


# Reimagining Identities

Addressing Intersectionality in Development Programming



**CHANGE  
ALLIANCE**  
CHANGING LIVES



This resource focuses on addressing barriers of intersecting identities in development programming. It looks at the example of caste and gender, as two intersecting identities, to build nuanced strategies for effective programming for results. The principles are relevant and can be adapted in all development programming and planning. Information within this resource comes from extensive interviews with members of socially excluded groups, civil society organisations, development professionals, policy makers, academics and the staff of the development agencies Change Alliance and Christian Aid in India, Bangladesh, Nepal in 2014 and 2015.

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# Inclusion is not automatic

We all live with multiple identities – race, caste, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, religion. Some of these identities come with certain social capital and resources, while others, such as being ‘low’ caste and female, are commonly perceived as liabilities and become grounds for exclusion and discrimination.

Social identities often intersect in varied ways and impact individual realities and lived experiences.

In almost every part of the world, certain social groups face systematic social exclusion due to who they are. Caste and gender are among the most common markers of such exclusion in South Asia. The resulting inequalities – which could be cultural, economic, political, intergenerational – can lead to poverty, result in low self-worth and rob individuals of a dignified life.

Social exclusion can impact on both economic and political spheres. Practices of caste-based ‘untouchability’<sup>1</sup> and discrimination hinder the completion of education, access to higher education, livelihood options and economic opportunities, such as getting a bank loan. They prevent people from claiming their rights to public services like health, and are deprived of voice and influence on critical issues that affect their lives. Spaces for Dalit women are non-existent in public or the private sphere and often they are subjugated because of their interlinking caste, gender and class identities.

Many social development programmes focus on an economic model with an assumption that economic empowerment will automatically

bring social equality. In 1936, in his undelivered speech famously known as ‘Annihilation of Caste’, Dr Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, the chairman of the drafting committee of the Indian Constitution, asked: ‘Can you have economic reform without first bringing about a reform of the social order?’

Intersectionality is defined as an approach to understanding overlapping or intersecting social identities that produce multidimensional and systemic oppression, domination and discrimination. It allows one to examine how various biological, social and cultural categories such as gender, race, class, ability, sexual orientation and other axes of identity interact on multiple levels simultaneously.<sup>2</sup> Arguably, while designing social development programmes, a conscious and deliberate bias can be built in to favour social groups that face multiple, intergenerational burdens and barriers because of who they are.

**In South Asia, caste discrimination is traditionally rooted in the Hindu caste system. Supported by philosophical elements, the caste system constructs the moral, social and legal foundations of Hindu society. Dalits, who fall outside the fourfold caste system, consisting of the Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vysya and Sudra, are considered outcastes. The ensuing caste discrimination has been assimilated into the Christian, Buddhist, Muslim and Sikh communities.**

Intersectionality calls on us to consider women as whole beings, to recognise that not all women experience their womanhood in the same ways, that many women face multiple forms of oppression and not all women are rendered powerless.

This challenges us to take a multisystemic approach to understanding privilege and oppression within structural macro levels, as well as how these same social identities become reified or transcended on more micro-interpersonal levels.<sup>3</sup> Recognising differences among women ‘We need . . . a shift of focus from “difference” and multiple voices to the social relations which convert difference into oppression.’<sup>4</sup>

**Alice asked the cat: ‘Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?’**

**Cat: ‘That depends a good deal on where you want to get to.’**

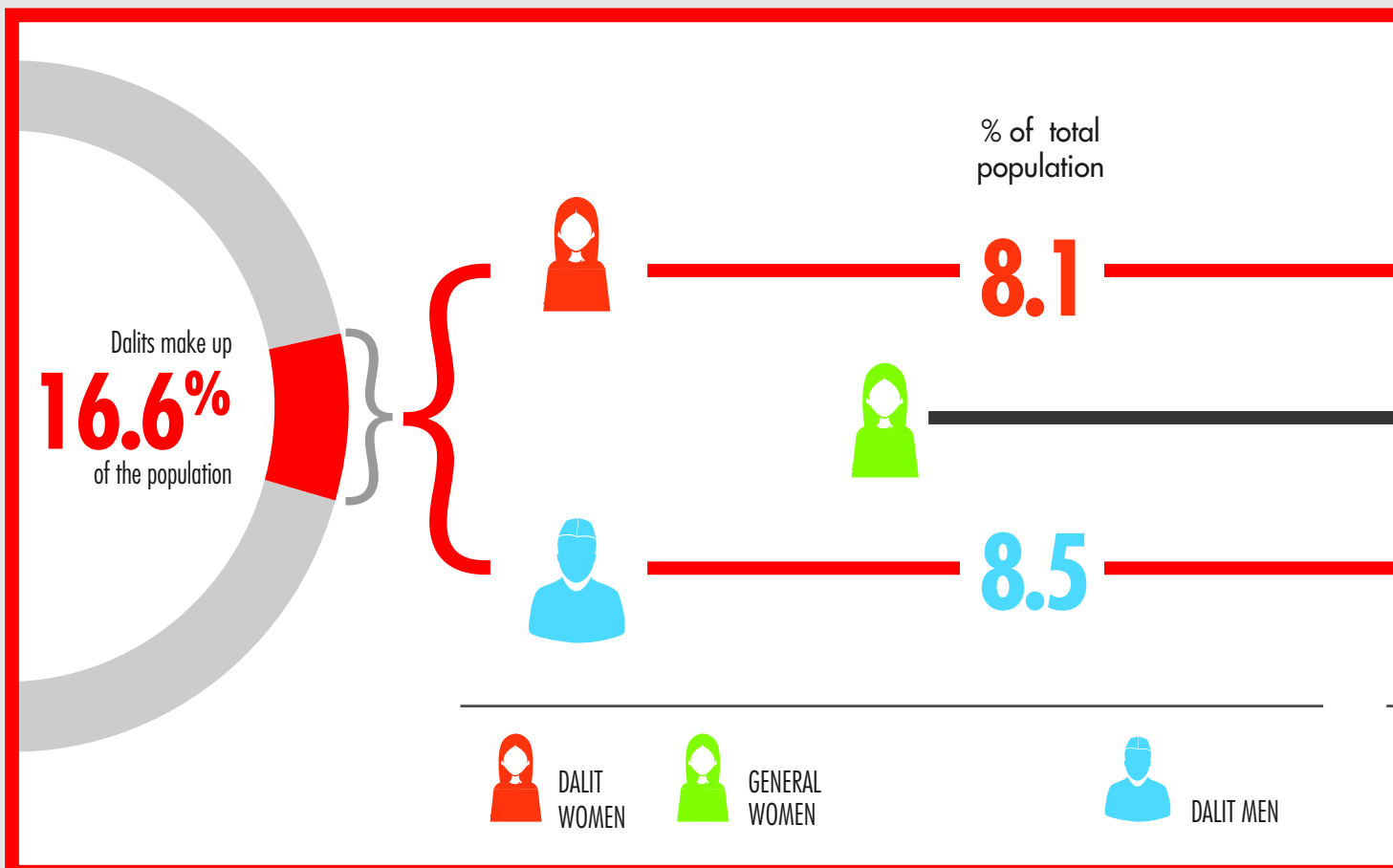
**Alice: ‘I don’t much care where.’**

**Cat: ‘Then it doesn’t matter which way you go.’**

**‘it does matter which way we go’**

# Reflective questions on intersectionality

- In your programme geography – in a village/community – who holds power? Who are the powerless and the most vulnerable? What are their social identities?
- Among the poorest, what identities intersect and become the cause for multiple burdens for those identified social groups? What are the identity-related barriers to accessing their rights and services meant for them?
- If your programmes are to address these issues what strategies would you consider for addressing their practical and strategic needs? How would you address patriarchy and caste together in designing a programme? In what ways can civil society at large address the power of caste and the power of gender together in policies and programmes?
- How can organisations define and review social norms around identities, including crosscutting identities?
- Does your programme give added emphasis on enhancing Dalit women's leadership?
- How can programmes work with powerful actors to help them to realise that power inequalities are self-destructive and harmful for social and economic development?



**My 8-year-old daughter goes to an English medium school. I withdrew her surname. I fear that might initiate discriminatory treatment towards her.**

A Dalit Deputy Sarpanch in Gujarat, India

**My son is a trainee attendant in a doctors' chamber. He has given the address of an NGO in Dhaka to hide his identity. Dalits in both rural and urban areas live in segregated localities and it becomes difficult to hide identity.**

A Dalit leader in Bangladesh



Dalit women collective taking up challenging tasks to manage agricultural land in India

CHRISTIAN AID PACS

Literacy rate in %

56.5

64.4

75.2

Reported victims of physical violence (%)

41.7\*

26.8\*



\* Women reported having faced physical violence after their 15th birthday from someone other than their current or last husband

**Manual scavenging is the practice of manually cleaning, carrying, disposing or handling human excreta from dry latrines and sewers**

Data source: NFHS II data on physical violence.



# Intersectionality in practice

**'We place Dalit women at the centre of our interventions, no matter what the caste of those who are obstructing them. A key part of our work is a process of continual knowledge building among the women, where knowledge is power to act.'**

Jhansi Geddam, Dalit Stree Shakti, Andhra Pradesh, India

**A. Data that is disaggregated by multiple intersecting identities is an important step** that tells us the differences in the situation of Dalit women from women of another social group, Dalit men and men of another social group. Such data enables us to describe diverse realities more effectively and shows us the consequences of multiple forms of discrimination. This helps in building clarity around unequal social structures that underlie these identities and thus is not an end in itself. Conscious effort needs to be taken in bringing out the most invisible vulnerabilities and discrimination. Accordingly, strategies for specific groups can be designed.

**B. Questioning and challenging a given pattern with deeper analysis. Programmes should use tools like 'power analysis' to build logic and reasoning on practical and strategic needs of specific social groups that should be at the centre of programming.** Often the power and privileges built into the caste hierarchy become acceptable social norms alongside the values and behaviours accepted in a patriarchal structure – when they intersect they become more powerful forces. For example, Dalit women are caught

in caste-based gender violence such as targeted rape, brutal punishment for inter-caste marriages, parading naked as severe forms of backlash to make them adhere to established caste and gender norms. In terms of solutions, there is much to learn from the feminist movement, especially the delayed realisation of involving men. In the case of gender and caste it **becomes important to work with other caste groups (men and women who hold power).**

**C.** It is important to **design appropriate strategies to address the specific needs of groups with intersecting identities.** A 'one size fits all' approach, or simple addition of approaches broadly applied to individual identities (eg, simple combination of strategies for Dalits and strategies for women) fails to address the varied needs and requirements of those with intersecting identities in meeting the intended objectives and desired outcomes of development programmes.

**D.** Dalit women and other groups who are located at intersections by virtue of their multiple identities **have to negotiate the 'traffic'** that flows through these intersections to avoid damage, and obtain resources for



the normal activities of life. This is the context in which intersectional damages occur – when multiple disadvantages or conditions interact to create a distinct and compounded dimension of disempowerment. Empowerment to negotiate power relations in order to obtain rights and entitlements is the key tool to encounter the traffic.

There are varied experiences that highlight the importance of enhancing the **role, relevance and power of Dalit women's participation**. These range from increasing these women's status in their homes and communities, to building their self-confidence, enhancing their mobility and visibility, and developing their skills to participate in a range of activities outside the home.

**E. Sorting through the layers and levels of oppressions and privileges and understanding them collectively without fracturing them as additive and separate components.** Some women oppress other women, some groups of women have enslaved other women, and some women have cared for and raised the children of other women. This understanding is fundamental for civil society groups as we work with women to honour their unique, multidimensional womanhood, personhood, and agency, even as their personhood and agency are dishonoured and devalued across the many contexts they must navigate. It becomes critical to differentiate the severity of oppression from outside vis-à-vis the oppression in the domestic sphere, and some Dalit Networks consciously opt to deal with outside oppression because of its brutal nature.

Maya, a Dalit women leader from Pune district in Maharashtra, who has been a sarpanch three times, said: 'When I became sarpanch for the first time from a Scheduled Caste (Dailt) women reserved seat, people who used to address me as Maya, gradually switched over calling me Tai,<sup>5</sup> then sarpanch, and now they call me "boss". I like it.' Maya was elected twice from a reserved seat and once from general constituency. She now aspires to be Zilla Parishad<sup>6</sup> chairperson in an upcoming election.

**F. Knowledge building and transforming mindsets:** knowledge is a tool for liberation and changing discriminatory mindsets. There is a socioreligious sanction to both caste and gender and thus the notion of hierarchy is all pervading, including in the educational system. A transformative agenda is required at the community level and at the individual level; the change will happen only when the personal beliefs on caste and gender identities can be changed, and civil society groups can play great role towards bringing in that change. The transformative agenda has to be driven, not only for women or for Dalits but for all, in order to build a collective consciousness on social equality that is currently very weak.

**G. Develop a vision for each programme that reflects an intersectional framework to guide the work of development organisations.** The policies and practices for any organisation should enable staff and other members to discuss structural barriers such as caste and gender practised and unconsciously promoted in the organisation and, going deeper, intersectional issues as well.



Sunitha Devi preparing mid day meal for general caste children inside a clean kitchen, this is a positive change. Food cooked by Dalit women are not accepted by other caste people in South Asian countries.



Yasoda Devi from Khoripanan village in the state of Jharkhand, India, stands up in a village meeting to propose new projects.



# Theory of change

**PROBLEM:** **Multiple discrimination of Dalit women** (gender + caste + class + geographic location + condition (exploited, migrated, trafficked, deserted, flood affected) making them marginalised, vulnerable, voiceless and powerless.

**BARRIERS:** **Age-old social norms, beliefs and practices of discrimination** in the name of custom and tradition with religious sanctions, powerful vested interest groups, discriminatory policies and practices by state institutions and communities.

STRATEGIC INTERVENTIONS	TOOLS	PRACTICAL INTERVENTIONS
<p><b>Transformative leadership</b> building at local and regional level, strategising around engaging with young men and women either on a day-to-day basis or at strategic moments. Perspective building of community leaders.</p> <p><b>Identifying champions</b> for the cause among government functionaries and public institutions and engaging with them in a systemic manner on intersectional policies and programming.</p> <p><b>Enhancing participation</b> of Dalit women in political processes and decision-making at the community level.</p> <p><b>Dialogues with elites</b> as well as those who hold power, and mobilising public opinion.</p> <p><b>Working with private</b> sector on affirmative action policies and practices in favour of Dalit women.</p> <p><b>Evidence-based advocacy</b> for promoting intersectional policies and programmes.</p> <p><b>Engaging with progressive</b> Hindu and other faith leaders to transform social norms.</p> <p><b>Ensuring access</b> to quality education for all.</p> <p><b>Building and strengthening</b> linkages with campaigns, movements and networks on specific issues of Dalit women (beyond Dalit and women’s movements).</p> <p><b>Following up on the SDGs</b> on reducing inequality, and promoting gender equality at the national level, by developing targets and indicators that reflect intersectionality.</p>	<p><b>Training</b> and capacity building.</p> <p><b>Cadre</b> of human rights monitors and defenders.</p> <p><b>Modelling</b>, research analysis and benchmarking against various other groups and human rights standards.</p> <p><b>Developing indicators</b> and targets for measuring progress, tracking and monitoring intersectional discrimination and violence.</p> <p><b>Disaggregated</b> information by multiple factors like caste and gender.</p> <p><b>Persuasion</b>, contestation, negotiation, collaboration.</p> <p><b>Storytelling</b> and documentation as a powerful means to connect with people on a rational level and to engage them emotionally with their actions and thoughts.</p>	<p><b>Identify community</b> entry points, peer support groups. Create and support spaces for dialogue, part of which might involve forming partnerships with various social groups.</p> <p><b>Resource investment</b> in specific interest groups. Institution building at the grassroots.</p> <p><b>Engaging with public</b> institutions who are mandated to serve the excluded communities to address discrimination and implementation of laws and programmes for enhancing access to entitlements (basic needs, health, housing, livelihood) and market linkages (labour, goods and services). Working for secure and sustainable livelihoods.</p> <p><b>Working with private sector</b> at the community level – affirmative action based on the available policies and practices in favour of Dalit women, looking for innovative measures.</p> <p><b>Protection from intersectional</b> discrimination and violence.</p> <p><b>Access to information</b> and informed choices.</p> <p><b>Engaging with media.</b></p>
OUTPUTS		
<p><b>Inclusive and equitable</b> policies and practices by government functionaries and human rights institutions.</p> <p><b>Other leaders</b> and social groups engage on caste and gender issues.</p>		<p><b>Inclusive practices</b> in the communities and other community-based institutions.</p> <p><b>Reduced violence</b> and discriminatory practices against Dalit women.</p>
OUTCOMES		
<p><b>Transformational</b> component</p> <p><b>Empowered</b> citizenry</p>		<p><b>Development</b> component</p> <p><b>Strengthened civil society</b>, values, beliefs and attitudes shifting towards social equality.</p>
GOAL: GENDER AND CASTE ARE NO LONGER BARRIERS TO ACHIEVING ONE’S RIGHTS.		



# Practical strategies for community-level engagement

## 1

### Build understanding and sensitivity to groups with conflicting values and interests, and develop long-term commitment to dealing with the problem

- Be sensitive to the interests and conflicts between different social groups, including intersectional identity groups, in a local community.
- Be sure to involve the youth and leaders of marginalised groups closest to the problem such as Dalit women, people with disabilities, in critical decision-making and programme implementation.
- Establish outside advisory monitoring and evaluation groups to keep the participant organisations and groups authentic and on track.

## 2

### Create meaningful and shared goals, objectives, strategies and procedures

- Specific goals and objectives for the reduction and prevention of the intersectional discriminatory norms and practices should be based both on the elaboration of specific organisational strategies (of addressing suppression, social intervention) and a general strategy of social mobilisation, consensus and cooperation within and across agency and intersectional identity group.
- Operational goals should be realistically related to the particular nature and scope of the problem, to express community groups' concerns, and to existing political interests.

## 3

### Seek to reach all groups

- Be sure to reach all groups (men, women and other caste people) in the community, not only those who are directly affected by caste and gender discrimination.
- Identify positive role models and engage them in the process of change. Meet Dalit women leaders where they feel safe and accepted.
- Mix and community/ field worker to spend time with the groups so that they are open to discussion – not prey for a project that wants to capture them.
- Encouraging the people who are decision makers (in formal and informal spaces) to listen to Dalit women.

## 4

### Disaggregate different types of 'men's groups' to work with them talking about gender discrimination and multiple vulnerabilities of Dalit women. Ensure that development staff or partners have good listening, communication and negotiation skills

- The language and messages used should be persuasive rather than intimidating.
- Avoid blame, stigma or shame; instead talk about opportunities and rights gained by addressing intersectional identities.

## 5

### Focus on the benefits of reduced violence against Dalit women

- Discuss how violent or abusive behaviour by both family and society affects the individual woman and the community, family, and children, eg, the consequences of children being afraid of other children in school.
- Question whether caste, male attitudes and behaviour are in practice promoting a network of violence and engage in peer-to-peer discussion as men listen to what other men are saying.
- It is also very important to talk with other caste women (Brahmin/Kshyatriya) when talking about violence, as in rural areas Dalit women face violence from other caste women to a large extent.

## 6

### Use multiple channels to raise the issue

- Find mechanisms to generate peer pressure. For example, temple groups hold their members – who hire Dalit men and women – accountable for providing rights to these workers and help people to question their belief system.
- Encourage men to create a safe local environment for their children, sisters, daughters, wives.

# Conclusion

With understandings of intersectionality still developing, its application in developmental programmes is an emerging area.

Intersectionality raises critical lines of analysis and enquiry for developmental planning and programming.

It brings to centre stage the complexities of social inequalities across gender, caste, class, ethnicity, geography and other axes as they crosscut each other and compound disadvantage.

It raises the critical issue of how multiple, intersecting identities can be centred in development planning, to what extent and in which circumstances. Ultimately, intersectionality serves to highlight that addressing diversity is essential to realising the universal rights for all.



Men supporting Dalit women to speak out and engage in collective action





**A society based on equality and equity should be a common aspiration of a healthy and caring society. But there is a huge gap between such an aspiration and the reality. Development programmes should aim to build collective consciousness towards social inclusion, making it everyone's business!**



## References and key resources on intersectionality

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- Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR), General Comment No. 20: Non-Discrimination in Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, UN Doc. E/C.12/GC/20, Geneva: United Nations, 2009.
- McCall, L. 2005. The Complexity of Intersectionality. Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society 30(3), 1771-1800

### ENDNOTES

- 1 The practice of ostracising a group by segregating them from the mainstream by social custom or legal mandate. The imposition of social disabilities by reason of birth into certain 'polluted', 'low' castes.
- 2 Crenshaw, Kimberle (1989-01-01). Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics. The University of Chicago Legal Forum, 140:139-167.
- 3 Journal of Women and Social Work Volume 23 Number 1 - February 2008 5-9- Samuels, Gina Miranda, Ross-Sheriff, Fariyal, Identity, Oppression, and Power Feminisms and Intersectionality Theory
- 4 Rege, Sharmila (1998), Dalit women talk differently, Vol. 33, Issue No.44, October 31, 1998 | Economic and Political weekly.
- 5 Tai means elder sister in the Marathi language spoken in Maharashtra.
- 6 Zilla Parishad is a local government body at the district level in India. It looks after the administration of the rural area of the district and its office is located at the district headquarters. The Hindi word Parishad means 'council' and Zilla Parishad translates to 'district council'.



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