

Reclaiming rights, reclaiming lives- Advocacy for marginalized and vulnerable groups**Abbiramy N**

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Article Received: 02/10/2025**Article Accepted:** 03/11/2025**Published Online:** 04/11/2025**DOI:**10.47311/IJOES.2025.7.11.18**Abstract:**

This paper aims to discuss the marginalized and vulnerable groups of the society. Some of the marginalized groups are women and girls, people with disabilities, refugees, poor people, asylum-seekers, LGBTQI+ community, older people and victims of racial discrimination. This paper analyses the causes of their marginalization and suggests solutions to empower them in the society.

Keywords: discrimination, exploitation, manual scavenging, dignity of life, feminization of poverty, human trafficking.

Introduction

Vulnerable and marginalized groups are people who are at risk of discrimination, exploitation, or other forms of disadvantage. A few examples include children and adolescents, women and girls, physically challenged people, migrants, transgender people, older people, people living below the poverty line. People who are vulnerable or marginalized experience multiple forms of discrimination based on their age, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, social origin, property, disability, birth, or other status.

This paper focusses on particular marginalized groups such as

- Manual scavengers
- Women
- Victims of human trafficking
- Particularly vulnerable tribal groups

Manual Scavengers

“Manual Scavenger” means a person engaged or employed by an individual or a local authority or a public or private agency, for manually cleaning, carrying, disposing of, or otherwise handling in any manner, human excreta in an insanitary latrine or in an open drain or on a railway track or in such other premises. They are one of the examples of modern slavery and exploitation. According to Government data, an overwhelming 97% of manual scavengers in India are Dalits, highlighting the strong link between caste and this practice. Specifically, about 42,594 manual scavengers belong to Scheduled Castes (SCs),

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to Scheduled Tribes (STs), and 431 to Other Backward Classes (OBCs). This data starkly illustrates the caste-based nature of manual scavenging and underscores the need to recognise and address this issue as a form of caste-based violence and discrimination.

The Union Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment has now said that only 508 districts (66%) out of the total 766 districts in the country have declared themselves manual-scavenging free. As many as 339 people have died while cleaning sewers and septic tanks in India in the last five years, according to government data. In 1993, the Government of India enacted the Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act. The act prohibited the employment of manual scavengers for manually cleaning dry latrines and also the construction of dry toilets. This was followed by the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013, which is wider in scope and importance, acknowledging the urgency of rehabilitating manual scavengers.

Of the 1.2 million Indians shackled by manual scavenging, 95% to 98% are women. These women are from Valmiki caste, predominantly an urban Dalit community present in Punjab and national capital Delhi. Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Madhya Pradesh have the highest number of female manual scavengers. The practice of manual scavenging is passed on to young girls post-marriage to work alongside their mothers-in-law, and any resistance to take up the occupation would result in their ostracization by their families and villages.

The Central Sector Self Employment Scheme for Rehabilitation of Manual Scavengers was revised in 2013. The main components of SRMS

- i. Onetime cash assistance of Rs.40000/- to identified manual scavenger.
2. Credit linked back-end capital subsidy upto Rs 3.25 lakh with provision of concessional Loans for project cost upto Rs 15 lakhs.
3. Skill Development Training upto two years with stipend of Rs.3000/- per month to the manual scavenger/dependent who opts for such training.
4. Subsidy on Loans to manual scavengers and their dependents for sanitation related projects (for projects upto Rs 15 lakh)
5. Coverage of Manual Scavengers for Health Insurance under Ayushman Bharat (PM-JAY) Yojana
6. Behavioral Skill Development Training (RPL).

The primary solution to end manual scavenging is to implement widespread use of advanced sanitation technology like automated sewer cleaning machines and robots, along with robust enforcement of laws prohibiting manual scavenging, comprehensive rehabilitation programs for existing manual scavengers with skill development and economic empowerment opportunities, and significant investment in upgrading sanitation infrastructure.

Women

The other half of human race called female has always been considered subordinate to the upper half of human race, the so-called male. Historically, women were made to

believe that they are inferior to man in all aspects starting from intellect till earning their own livelihood. Women are also a vulnerable section of the society who have been historically suffering in many ways and they are treated as a marginalized community. They are vulnerable to societal inequalities and sexual offences.

There are still places in India, rural and urban that believes the birth of daughters as a curse. This led to female infanticide fearing the dowry that has to be spent for the daughter's wedding. In rural areas of North India, child marriage still exists. In a family, that has son and daughter, the family prefers to spend on the education of son rather than that of the daughter. Marriage is treated as the ultimate goal of a woman in life. This makes us question the very purpose of a woman's life. Women still face unequal opportunities which ultimately leads to the feminization of poverty. This forms vicious circle of poverty wherein women are made to feel helpless due to financial dependence upon father before marriage, then dependence upon husband after marriage, finally dependence upon son at older age. Here, we could simply figure out how the woman is completely absent in her own life. When she looks back at her life, it is only the men related to her who lived her life on her behalf. This realisation should occur in the minds of every girl at a young age. Only then, she would live a life of dignity and self-respect. Dignity and self-respect should be given to every human being irrespective of their gender.

A man is respected and accepted by the society if he places his profession above his family. In case, a woman places her career above her family, then she is termed selfish and cursed by her own family members and the society. Here, I would like to quote a real-life example. Gukesh became the youngest world chess champion at the age of eighteen years. His parents faced higher challenges than his chess journey. In an interview, Gukesh's father told he quitted his job as a surgeon and took the responsibility of shaping his son's chess career. Whereas, Gukesh's mother became the sole bread winner of the family. His parents would have surely undergone severe criticism by the family and society. His father would have definitely been criticised for leaving his job and supporting his son in chess career. It is because of the deep rooted societal norms that expect only a mother to quit her job and take sole responsibility of the child. This is a rare scenario that happens in very few families. It is because of a good mindset that exists in that family. People should understand that a family should be made out of love and affection not by rigid rules that completely suppress a woman giving her a subordinate position.

Women are often discriminated against in the workplace, including pay gaps and unequal access to opportunities. Women face violence from intimate partners, and gender-based violence in conflict zones. Women are underrepresented in leadership roles, particularly at the highest levels. The glass ceiling is the invisible barrier that prevents women from reaching senior leadership positions. Women often handle the majority of domestic and childcare duties, even when both spouses work full-time. Balancing multiple responsibilities can lead to stress, anxiety, and depression. Hormonal changes that women

experience during menstrual cycle, child-birth and menopause can contribute to mental health challenges.

The government has enacted various legislations to solve the problems women face in their lives. Some of them are discussed. Swadhar Greh Scheme for women who are victims of difficult circumstances in need of institutional support for rehabilitation so that they could lead their life with dignity. The Ujjawala Scheme for Prevention of trafficking and for Rescue, Rehabilitation, Reintegration and Repatriation of victims of trafficking for commercial sexual exploitation. Working Women Hostel Scheme is implemented by the Government with the objective of providing safe accommodation for working women, with day care facility for their children. Beti Bachao Beti Padhao Scheme aims to prevent gender biased sex selective elimination. It ensures survival and protection of the girl child and insists upon education and participation of the girl child. The Mahila Shakti Kendra Scheme aims to empower rural women through community participation. Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana is a Centrally Sponsored Conditional Cash Transfer Scheme. The maternity benefit under PMMVY is available to all Pregnant Women & Lactating Mothers. Real change should start from the mindset of people that historically provided subordinate role to women in home and in the society. Such a change will create inclusive and happy society.

Victims of human trafficking

Human Trafficking is the recruitment, transportation, transfer and harbouring of people through force, fraud or deception, with the aim of exploiting them for profit. Men, women and children of all ages and from all backgrounds can become victims of this crime, which occurs in every region of the world. As per the United Nations Office for Drugs and Crime report, 46% of trafficking victims are women, 34% are children, and 20% are men. Human trafficking can be separated into sex trafficking and labour trafficking. The root causes of human trafficking is poverty, war and natural disasters. The devaluation of women and children make them far more vulnerable to trafficking than men. Women and girls make up 98 percent of the victims trafficked for sexual exploitation. In addition to the establishment of protection and rehabilitation homes, the government has allocated funds from the Nirbhaya Fund to **support the strengthening of anti-human trafficking units in every district across all states and Union Territories.**

The Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment has launched an umbrella scheme **“SMILE - Support for Marginalized Individuals for Livelihood and Enterprise”** which includes two sub-schemes - ‘Central Sector Scheme for Comprehensive Rehabilitation for Welfare of Transgender Persons’ and ‘Central Sector Scheme for Comprehensive Rehabilitation of persons engaged in the act of Begging’. This umbrella scheme covers several comprehensive measures including welfare measures for both transgender persons and persons who are engaged in the act of begging with focus extensively on rehabilitation, provision of medical facilities, counselling, education, skill development, economic linkages with the support of State Governments/UTs/Local Urban Bodies, Voluntary Organizations, Community Based Organizations (CBOs) and institutions and others.

Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups

Tribal communities are often identified by some specific signs such as primitive traits, distinctive culture, geographical isolation, shyness to contact with the community at large and backwardness. Along with these, some tribal groups have some specific features such as dependency on hunting, gathering for food, having pre-agriculture level of technology, zero or negative growth of population and extremely low level of literacy. These groups are called Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups.

In 1973, the Dhebar Commission created Primitive Tribal Groups as a separate category, who are less developed among the tribal groups. In 2006, the Government of India renamed the PTGs as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups. In India, tribal population makes up for 8.6% of the total population. Tribal people live in about 15% of the geographical area of the country. The places they live vary from plains, forests, hills, inaccessible areas etc. PVTGs are scattered in different geographical areas of the country. According to the 2001 census, the PVTGs population is approximately 27,68,322. There are 12 PVTGs having a population above 50,000 and the remaining groups have a population of 1000 or less. The PVTG of Sahariyas has the highest population of 4,50,217, while the PVTGs of Sentinelets and Andamanese has a very small population of 39 and 43, respectively.

PVTGs depend on various livelihoods such as food gathering, Non Timber Forest Produce, hunting, livestock rearing, shifting cultivation and artisan works. Most of their livelihoods depend on the forest. They collect various NTFP items such as honey, gum, amla, bamboo, shrubs, fuel wood, dry leaves, nuts, sprouts, wax, medical plants, roots and tubers. Most of the forest produce items they gather are for consumption and they sell the remaining to middle men. But due to the shrinking forests, environmental changes and new forest conservation policies, their forest produce collection is getting hampered. Because of the lack of awareness about the value of non-timber forest produce, PVTGs are exploited by the middle men.

The health status of PVTGs is in an awful condition because of multiple factors like poverty, illiteracy, lack of safe drinking water, bad sanitary conditions, difficult terrain, malnutrition, poor maternal and child health services, unavailability of health and nutritional services, superstition and deforestation. The diseases like anemia, upper respiratory problem, malaria; gastro-intestinal disorders like acute diarrhoea, Intestinal protozoan; micro nutrient deficiency and skin infection diseases are common among PVTGs. Many of these diseases can be prevented by providing nutrition food, timely medical facilities and health awareness. The condition of education is also very poor, with an average literacy rate of 10% to 44%. The Scheme for Development of Primitive Vulnerable Tribal Groups came into effect from April 1, 2008. The Scheme identifies 75 PVTGs. It seeks to adopt a holistic approach to the socio-economic development of PVTGs and gives state governments flexibility in planning initiatives that are geared towards the specific socio-cultural imperatives of the specific groups at hand.

The scheme covers funding for activities like housing, enhancement of education and health infrastructure, land distribution, land development, agricultural development, animal husbandry, construction of link roads and installation of non-conventional sources of energy for lighting purpose, irrigation, social security (including Janshree Bima Yojana), skill development and upgradation, conservation of culture or any other innovative activity meant for inclusive development of PVTGs.

References

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