

# Reimagining Dalit Feminist-Led Caste Equity in South Asia: Pathways for Sustained Funding & Movement-Building

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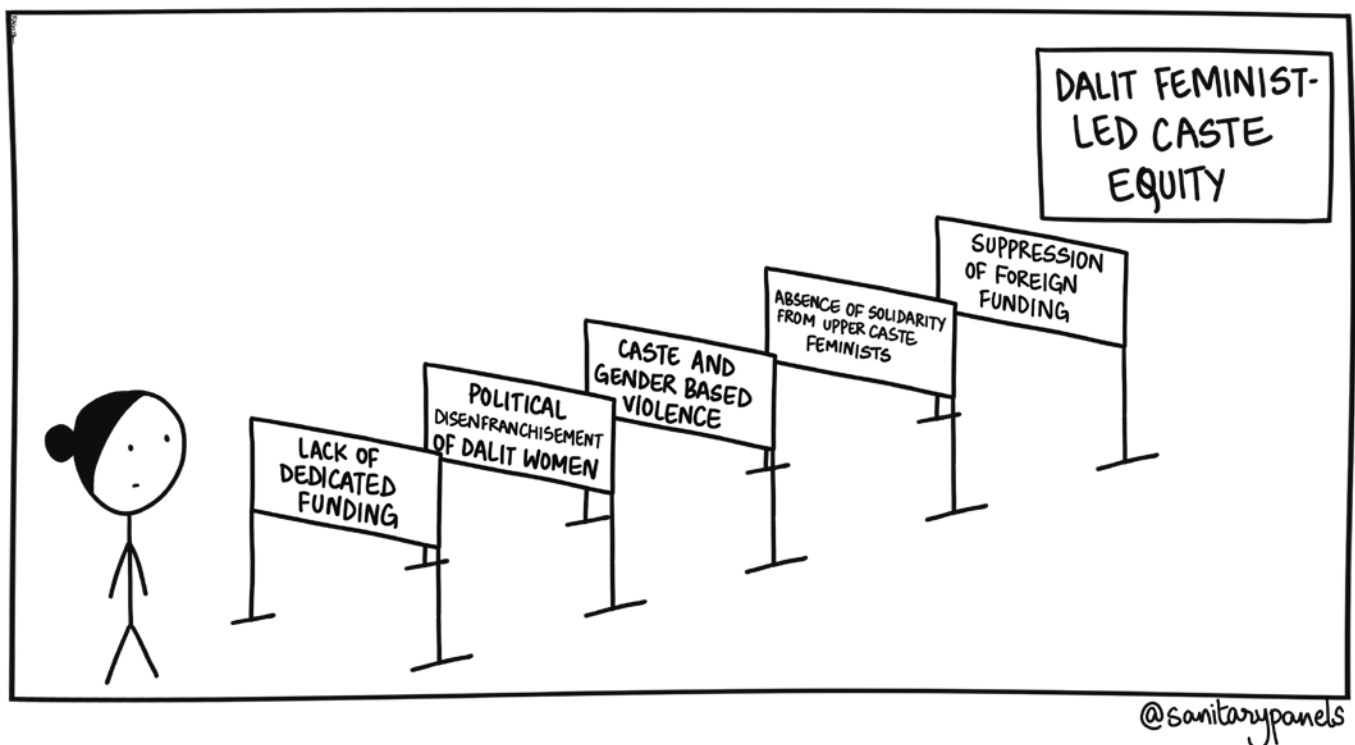
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## **Advocacy Summary**

In recent years, there has been an increased demand for funding and philanthropy to be more representative of the communities they aim to support. This demand requires that decision-makers possess both the lived experience and the political understanding of intersecting hierarchies, as well as the multiple layers of oppression they generate. Within South Asia, an intersectional lens must translate to a caste-equity or an anti-caste lens, which foregrounds how caste, a system of graded socio-religious hierarchy, shapes power, access to basic needs, availability of opportunities, life options, and outcomes, both today and historically.

A significant number of funding and philanthropic institutions, particularly those located in the Minority World, are heeding the call to decolonise funding practices and beginning to support Indigenous and Black feminist-led movements. Along similar lines, those seeking to resource communities in South Asia must acknowledge the presence of social hierarchies in the region, explicitly accounting for people who caste-based systems have historically marginalised. Indeed, there is an urgent need to adopt the principles of caste equity. It is also essential to recognise the work of Dalit feminist-led movements, which are often actively discriminated against, excluded, and marginalised on the grounds of caste when it comes to funding and representing their voices globally.

The necessity for funders to allocate dedicated funds for Dalit feminist movements in South Asia stems from the unique challenges faced by Dalit women. These include caste-based discrimination, gender-based violence, and socio-economic marginalisation, all of which are compounded by a systemic denial of representation in the broader feminist and caste-equity movements. Intentional funding is crucial to empower Dalit women to lead their movements, articulate their specific needs, and achieve systemic change. To ensure that funds reach the most caste-oppressed communities, funders should consider the following steps:

1. **Direct Engagement:** Work directly with grassroots organisations led by Dalit women leaders. This ensures that funds are used effectively and reach those who need them most.
2. **Participatory Grantmaking:** Centre Dalit women in fund and resource allocation decision-making processes. Participatory approaches help ensure that funding priorities align with the community's needs.
3. **Capacity Building:** Invest in building the organisational capacity of Dalit feminist-led community-based organisations to manage funds, implement projects, and sustain their activities over the long term.
4. **Monitoring and Evaluation:** Establish transparent caste-informed mechanisms for monitoring and evaluation, while adopting decolonial and debrahminised frameworks.

Philanthropy should include Dalit women's representation because it ensures that the voices and experiences of those most affected by caste and gender oppression are heard and prioritised. Meaningful and substantial representation that is not merely tokenistic can lead to more inclusive and equitable policies and practices within philanthropic organisations, ensuring that the lived realities of Dalit women inform funding strategies. This representation also challenges the dominance of upper-caste perspectives in feminist and social justice movements, fostering a more inclusive and intersectional approach to addressing systemic inequalities.

## ■ Key Recommendations for Funders

- ➔ Increase investments in long-term, sustained social change led by Dalit feminists in South Asia.
- ➔ Work actively to de-brahminise philanthropy, which warrants a deep and rigorous understanding of caste-based structures and anti-caste movements.
- ➔ Set up collaborative funds at global and regional levels to circumvent caste-based, language-related, and country-specific challenges.

## Authors and Acknowledgements

**The Global Campaign for Dalit Women (GCDW)** is an initiative that aims to empower caste-marginalised women to pursue strategies that ensure their dignity, safety, access, and justice. GCDW adopts sustainable and proactive approaches to support survivors, develop leadership, promote grassroots activism, and foster strategic partnerships. It also forges strong connections with global communities by collaborating with other marginalised groups and engaging in international human rights mechanisms.

### About the Authors

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## Introduction

In recent years, there has been an increased demand for funding and philanthropy to be more representative of the communities they aim to support. This demand requires that decision-makers possess both the lived experience and the political understanding of intersecting hierarchies, as well as the multiple layers of oppression they generate. A vital initiative in this regard has been the call to #ShiftThePower, which “seeks to tip the balance towards a fairer and more equitable people-centred development model and reform top-down systems of international development and philanthropy” (Inga & Kodi 2024). For instance, directly funding Indigenous-led funds recognises the population’s expertise and agency in addressing their needs. Additionally, by providing resources and support, funders can catalyse self-driven solutions that profoundly impact the community and promote long-term sustainability (Bridgespan, 2024).

In South Asia, an intersectional lens must translate to a caste-equity or an anti-caste lens, which foregrounds how caste, a system of graded socio-religious hierarchy, shapes power, access to basic needs, availability of opportunities, life options, and outcomes, both today and historically. A significant number of funding and philanthropic institutions, particularly those located in the Minority World, are responding to the call to decolonise funding practices and beginning to support Indigenous and Black feminist-led movements (Zovighian 2022; Banerjee and Sriram 2022; Human Rights Funders Network 2021). Along the same lines, it is crucial that those seeking to resource communities in South Asia acknowledge the presence of social hierarchies in the region and specifically account for people who have been historically marginalised by caste.

The caste system is a complex social phenomenon that has transcended borders in South Asia, impacting countries like Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and across religious and ethnic communities. Beyond South Asia, caste is also prevalent across contexts where a significant South Asian population exists. This includes the United States, Canada, Europe, the United Kingdom, South Africa, and parts of Southeast Asia (Zwick-Maitreyi et al., 2018). While it may not be as visible in every society as in India, caste is expressed in various forms in policymaking and practices across South Asia. Globally, the Dalit population is estimated to be about 250 million. India has nearly 201 million, followed by Bangladesh at 5.5 million, Sri Lanka at 4.5 million, and Pakistan at approximately 0.33 million Dalit population (Asia Dalit Rights Forum, 2014).

There is, therefore, an urgent need to embrace principles of caste equity and recognise the work of caste equity movements, but more specifically, initiatives led by Dalit feminists, who have been systematically denied agency to represent their voices globally, both in feminist spaces and within the philanthropy ecosystem. In this research study, the [Global Campaign for Dalit Women \(GCDW\)](#), an initiative that empowers caste-marginalised women towards dignity, safety, access, and justice, reimagines Dalit feminist-led caste equity work in South Asia through innovative pathways for sustained funding and movement-building.

## **Methodology**

The researchers aimed to investigate a key research question: how could the future of Dalit feminist-led caste equity work in South Asia be reimagined through sustained funding and movement-building? The research objective was to understand the trajectories and funding challenges faced by South Asian collectives working on caste equity. Additionally, the study sought to identify ways and best practices for addressing these challenges.

The approach undertaken for this study is primarily qualitative, based on a review of the existing literature and primary interviews and focus group discussions with organisations engaged in this space. Fourteen in-depth semi-structured key informant interviews were conducted with Dalit feminist leaders across the five countries. Their organisations and movements recognise that Dalit women experience a “triple oppression” based on caste, class, and gender, and actively critique the social, cultural, and religious norms that perpetuate caste-based and gender-based hierarchies (Paik 2022). All the initiatives referred to in this research prioritise the experiences and perspectives of Dalit women and gender minorities, while creating platforms for them to speak for themselves and lead their own struggles.

### **Limitations**

While there are case studies of organisations, there is limited research documenting trends in anti-caste movements, particularly outside of India. Even within India, comprehensive documentation of the trajectories and challenges faced by organisations focused on anti-caste work has been scarce, with only a few reports published in the last decade. Primary interviews with these organisations across the focus regions have helped validate some initial hypotheses around challenges and potential solutions.

## Literature Review

### Evolution of Dalit feminist organising in India

Till the early 1990s, Dalit feminist voices and organising in India manifested through literature and other social movements. They highlighted the vulnerabilities of Dalit women, seeking more excellent representation and participation (Sarvesh, Singh, and Alam 2021). While there is a history of Dalit women raising their voices and participating in social movements in pre-Independence India, few are as historically prominent as their non-Dalit counterparts.

One of the earliest recognised leaders of the Dalit feminist movement is Savitribai Phule. Savitribai was the first caste-marginalised woman (although not a Dalit) to stress the importance of education and English through her poems. She and her husband, Jyotiba Phule, raised the issues of Dalit women in particular and women in general (Gorain and Sen 2021). Elite caste feminists have often co-opted Savitribai's legacy in India and abroad by emphasising her contributions to education and women's rights, while neglecting the broader social reform work she championed, which addressed caste-class-based hierarchies.

This selective appropriation presented her as a singular figure in the narrative of South Asian feminism, sidelining the intersectionality of her struggles and the voices of marginalised communities she represented (Prasad 2015). This had also obscured the collaborative spirit of the social movements she participated in and diminished the transformative potential of her work within a more inclusive, diverse and staunchly anti-caste feminist framework in India until the 1990s (Kushwah 2022). This was when formal Dalit feminist organisations began to establish themselves, shifting the focus to access to education and healthcare, and leveraging rights- and justice-based approaches.

The National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW), founded in 1995 by Ruth Manorama, emerged as a significant force in India following the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. The Conference provided a platform for Dalit women to articulate their unique experiences of oppression, intersecting with both gender and caste-based discrimination (Guru 1995). The organisation has since played a crucial role in advocating for the rights and empowerment of Dalit women. Through grassroots mobilisation, legal advocacy, and awareness-raising campaigns, NFDW has worked to combat violence against Dalit women, promote their access to education and healthcare, and challenge discriminatory social norms. Furthermore, by advocating for the inclusion of caste as a form of



discrimination in international human rights frameworks, NFDW brought to light the state's inability to protect the human rights of Dalit women (Subramaniam 2006). At the UN World Conference Against Racism held in Durban, South Africa, in 2001, NFDW demanded that caste discrimination be declared a form of racism.

Other organisations, such as the All India Dalit Women's Forum, later fought for greater political representation among Dalit women (Berg 2007). This was also happening with affirmative action legislation being codified into the Indian Constitution. Despite constitutional provisions against untouchability, Dalit communities, and especially Dalit women, have continued to face severe discrimination and violence. This violence often takes the form of physical and sexual assault, land dispossession, and social ostracisation. The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act of 1989 is a notable example and was enacted to address this issue. It aims to provide legal protection against atrocities committed against members of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. This act culminated years of activism and advocacy by Dalit leaders and organisations.

## **Initiatives led by Dalit feminists in other South Asian countries**

In Bangladesh, the emergence of Dalit feminist activism can be traced back to the 1990s, with organisations like the Bangladesh Dalit and Excluded Rights Movement advocating for the rights of Dalit women. These movements initially focused on raising awareness about caste discrimination and the specific challenges faced by Dalit women, including violence and economic exploitation. Over time, they have evolved to encompass a broader agenda that includes education, health rights, and political representation. Today, Dalit feminists in Bangladesh are increasingly vocal about their rights, seeking to integrate their struggles into the national discourse on women's rights.

In Nepal, the Feminist Dalit Organisation (FEDO) was established in 1994 and has played a pivotal role in advocating for the rights of Dalit women. Initially focusing on education and empowerment, FEDO has evolved to address broader issues, including political representation and social justice. The political upheaval following Nepal's civil war allowed a platform for Dalit women's voices to be heard, leading to increased participation in local governance. Today, Dalit feminists in Nepal continue to challenge both caste and gender oppression while striving for greater inclusion within mainstream feminist movements.

In Pakistan, Dalit feminist movements have gained traction in recent years, mainly through the efforts of organisations like the Pakistan Dalit Solidarity Network. Initially focused on addressing caste-based discrimination and violence against women, these movements have expanded their scope to include issues such as land rights and access to education. The context of rising religious extremism has posed additional challenges, as Dalit women often face violence not only from caste-based discrimination but also from patriarchal structures within their communities. These movements are working towards building solidarity among marginalised groups and advocating for legal reforms to protect the rights of Dalit women.

In Sri Lanka, Dalit feminist movements have historically been less visible but are gaining momentum through grassroots organisations focusing on social justice and equality. The intersection of caste discrimination with ethnic conflict has complicated the struggles of Dalit women, who often find themselves marginalised within both ethnic and gender-based discussions. Recent efforts have focused on raising awareness about the specific challenges faced by Dalit women in Sri Lanka, including access to education and healthcare. As these movements evolve, they aim to build alliances with other marginalised groups to strengthen their advocacy for social change.

## **Lessons from Global feminist movements**

The Black feminist rights movement in the United States of America emerged as a response to both the civil rights movement and the mainstream feminist movement, which often marginalised the voices and experiences of Black women. Black feminism's roots can be traced back to the mid-19th century, with early figures such as Sojourner Truth advocating for the intersection of racial and gender rights (Smiet 2015).

In the 1970s, Audre Lorde and the Combahee River Collective articulated the need for an intersectional approach that recognised how race, gender, and class intersect to shape the lives of Black women. This period marked a significant shift as Black feminists established their organisations, such as the National Black Feminist Organisation, to address their unique struggles and advocate for systemic change. Over time, Black feminism has further evolved to embrace diverse perspectives, including queer and trans identities, and Black feminists have been at the forefront of major social justice initiatives, such as the Black Lives Matter and Me Too movements, highlighting their ongoing commitment to ending both racial and gender-based violence (Stueven 2021).

Early expressions of Indigenous feminism can be traced back to the 19th century when women like Matilda Joselyn Gage highlighted the intersection of race and gender in their advocacy for rights. Indigenous women began to articulate their distinct struggles within the broader civil rights and women's liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s.

The formation of groups such as the Women of All Red Nations (WARN) in 1974 marked a pivotal moment, as these activists sought to address both gender and colonial oppression, emphasising that patriarchy was intertwined with colonialism. Contemporary Indigenous feminism continues to focus on issues such as sovereignty, decolonisation, and the crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women (MMIW), advocating for justice while reclaiming traditional roles and cultural practices that empower Indigenous women.

Organised political activism among Romani women can be traced back to the 1920s and 1930s in Romania and Poland (Izsak 2008). The establishment of the General Union of Roma in Romania sought to include women in leadership roles and address their specific needs. In Spain, the Gitanas movement emerged in the late 20th century, focusing on dismantling patriarchy and challenging gendered anti-gypsyism while advocating for the rights of Romani women (Mirga-Kruszelnicka 2018). The late 1990s marked a pivotal moment for Romani feminism, with the first international conference of Romani women held in Budapest in 1998. This event catalysed the formation of networks and initiatives to promote gender equality within Romani communities.

A critical look at countries like New Zealand, Sweden, and Canada that position themselves as feminists within international relations and foreign policy lays bare the colonial legacy of disenfranchising indigenous communities. For instance, the feminist movement of Māori women in New Zealand has undergone significant evolution since the 19th century, characterised by a strong push for gender and indigenous rights. Initially, Māori women participated in the suffrage movement, advocating for their right to vote and to hold positions in the Māori Parliament, as exemplified by Meri Te Tai Mangakāhia's efforts in the late 1800s (Johnston 2022). This early activism laid the groundwork for contemporary Māori feminism, often referred to as *mana wāhine*, which emphasises the intersection of being Māori and a woman, challenging both colonial and patriarchal structures (Simmonds 2011). This perspective critiques mainstream feminist narratives that often overlook the complexities of indigenous experiences (Stewart 2021).

Sámi women's movement in Sweden, gaining prominence in the 1970s, has argued for an intersectional lens by highlighting how colonial histories and patriarchal structures have compounded the oppression of Sámi women, particularly within the context of reindeer husbandry and broader societal norms (Knoblock 2022). Sámi feminists emphasise the need to integrate Indigenous perspectives into feminist discourse, advocating for recognition of their specific experiences and struggles against both gendered violence and colonialism. They critique the historical erasure of Sámi women's contributions to Swedish feminist scholarship and seek to reframe gender studies to include Indigenous knowledge systems (Asztalos Morell 2021). This intersectional approach challenges the dominant narratives marginalising Sámi identities within feminist and national discourses (Brovold 2023).

Further, in Canada, the feminist movements of Inuit and Métis women have evolved to address the unique intersection of gender, culture, and colonialism. Organisations like Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada have been pivotal since their founding in 1984, advocating for the rights and empowerment of Inuit women while emphasising the importance of cultural identity and community well-being. Inuit women have increasingly engaged in political activism, challenging traditional gender roles and advocating for representation in decision-making processes. Similarly, the Métis women's movement has focused on intersectionality, recognising that issues such as violence, health disparities, and socioeconomic challenges disproportionately affect Indigenous women due to systemic racism and colonial legacies (Strong-Boag 2021).

Global feminist movements have demonstrated the power of solidarity across borders and communities. Dalit feminists led caste-equity work in South Asia could substantially benefit from building alliances with other feminist movements, particularly those that address similar forms of systemic oppression. However, the burden of forging solidarities rests not solely with Dalit feminists. At its core, the Dalit feminist movement challenges mainstream feminist movements in South Asia, dominated by privileged and oppressor caste women, not just to be more inclusive, but to address the complexities of oppression and work together to dismantle all hierarchies that contribute to caste-patriarchal subjugation.

## Findings

### Landscape analysis of Dalit feminist-led caste equity movements

#### India

In India, the Dalit feminist movement primarily focuses on anti-caste activism and social justice. It began in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Before that, while there were several Dalit organisations, Dalit women's organisations were conspicuously absent as formal collectives. Feminist movements also emerged around this time, but their struggles often focused on issues like domestic violence and household matters, which, while necessary, did not include the far more expansive and specific challenges faced by Dalit women. Dalit women have a unique set of issues because they face both gender-based and caste-based violence, both of which compound the other.

Senior Dalit women leaders, such as Ruth Manorama and Vimal Thorat, came together because, at the time, only left-wing women's organisations were addressing labour issues. However, these organisations were unwilling to recognise the caste system's role in creating and perpetuating labour exploitation, failing to address its root cause. While Dalit organisations and feminist groups existed, they neither acknowledged nor prioritised the unique issues faced by Dalit women, nor were they willing to cede leadership to them.

The urgency of Dalit women's issues demanded focused attention, prompting these leaders to develop their agenda and framework. This effort led to the formation of organisations such as AIDMAM (All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch) and NFDW (National Federation of Dalit Women), as well as the contributions of other individual Dalit women leaders, marking the emergence of the Dalit feminist movement.

Even today, Dalit feminist organisations in India and South Asia remain exceedingly rare. This scarcity is not accidental; it reflects the deeply entrenched marginalisation faced by Dalit women throughout history. Establishing an organisation poses significant challenges for Dalit women due to numerous obstacles, including a lack of resources, mentorship, and institutional knowledge.

As a result, only a handful of registered Dalit feminist organisations exist, and those that do face immense difficulties in securing recognition, resources, and

formal approvals such as FCRA (Foreign Contribution Regulation Act) clearance. Despite these barriers, many Dalit women leaders continue to advance caste equity—whether as independent activists, members of collectives, or participants in broader movements.

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## Nepal

In Nepal, the Dalit feminist movement has emerged as a dynamic socio-political force addressing the intersectional challenges faced by Dalit women, who are marginalised on both caste and gender grounds. Historically, the Dalit community in Nepal has faced economic, social, and educational disadvantages. Following the pro-democracy movement, the movement gained traction post-1990 and witnessed a notable increase in Dalit-led organisations after 2000. Over the past three decades, organisations like the Feminist Dalit Organisation have played a pivotal role in advocating for the rights and empowerment of Dalit women, with a particular focus on enhancing their representation in governance and decision-making processes.

A significant disparity exists in the ground reality for smaller community-based initiatives. Dalit feminist organisations like the Centre for Dalit Women Nepal and Samari Utthan Sewa face substantial challenges in pursuing caste equity due to funder preferences that often prioritise organisations with long-standing experience and established expertise. Many Dalit-led organisations, having emerged prominently only after 2000, struggle to meet these criteria despite their enduring relationships within communities and their profound understanding of the issues they address. This creates a disparity in funding opportunities between self-led and non-self-led organisations.

At the local level, many mainstream feminist organisations, often led by privileged caste women, and other local groups remain unwilling to share knowledge, resources, or platforms with Dalit feminist collectives. There is a persistent reluctance to acknowledge Dalit feminist leadership, resulting in further marginalisation within the broader feminist movement. This lack of solidarity prevents Dalit women from gaining the visibility and support necessary to combat caste-based violence and discrimination effectively.

While India and Nepal have strong constitutional provisions and legal safeguards against caste-based discrimination, enforcement of these provisions remains weak. Dalit women continue to face deep-rooted social biases and limited societal acceptance, restricting their full participation across various spheres.

Their representation in political leadership also remains low. Although quotas exist for Dalit women in governance, meaningful participation is still lacking, with many reserved seats either left unfilled or existing only in name.

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## Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, Dalits constitute the majority of the Hindu minority community. However, there is also a significant presence of Dalit Christians, Muslims, and Buddhists. Dalits are predominantly employed in menial jobs, including cleaning, manual scavenging, leather processing, and steel clearing. Many also work as labourers on farms and in plantation areas.

For over three decades, the Bangladesh Dalit and Excluded Rights Movement has been advocating for the rights of Dalits across various religious communities. Organising Dalit feminist organisations in Bangladesh remains complex and challenging. Yet it has become an increasingly vital part of the struggle for social justice and equality over the past two decades. Grassroots and national organisations, such as the Bangladesh Dalit Women Forum, play a crucial role in empowering Dalit women and amplifying their voices in the fight for their rights, despite facing limited funding, capacity, and human resources compared to larger intermediaries like Nagorik Uddyog.

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## Pakistan

The Dalit movement in Pakistan is rooted in the broader struggle for the rights and recognition of Scheduled Castes within the Hindu community, as well as among Christian minorities and marginalised Muslim communities, such as the Kohli and Meghwal castes. Historically, these communities have faced systemic discrimination and economic marginalisation, often relegated to jobs like sanitation work and manual labour. Although Islam does not formally recognise the caste system, caste-based discrimination persists in practice, affecting Hindu, Muslim, and Christian groups alike. The movement has struggled with limited political and social representation, as upper-caste minorities often occupy reserved seats in parliament.

Dalit feminist-led organisations, such as the Shelter Participatory Organisation and the Bonded Labour Liberation Front, are actively raising awareness and advocating for the rights of these communities. The movement is increasingly taking an intersectional approach, with leadership by women from oppressed



caste backgrounds who are addressing issues such as gender-based violence and the political participation of Dalit women. The Pakistan Dalit Solidarity Network highlights the urgent need for constitutional amendments to explicitly recognise and protect the rights of Scheduled Castes, advocating for equality regardless of religion or caste.

Self-led caste equity initiatives primarily address the challenges that grassroots organisations face in securing funding. In this context, feminist movements can play a crucial role in strengthening anti-caste advocacy and advocating for policy changes that promote lasting structural reforms.

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## Sri Lanka

In Sri Lanka, caste issues are often overshadowed by broader ethnic minority concerns, particularly for Tamil plantation workers who face both caste- and ethnicity-based discrimination. The Human Development Organisation has played a crucial role in securing citizenship for stateless plantation workers and advocating for their rights, including access to land and housing. Many plantation workers identify as *Malayaga Tamilar* (or Indian Tamils) and are concentrated in the Southern Province, primarily in smallholdings for tea and the rubber plantation sector. While caste continues to shape personal aspects like marriage, it is less visible in public discourse. However, systemic barriers such as language discrimination, lack of representation in leadership, and entrenched biases continue to hinder the progress of Dalit and lower-caste communities. The primary struggle remains to secure full citizenship rights, which could significantly enhance their socio-economic standing in Sri Lankan society.

The Dalit feminist movement in Sri Lanka is not as explicitly recognised as in India, but anti-caste feminist principles are embedded in the work led by Dalit women. The Human Development Organisation has advocated for the rights of plantation workers, focusing on citizenship, fair wages, and women's empowerment. There is now a growing movement toward acknowledging and addressing caste-based discrimination at both local and international levels, underscoring the need for more inclusive policies and greater representation of oppressed caste women in global forums.

Dalit feminists and Dalit feminist organisations have worked tirelessly to raise awareness about caste-based oppression and address its root causes, despite facing numerous challenges. The intersection of caste, gender, class, and other social conditions creates compounded forms of marginalisation for Dalit women.



While various organisations focus on women in agriculture, labour, or elder care, these discussions often fail to acknowledge caste identity. Many of these organisations speak about women's vulnerabilities but overlook the fact that women are not a homogeneous group. Dalit women, for instance, experience gender-based oppression in ways that are deeply intertwined with their caste identity.

Dominant caste perspectives frequently obscure the specific struggles of Dalit women. These voices lack the lived experiences of caste-based violence, discrimination, and exclusion. This is why Dalit women and Dalit feminist organisations have consistently led the charge in raising awareness about the intersection of caste and gender, highlighting the unique forms of oppression Dalit women face. Through their activism, they have brought much-needed visibility to intersectionality, ensuring that the voices of Dalit women are heard and their struggles are addressed in both feminist and social justice spaces.

## **Impact of Caste in the Funding Ecosystem**

Dalit feminist organisations face significant challenges in securing funding. One major obstacle is the language barrier. While these organisations are more comfortable drafting proposals in regional languages, funders typically require applications to be submitted in English. Given their limited resources, many Dalit feminist-led groups cannot afford to hire professional grant writers, further restricting their access to funding. Some funders impose unrealistic requirements, such as mandating a minimum annual turnover. This raises questions on how these organisations can build their financial capacity if they are not adequately supported. With scarce funding, Dalit feminist organisations struggle to sustain their work, develop leadership, and expand their impact.

The Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) process reinforces casteist hierarchies at multiple levels. Over the past decade, trust-based approaches in M&E have sought to empower Indigenous organisations by reducing reporting burdens. Moreover, this grants them greater control over resource allocation and fosters culturally appropriate solutions to community challenges. While conversations in the Majority World have critically engaged with the colonial legacy, historical trauma of Indigenous peoples, and the inherent power imbalances within trust-based philanthropy, funding for caste equity remains primarily excluded from these discussions.

Funding agencies in South Asia continue to impose reporting requirements aligned with hetero-patriarchal, capitalist standards, often weaponising accountability while normalising elite caste mediocrity in the name of effectiveness. In contrast, Dalit feminist-led initiatives in South Asia advocate for an intersectional lens, emphasising how colonial histories intersect with local social hierarchies, particularly the caste system and its entanglement with gender discrimination. They assert that the struggles of Dalit women cannot be understood in isolation from their broader cultural and social contexts, demanding a more nuanced and equitable approach to funding and evaluation.

Another major challenge for Dalit feminist organisations is chronic underfunding, which severely impacts their ability to retain skilled team members. Many struggle to offer fair wages, leading to high turnover rates. In contrast, upper-caste feminist organisations or better-funded groups often hire Dalit women but relegate them to lower-level positions or fieldwork rather than leadership roles. This tokenisation limits their potential and prevents the genuine development of Dalit feminist leadership.

Additionally, funders prioritise programs like microfinance or climate change initiatives over rights-based work. They prefer measurable, tangible ‘hardware’ outputs—such as infrastructure or economic development—over ‘software’ approaches like movement building, advocacy, and knowledge production. This bias significantly hampers long-term engagement and impact within Dalit communities.

A further obstacle is the deeply skewed knowledge-sharing landscape within and outside South Asia’s philanthropy ecosystem. Dalit feminist-led grassroots organisations often lack timely access to funding opportunities due to limited networks and lower social media visibility. This restricts their ability to stay informed about available grants. However, available funding is often limited to small, short-term grants, typically ranging from six months to a year, which are insufficient for achieving meaningful, long-term impact.

Moreover, funders impose rigid demands for measurable outcomes, such as success stories and quantifiable achievements, within unrealistic time frames. They fail to recognise that deep-rooted social change—especially around caste and gender—requires sustained effort, long-term commitment, and the flexibility to address complex, evolving challenges.

## State-level Challenges

Dalit feminist organisations face significant repression from the state, particularly in India, where local and regional governments actively target them for challenging the status quo. By raising issues of dignity, human rights, caste atrocities, and systemic poverty, these organisations confront entrenched power structures, making them more vulnerable to state retaliation. In contrast, feminist organisations that do not centre caste oppression in their work often operate with greater safety and autonomy, as their work is perceived as less politically contentious.

State surveillance is a significant obstacle, with many Dalit feminist organisations in India facing the cancellation of their FCRA (Foreign Contribution Regulation Act) licenses. This crackdown on foreign funding severely restricts their ability to function effectively, reinforcing financial precarity and limiting their outreach. The constant threat of government scrutiny, legal harassment, and funding restrictions creates a hostile environment, forcing many organisations to navigate immense risks simply to continue their work.

In Pakistan, while laws exist to address caste-based exploitation and discrimination, they fail to recognise or address the gendered caste violence that Dalit women face. Similarly, in Nepal and Bangladesh, governments have offered some preliminary support for Dalit feminist-led initiatives, particularly in advocacy and policy discussions. However, bureaucratic hurdles and restrictive policies on foreign funding continue to hinder meaningful and sustained investment in caste equity efforts.

## Conclusions and Way Forward

**Dalit feminist organisations require long-term, sustainable funding** to plan and implement lasting change, rather than being constrained by short-term, piecemeal grants. They also need capacity-building support to strengthen their teams and infrastructure. However, funders frequently compare Dalit feminist organisations to upper-caste feminist organisations, which often have historical access to resources, larger teams, and well-established infrastructures. This comparison is fundamentally unfair, as it ignores the systemic marginalisation Dalit communities face—barriers that limit their access to the same levels of funding, networks, or institutional support.

For meaningful change, **funders must recognise that resourcing caste equity initiatives is not optional but essential.** Caste oppression intersects deeply with gender, geographic location, and poverty, placing Dalit women in particularly vulnerable positions where human rights violations are severe and persistent. Funding frameworks must be restructured to prioritise Dalit feminist leadership, ensuring that resources are directed toward those most affected by caste-based discrimination and gendered violence.

**Caste equity is not a short-term project—it is a long-term commitment.** Raising visibility and advocating for systemic change requires sustained effort, consistency, and dedication. Transforming deeply entrenched caste hierarchies is an ongoing process, requiring long-term engagement with communities and relentless advocacy for justice.

Dalit feminist leaders emphasise that effective change comes not just from advocacy but from **deeply listening to and learning from the lived experiences of those most affected by caste-based discrimination.** Being present with communities fosters trust and solidarity, enabling more effective strategies for resistance and transformation. However, for this work to be impactful, Dalit feminist organisations need stable, long-term funding.

**Short-term grants of one or two years are insufficient to create lasting structural change.** When funding cycles are brief and unpredictable, organisations must constantly scramble for resources, diverting energy from their core mission. Long-term funding provides the stability necessary to build momentum, expand reach, and transition from grassroots efforts to national-level impact.

Moreover, **funding must be core and flexible.** Rigid, project-based funding often fails to meet the evolving needs of communities. Flexible funding allows organisations to adapt to emerging challenges, invest in leadership development, and sustain long-term strategies for systemic change. Without this, the Dalit feminist movement remains constrained by financial precarity, despite its critical role in challenging caste and gender-based oppression.

**Strengthening partnerships between Dalit feminist organisations and funders is essential for long-term impact.** However, these partnerships must be built on principles of equality and shared leadership. Dalit feminist organisations are not passive recipients of charity—they are leaders at the forefront of justice movements. True partnership requires funders to recognise this and move away from paternalistic support models.

The concept of “giving back to society” should be mutual, dismantling the hierarchy between funders and the organisations they support. Funders must go beyond transactional grant-making and instead invest in the overall well-being and growth of these organisations. This means shifting the focus from rigid metrics, such as quarterly reports and numerical outputs, to a deeper understanding of organisational challenges, needs, and long-term capacity-building.

**Sustainable funding must cover more than just operational costs.** It should include essential support for travel, urgent actions, and emergency grants, ensuring that Dalit feminist organisations can respond swiftly to crises and opportunities. Without this flexibility, organisations are often forced to choose between immediate survival and long-term strategy—an impossible trade-off for movements working to dismantle caste and gender oppression.

**Intersectionality must be at the core of the philanthropic ecosystem,** yet many international funding agencies continue to operate from a limited, homogenised understanding of women’s issues. White women often lead these agencies from the Minority World, whose perspectives, while valuable, may not fully grasp the layered and systemic nature of caste oppression. A more diverse leadership within philanthropy, particularly with increased representation of women of colour, especially Black women and those from caste-oppressed backgrounds, could bring deeper intersectional awareness. Black feminist thought, for instance, has long challenged one-dimensional approaches to oppression, offering critical insights that could reshape how funders engage with Dalit feminist movements. Without such perspectives, funding agencies risk reinforcing the very inequalities they claim to dismantle by treating “women’s issues” as a singular, universal category rather than recognising the specific struggles of caste-marginalised women.

**Philanthropy must move beyond performative inclusivity** and actively integrate intersectionality into its decision-making structures. This includes shifting power to Dalit feminist-led organisations, acknowledging their expertise, and ensuring that funding frameworks reflect the realities of those they seek to support.

The priorities for Dalit feminist organisations in the next decade include the following:

1. **Building the capacity of organisations and communities:** Strengthening the internal capacity of Dalit feminist organisations and empowering local communities is essential for long-term sustainability and impact. This includes providing training, resources, and support to help them address their unique challenges more effectively.
2. **Registering more organisations:** Expanding the number of registered Dalit feminist organisations will increase their visibility and influence, allowing them to better advocate for the rights and needs of Dalit women on a larger scale.
3. **Raising the voices of Dalit women at the international level:** It is crucial to elevate the voices of Dalit women in global discussions around gender, caste, and social justice. This includes advocating for their representation in international forums and policy-making spaces, where their issues often remain underrepresented.
4. **Focusing on youth and adolescent girls:** A key priority should be empowering Dalit youth, particularly adolescent girls, by building their leadership capacity. Providing them with the tools, knowledge, and support they need to become community leaders is essential for creating a more equitable future.
5. **Promoting digital literacy and education:** In today's world, digital literacy is vital for social and economic empowerment. Dalit feminist organisations should prioritise providing access to education and digital skills, enabling young people to navigate the modern world and create opportunities for themselves and their communities.

Focusing on these priorities, any substantial work that involves movement building and capacity building for communities at large would require long-term, dedicated funds that are fundamentally driven by trust and a genuine intent for a casteless society. Funders need to take responsibility for strengthening Dalit feminist organisations' movement, amplifying the voices of Dalit women, and creating lasting changes for future generations.

## Recommendations

### Organisations

In terms of overarching approaches, by drawing on these lessons from the evolution of feminist movements worldwide, Dalit feminist organisations in South Asia can enhance their strategies for empowerment, advocacy, and social justice, ultimately working towards a more equitable society for all marginalised women.

- ➔ **Intersectionality:** The evolution of key global feminist movements underscores the importance of recognising how various forms of oppression intersect, such as race, gender, and colonial histories. Dalit feminist movements in South Asia can benefit from an intersectional approach that addresses their unique challenges while acknowledging the historical context of caste discrimination.
- ➔ **Grassroots organising:** The formation of groups like the National Black Feminist Organisation, WARN illustrates the power of grassroots organising in addressing specific community needs. Dalit feminist movements can learn from this by establishing their platforms to advocate for rights without being overshadowed by mainstream feminist narratives.
- ➔ **Addressing violence against women:** The MMIW crisis highlights the urgent need to address violence against Indigenous women. At the same time, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement has focused on police violence and systemic racism, which can affect Black women in particular. Similarly, Dalit feminist movements must prioritise issues such as gender-based violence within their advocacy efforts, creating awareness and seeking justice for survivors.

### Funders

Black feminist movements in the U.S. have been actively addressing the chronic underfunding they face through innovative strategies and the establishment of dedicated funding initiatives. The Black Feminist Fund (BFF), launched in 2021, exemplifies a new approach to philanthropy that aims to significantly increase resources for Black feminist movements globally. This fund seeks to overcome traditional barriers by providing sustained, multi-year grants ranging from \$50,000 to \$200,000, allowing organisations to focus on long-term goals rather than project-specific funding. By employing a participatory funding model where a diverse committee of Black activists decides on grant allocations, BFF aims to build trust and ensure that funding directly supports grassroots movements often overlooked by mainstream philanthropy.



Additionally, there is a growing trend of philanthropists of colour and women supporting these movements. This shift is partly driven by an increased awareness of the need for intersectional approaches in philanthropy that recognise the unique challenges marginalised communities face. Reports indicate that while Black feminist movements receive only 0.1% to 0.35% of all philanthropic funding, there is a rising commitment among some funders to prioritise Black leadership and intersectional issues (Human Rights Funders Network 2021). By diversifying funding strategies and moving away from siloed approaches that focus solely on single issues, these philanthropists are working to create a more equitable distribution of resources that supports the holistic needs of Black feminist movements.

Specifically, some approaches could include;

- ➔ **Establishing dedicated funds:** The creation of funds, such as the BFF, highlights the importance of establishing dedicated financial resources for specific movements. Dalit feminist organisations can advocate for similar funds focusing on their unique challenges and needs, ensuring sustained support over time.
- ➔ **Participatory funding models:** Implementing participatory funding models can empower marginalised communities by involving them in decision-making processes about resource allocation. Dalit feminists can adopt this approach to ensure that funding aligns with their priorities and addresses their specific concerns.
- ➔ **Building networks among philanthropists:** The increasing involvement of philanthropists of colour and women in supporting Black feminist movements suggests that building networks among diverse funders can enhance resource mobilisation for Dalit feminist causes. Engaging with allies who understand the importance of intersectionality can lead to more substantial support.
- ➔ **Advocating for Long-Term Funding:** The emphasis on long-term funding commitments within the BFF model highlights the need for Dalit feminist movements to advocate for sustained financial support rather than short-term project grants. This approach enables organisations to plan effectively and implement comprehensive strategies for change.
- ➔ **Raising awareness about intersectionality:** Black feminists' ongoing efforts to highlight their intersectional struggles can serve as a model for Dalit feminists in South Asia. By raising awareness about how caste intersects with gender and other forms of discrimination (such as economic and health inequities), Dalit feminists can attract broader support and understanding from potential funders.



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