

Manual Scavenging and Sustainable Development Goal 5 and 10



Manual Scavenging and Sustainable Development: Goal 5 and Goal 10

Author and Editor: **Juno Varghese and Kalpana Biswakarma**

Concept & Research Advisor: **Beena Pallikal**

Contributors: **Aparna Prabhu**

Photographs: **Sudharak Olwe, NCDHR**

Design & Illustrations: **Sajana J**

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National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR)

8/31, South Patel Nagar, Third Floor
New Delhi - 110008

Phone: +91-11-25842249

Website: ncdhr.org.in



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‘Entitlements to economic rights become narrower and narrower the farther down the hierarchical ladders of the caste system. Without intervention, classically untouchables, or Dalits, who lie at the very bottom of the social order, find themselves restricted to the most despised occupations and the lowest wages’

- Katherine S. Newman and Sukhadeo Thorat.

INTRODUCTION

Social justice is the aspiration of the Indian Constitution that it strives to achieve. The Constitution mandates the state to ensure and secure social justice and order based on equal opportunity so that it is not denied to any citizen on any grounds. When we examine the country based on five basic indicators of poverty, inequality, employment, violence, and atrocities, the numbers are indicative of the marginalization of communities such as the Dalits and Adivasis, leading to widening inequalities.

‘Entitlements to economic rights become narrower and narrower the farther down the hierarchical ladders of the caste system. Without intervention, classically untouchables, or Dalits, who lie at the very bottom of the social order, find themselves restricted to the most despised occupations and the lowest wages’ writes Katherine S. Newman and Sukhadeo Thorat.

Discrimination, exclusion, inequality, and the system of untouchability based on caste continue to operate and thrive very securely in the country. Despite formal legal protection by the law, discriminatory norms continue to be reinforced by the state and non-state actors often through violence. There are very strong caste divisions between Dalits and other caste groups in housing, religious

Based on the caste hierarchy, Dalits make up the majority of the manual scavengers in the country, out of which Dalit women are seen in huge numbers.

practices, employment, and marriage, among many others. The incidence of violence against the Dalit has not shown a decline and remains persistent in different forms like murder, individual and gang rape, physical assault, verbal abuse, naked parading, and so forth.

Exclusion and discrimination are not only visible in the civic and political spheres but also in the economic sphere, particularly in terms of occupation, labor employment, and market arrangement. Dalits are often restricted to particular kinds of occupations often considered polluting with low wages and with very less options of mobility.

Manual scavenging is one of the definitive examples reflecting their economic position in the labor market. Based on the caste hierarchy, Dalits make up the majority of the manual scavengers in the country, out of which Dalit women are seen in huge numbers. The entrenched concept of pollution and discrimination connected with manual scavenging makes it difficult for them to find any alternative livelihood opportunities pushing them into the age-old vicious circle of poverty and exclusion.

In India as per the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013 'manual scavenger' refers to: "a person engaged or employed ... for manually cleaning, carrying, disposing of, or otherwise handling in any manner, human excreta in an insanitary latrine or in an open drain or pit."

As per the data provided by Safai Karamchari Andolan roughly 45 deaths related to manual scavenging are reported annually in India while admitting that many of them even go unreported.

In our country, the accurate figure related to the population of persons engaged in manual scavenging is a subject of dispute. So, the real picture is away from the public view.

In India, it is sad to note that over the last few years, the deaths of sewage workers have increased, with 634 deaths related to manual scavenging recorded in the last twenty-five years. As per the data provided by Safai Karamchari Andolan roughly 45 deaths are reported annually in India while admitting that many of them even go unreported. With a lack of minimum wages, lack of protective gear, absence of alternate economic opportunities, social security, and health risks the practise of manual scavenging poses serious questions on the human rights situation in our country.



Photo: Sudharak Olwe

What are SDGs and Looking at the Issue from the Perspective of SDGs

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with the agenda of leaving no one behind have captured the world's attention. This has replaced the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which was initiated in 2000 to tackle the multiple issues faced by the global population, particularly with an objective of sustainability and elimination of extreme poverty for a dignified life. SDGs focus on principles of accountability, transparency, and participation, with an objective of holistic development for a dignified life in specific.

However, despite the holistic development agenda, there are apprehensions as to its reach and impact on the socially excluded communities, particularly Dalits. 'The SDG indirectly influences the various concerns of the excluded communities, while it fails to recognize caste as an important determinant of poverty and under-development. The absence of caste from the SDG main document, goals, and targets as well as the global indicators is clear evidence that there is less to no recognition of caste in the global agenda of development¹. India is a signatory to the SDGs agenda for sustainable development and working towards achieving the 17 SDGs.

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In the context of India, the Sustainable development goals seem very hopeful and necessary. However, India's economic disparity between the mainstream society, Dalits, Minorities, and Scheduled tribes is notable and disquieting too. Inequality has been sharply rising, the rich have become more affluent at a much faster pace while the poor are struggling to earn minimum wage and even to get access to quality education and healthcare services.

SDGs 4, 5, 6, 8, and 10 of all 16 goals are some core areas where the Dalits are marginalized and discriminated based on caste and work. To address the issues of caste and to achieve these SDG goals it is of utmost importance to acknowledge the existence of caste and related discrimination and address the issues about the accessibility of basic amenities like water, healthcare, education, livelihood, and so forth.

Why This Report

Through this report, the attempt is to understand the issue of caste discrimination from the perspective of the most marginalised communities in the context of SDGs. The report is a small endeavor to understand the key issues and challenges pertaining mainly to the persons engaged in sanitation work and manual scavenging. The perspective of constitutional and international frameworks is highlighted in this document to argue the sustainability scope of the SDGs particularly SDGs 5 and 10.

SDGs and their Relevance for Inclusive Development from the Perspective of Constitutional Goals

The practice of untouchability though legally prohibited, is still practiced in India, which has stolen the basic human rights in Indian society.

Untouchability is abolished by the Constitutions of India and have even enacted specific legislation to protect Dalit communities from caste-based atrocities. The fundamental rights of Articles 14, 15, 16, 21, and 22 talk about the rights and freedom of the Indian citizen irrespective of Caste and Creed, race, sex, religion, occupation, etc. In fact recognising the historical marginalisation of women Article 15 (3) states that “nothing in this article shall prevent the State from making any special provision for women and children”.

Under Article 46, the State to promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of the people and to protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation. The practice of untouchability though legally prohibited, is still practiced in India, which has stolen the basic human rights in Indian society.

Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013 (PEMSR) has legally prohibited the employment of the person as a manual scavenger in the country, after which flagship programs such as the ODF Open Defecation Free program were introduced to replace the insanitary toilets with the sanitary one and reach every household with the concrete toilet. However, the implementation and efficacy of this scheme is another question altogether. After the coming into effect of the PEMSAR Act² of 2013, the 2016-17 period of the Self Employment Scheme for Rehabilitation of Manual Scavengers (SRMS) scheme which undertook the rehabilitation process of manual scavengers was extended to 2020-21 as the objective of the scheme to eradicate the practice remained unfulfilled. The Department of Social Justice and Empowerment introduced the SRMS in 2007 to aid the rehabilitation of ‘former’ manual scavengers transitioning to other occupations.

The absence of political will and lack of administrative determination are the reasons for the persistence of the practice like manual scavenging.

Despite all the constitutional remedies the practice of manual scavenging continues to exist. The absence of political will and lack of administrative determination are the reasons for the persistence of the practice like manual scavenging. India has adopted to integrate SDGs with National Development programmes. However, our national indicators on many thematic areas like education, healthcare, livelihood, water, and sanitation stipulate that the national development programs have failed to reach the most vulnerable population, particularly Dalits. The rising number of deaths of the people engaged in sanitation work and manual scavenging is a clear indicator that the country’s development goals have failed to translate even in its SDG implementation.

Quandary of Sanitation Workers from the Viewpoint of SDGs

Several of the Sustainable Development Goals are particularly relevant to casteism and manual scavenging. Prevalences of manual scavenging in our country challenges the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) particularly those related to Goal 6 - Clean water and sanitation, Goal 8 - Decent work and economic Growth, Goal 5 – Gender Equality, Goal 10 - Reduced inequalities, Goal 16 - Peace, justice and strong institutions.

In this brief the focus will be on Goal 5 and 10. Ending casteism would help meet Goal 5, “Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls,” because of the disproportionate and intersectional mistreatment suffered by female sanitation workers. Additionally, achieving Goal 10, “Reduce inequality within and among countries” is inseparable from dismantling casteism, given the practice’s key role in perpetuating economic and social inequality within India. Because of its damaging impact on the environment, worker rights, gender equality, economic well-being, and general human dignity, it is fitting to analyze manual scavenging in light of the sustainable development goals.

India has committed to meeting the goals, but the persistence of manual scavenging challenges its ability to do so. This report provides insight into India's work on scavenging, and, by extension, the SDGs and also provides policy recommendations towards the end of the document.

Goal 5: Achieve Gender Equality and Empower All Women and Girls



SDG 5 calls for “Gender Equality”. The SDG emphasizes on equal rights for women, and ensures political, economic and social equality for all women. It urges to eliminate root causes of discrimination that still curtail women’s rights in private and public spheres. The targets to create action to reduce inequalities are as follows:

Target	Action
5.1	End all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere.
5.2	Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation
5.3	Eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation
5.4	Value unpaid work and promote shared domestic responsibilities
5.5	Ensure women’s full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership and decision-making
5.6	Ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights
5.7	Equal rights to economic resources, property ownership, and financial services
5.8	Promote empowerment of women through technology
5.9	Adopt and strengthen policies and enforceable legislation for gender equality

There exists additional levels of impediments for women engaged in the practice of manual scavenging. Situated at the intersection of multiple identities, Dalit women, suffer from numerous prejudices owing to this compounded and complex form of discrimination which finds its place in the domestic, social, cultural as well as professional spheres. They're not just subjects of discrimination based on caste and class but also based on gender which further makes it difficult for women to find a place of equality, equity as well as dignity in different domains of life and society.

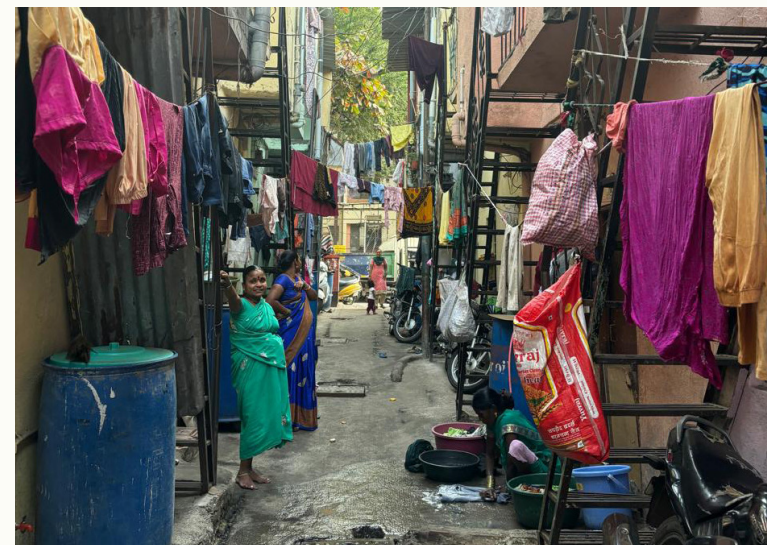
Issues of unequal pay, education, sexual harassment, supporting domestic duties, and physical and emotional abuse are just a few in a long list of problems that women engaged in manual scavenging face. Women in this sector are mainly engaged in cleaning insanitary dry latrines and carrying and disposing of human faeces, and also in assisting their male folks in the cleaning of septic tanks.

Issues of unequal pay, education, sexual harassment, supporting domestic duties, and physical and emotional abuse are just a few in a long list of problems that women engaged in manual scavenging face.

In rural India, women and girls of the Dalit community are exclusively working as manual scavengers of the dominant caste neighbourhood and manually cleaning the human excreta, and 50% of the urban sanitation workers are women working as toilet cleaners, sweepers, garbage pickers and are forced to do manual labour without the provision of protective gear or some time with a poor quality of safety kits such as gloves and mask.

Ownership of land and other assets by women is critical to enhancing a woman's overall well-being, economic security, access to food, livelihood, housing, and socio-economic mobility. Dalit women lack access to income-earning assets and regular employment and depend mainly on wage labor. Under these circumstances it becomes extremely difficult for Dalit women to engage in alternate livelihood options, also considering the social stigma in the society.

A large number of Dalit women engaged in sanitation work and manual scavenging work without any specific recognition of their particular vulnerabilities. Women in sanitation work are often exposed to mental and sexual harassment and abusive words from their male supervisors and contractors. They face sexual abuse and violence both inside and outside the home which is a clear violation of all the indicators of SDG Goal 5.



Goal 10: Reduce Inequality Within and Among Countries



SDG 10 calls for “Reduced inequality within and among countries”. This SDG emphasizes social and economic development. Concentrating the world’s wealth in a few hands can lead to financial and social discrimination thereby harming poverty reduction and destroying people’s sense of fulfilment and self-worth. Inequalities exist in various fields including health, education, water and sanitation, employment, land and housing among others which represent in SDGs through separate and specific goals. The targets to create action to reduce inequalities are as follows³:

Target	Action
10.1	By 2030, progressively achieve and sustain income growth of the bottom 40 percent of the population at a rate higher than the national average
10.2	By 2030, empower and promote the social, economic, and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion, or economic or other status
10.3	Ensure equal opportunity and reduce inequalities of outcome, including by eliminating discriminatory laws, policies, and practices and promoting appropriate legislation, policies, and action in this regard
10.4	Adopt policies, especially fiscal, wage, and social protection policies, and progressively achieve greater equality

Target	Action
10.5	Improve the regulation and monitoring of global financial markets and institutions and strengthen the implementation of such regulations
10.6	Ensure enhanced representation and voice for developing countries in decision-making in global international economic and financial institutions in order to deliver more effective, credible, accountable, and legitimate institutions
10.7	Facilitate orderly, safe, regular, and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through the implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies

Caste-based discrimination and the caste-based nature of manual scavenging and sanitation work is an important aspect of flaring inequalities. The relationship between caste discrimination, inequality, and poverty cannot be discreet. SDG 10 is closely related to SDG 8 i.e. decent employment, particularly for the Dalit community who are forced into indecent forms of employment. They often work without access to basic human rights, even without fair pay or minimum wages.

Sanitation work or manual scavenging is often associated with the caste group one belongs to, thereby reinforcing the social stigma of ‘untouchability’ associated with this work. Academic Jayati Ghosh has argued that in India growth is based on private accumulation – which has relied on existing social inequalities creating segmented labour markets that keep wages low for certain social categories while benefitting more privileged ones⁴.

If we specifically look from the perspective of SDG Goal 10 targets those related to income growth; social economic and political inclusion and fiscal, wage, and social protection policies the condition of the persons engaged

in manual scavenging and sanitation work is quite inexcusable. In terms of income growth, persons engaged in this work are hired as informal workers without any fixed and consistent wages, leaving them at the mercy of the employers. Dalit women who are employed as manual scavengers are often not paid for their work in cash and are instead provided with leftover food or rations. Moreover, in the instances where they do get paid, their wages are substantially lower than that of men.

Women manual scavengers get paid as little as INR 10 to INR 50 per day per household for their work as compared to men who get paid INR 300 on average. With a lack of minimum wages, a lack of protective gear, an absence of alternate economic opportunities, social security, and health risks the practice of manual scavenging poses serious questions on the human rights situation in the country. Additionally, poor access to government schemes and entitlements disseminates this inequality among the workers, especially for women from the community.

References

¹Sustainable and Resilient Communities : A Profile of Dalits in Disaster Risk Reduction in South Asia <https://www.ncdhr.org.in/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/1724299862Regional-Report-on-SDG-and-DRR.pdf>

²PMSR Act has defined and prohibited manual scavenging in the country and has banned dry latrines. The act has directed a survey at the local, district, and state levels to identify the manual scavengers in the country and their occupational rehabilitation by providing them with one-time money transactions for alternative livelihood through the SRMS schemes under the act.

³<https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/inequality/>

⁴<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/13547860.2014.974316>

⁵Is There Any CAG Report On the Implementation Of Manual Scavengers Act? Supreme Court Asks Centre: <https://www.livelaw.in/top-stories/supreme-court-pil-manual-scavengers-act-implementation-235469?infinite-scroll=1>

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Eliminate the practice of manual scavenging and ensure that the implementation of the law is effectively carried out

Efforts should be made to create more awareness about policies and schemes on manual scavenging, especially among women practitioners. The state and local authorities can organise awareness drives and programs in rural and remote areas where manual scavengers are substantially more unaware of the policies. State administrations can coordinate systematic annual awareness camps in these areas with the help of local panchayats. Sanitation and awareness campaigns, as seen in the likes of the Swachh Bharat Mission, can include aspects of upliftment and rehabilitation of manual scavengers.

3. A multi-pronged strategy should be adopted to ensure that women currently engaged in Manual Scavenging are rehabilitated as per the law, more efforts to prohibit this practice thereby putting more effort in education etc

4. More funds need to be allocated to the financial assistance schemes for women engaged in manual scavenging

5. More emphasis needs to be placed on making the schemes and entitlements more accessible to the targeted group further ensuring that the socio-cultural prejudices don't interfere with the ability of the community to approach relevant authorities to voice their concerns.

- Eradication/discontinuation of any informal practices that are responsible for the employment of manual scavengers in rural areas by the stringent implementation of the POA act and the activation of vigilance committees right from the local level because it is in rural areas where the women are enforced in manual scavenging work which is exclusively done by Dalit women most belonging to the Valmiki community.
- 6.

- Official surveys and studies need to be conducted on the recognition of the persistence of manual scavenging, the communities that are engaged in the practice, the implementation of schemes as well as the barriers in accessing the schemes. (Acting on a PIL on the implementation of the PM-DAKSH scheme and the PEMSR Act of 2013, the division bench of the supreme court headed by justices S Ravindra Bhat and Arvind Kumar asked the representative of the center about the official CAG report. The bench inquired that even after 10 years of the prohibition act why has there never been an official report or survey by CAG? The court proceeding also illuminated the fact that national surveys on manual scavengers were not done in rural areas which have the highest instances of continuation of the practice. The bench emphasised that apart from five states, there have been no state-level surveys as well bringing out the evident fact that government-backed surveys and studies have been inadequate on the issue.⁵)
- 7.

- Provisions should be made to assist Dalit women in representing their community as elected representatives. Female representatives are rarely ever seen to represent the problems and demands of the community. Provisions similar to how local election seats are reserved for persons from scheduled castes, it should be stressed that seats are reserved for Dalit female candidates as well so that better representation of issues faced by women might be presented to relevant higher authorities.
- 8.

- A financial literacy program needs to be introduced among the women engaged in manual scavenging work and other sanitation work so that they can access and utilize the scheme benefits more efficiently. It is to be noted that formal education and literacy among Dalit women is still very low which is another added disadvantage for the Dalit women.
- 9.

- Assisting individuals, and groups of women accessing loans and other livelihood schemes for planning concrete and sustainable business models/prototypes. Mentoring them throughout their endeavor to establish sustainable and secure livelihoods is crucial for these women who are already deprived of quality education and business management. Even though these components are mentioned in the guidelines of PM DAKSH Yozna, practical implementation of the same is required on the ground.
- 10.

- The maximum number of Skill development Training centres which are registered under these schemes are situated in capital cities of various states, which to a large extent hinders the enrolment of women from rural areas to these centres. Efforts should be made to establish such skill development training centres and vocational institutes in the rural areas as well where the number of the people engaged in Manual scavenging and other sanitation work live or vocational institutions nearest to the residence or the colonies of the people engaged in MS and other sanitation work should be registered under the Scheme and should be upgraded to the level of the advanced training centres which are established in the cities and popular urban areas. This would encourage and impact women engaged in this work to enrol themselves in skill development training courses.
- 11.



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