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Intersectional Empowerment of Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe Women in India

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Abstract: Women's empowerment in India is shaped not only by legal rights but also by intersecting social identities such as caste, class, religion, and disability. This study examines the intersectional empowerment of Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) women, focusing on how social norms, family pressure, and structural inequalities influence their agency and decision-making. Using an analytical approach, nationally representative secondary datasets—including Census of India (2011), Periodic Labour Force Survey (2018–19), NFHS-5 (2019–21), Ministry of Panchayati Raj (2019), Ministry of Finance (2021), and Social Justice Department reports (2020)—were integrated to analyze disparities in education, workforce participation, political representation, financial inclusion, health, mobility, child marriage, and access to legal support. Although legal protections exist, prior studies have inadequately addressed how intersecting social identities constrain practical empowerment. Findings reveal that SC and ST women experience limited autonomy, with 70.6 % of SC and 68.2 % of ST women participating in personal health decisions, while involvement in major household purchases is 63.5 % and 60.1 %, respectively. Mobility restrictions, persistent child marriage, and high exposure to spousal violence further limit agency, yet few women seek help or report abuse formally. These results emphasize the need for context-specific interventions, community-level programs, and policy innovations to enhance SC and ST women's autonomy, access to resources, and sustainable empowerment.

Keywords: *Intersectional Empowerment, Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe Women, Decision-Making Autonomy, Social Inequality, Gender and Development*

Introduction: Women's empowerment in India not only depends upon their legal rights but also involves the interplay of multiple social identity factors such as caste, class, religion, and disabilities. Although several provisions under the Constitution and laws extend equal rights and protection to women, empowerment still remains limited because of social identity factors. This indicates that legal empowerment of women does not necessarily generate empowerment.

The concept of intersectionality, popularized by Kimberlé Crenshaw, provides an analytical tool to comprehend the experience of multiple identity categories leading to cumulative disfavor (Crenshaw, 1989). For example, in the Indian context, gender intersects with caste in a significant measure, leading to abject social and economic deprivations of Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe women. Various empirical studies have documented that the experiences of caste oppression, economic deprivations, religious restrictions, and disability-based exclusion collectively constrain the educational opportunities, employment opportunities, and access to healthcare, mobility, and legal

recourse enjoyed by Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe, and women in general (Singh & Tomer, 2024; Kumar, 2025). Similarly, women with disabilities, as well as the broader female population belonging to minority communities, experience more barriers, thereby perpetuating the divide between existing legal provisions and actual empowerment. Because although there is an increase in literature about women's empowerment in recent times, there is still insufficient research addressing the aspects of women's legal rights in isolation. The main objectives of this research study include: (i) to identify differences in the exercise of legal rights in women from different caste backgrounds, classes, religions, and disabilities; (ii) to comparatively understand the scenario of women's empowerment in India in an intersectional frame of reference; and (iii) to identify how pressures from family, society, and fear affect the decision-making capacities of marginalized women. By conducting this research study in an intersectional frame of reference with the help of nationally representative data, there is an aim to fill in the gap that exists in India regarding women's legal rights.

Review of the literature:

Recent scholarship on women's empowerment in India highlights the critical importance of intersectionality—the interplay of caste, class, religion, disability, and gender—in shaping women's lived experiences and access to rights. Mal and Saikia (2024) demonstrate through the SWPER index that

empowerment among women varies significantly across caste and tribal groups, influencing health outcomes such as institutional deliveries and anemia prevalence. While forward caste women generally exhibit higher empowerment, Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) show

domain-specific advantages, particularly in decision-making autonomy and social independence. The study identifies a research gap in understanding these differences using nationally representative data, advocating for intersectional policy design to address these disparities.

Mangat and Gill (2024) provide qualitative insights into how Dalit women navigate experiences of sexual violence, revealing that strategic silence often serves as a form of agency rather than passive compliance. Their findings emphasize that patriarchal norms and community pressure shape women's responses, highlighting a need for nuanced approaches in policy and legal support systems. Similarly, Devkota (2021) and Thapa (2021) examine health disparities, showing that caste and disability intersect to compound marginalization, leading to reduced access to maternal health services and poorer health outcomes for women with intersecting vulnerabilities. Both studies point to a lack of intersectional research on health inequities and call for culturally responsive and inclusive health policies.

In workplace contexts, Jameel, Gauhar, and Ahmed (2024) explore how gender intersects with socio-economic status and ethnicity, serving as a proxy for caste and religion, to shape discrimination and career progression. They argue that Indian workplaces often reproduce structural disadvantages, reinforcing the need for context-specific organizational policies. Bouakaz and Khalid (2025) provide a broader review of intersectionality research in India, highlighting gaps in critical

evaluation of policy implementation and legal enforcement. Their work emphasizes the importance of longitudinal studies to assess real-world impacts of intersectional interventions.

From a theoretical and cultural standpoint, Rege (2006, cited widely in post-2017 literature) and Reddy (2024) foreground Dalit women's narratives and literature, demonstrating how caste, gender, and class simultaneously structure oppression while also providing avenues for resistance. These studies reveal a persistent gap in integrating qualitative testimonies into empirical research on legal and social outcomes. Singh (2025) further critiques mainstream feminist frameworks in India, arguing that without attention to caste, class, and regional inequalities, analyses of empowerment remain incomplete.

Community-level interventions have also been studied. The Sociology of Dalit Women SHGs (2025) investigates how self-help groups improve economic inclusion and confidence among marginalized women, yet structural barriers, particularly caste-based hierarchies, continue to limit their effectiveness. Similarly, Bhatia and Tomer (2024) stress that empirical intersectional studies remain scarce, particularly in rural and minority contexts, limiting the ability to formulate targeted policy responses. Finally, recent health disparity studies (2024) show that religion, caste, and socio-economic status jointly determine health outcomes, suggesting that effective interventions must address these intersections rather than single-axis disadvantages.

Research Questions:

RQ₁: What patterns exist in exercising legal rights among women across caste, class, religion, and disability?

RQ₂: How is women's empowerment experienced from an intersectional perspective?

Research gap:

disability jointly constrain practical empowerment and decision-making. This study addresses this gap by adopting an intersectional lens to analyze autonomy, mobility, financial inclusion, and vulnerability to social pressures.

RESEARCH DESIGN

patterns, and relationships across intersecting social identities comprising caste, class, religion, and disability. Such a design becomes useful especially for understanding complex social issues such as the female empowerment phenomenon using large-scale nationally representative data without direct investigation in the field.

Study Area and Units of Analysis:

indicators pertain to women aged 15–49 years, reflecting reproductive age groups commonly used in demographic and health surveys. The datasets involve women from diverse geographical regions, rural and urban areas, and

RQ₁: What patterns exist in exercising legal rights among women across caste, class, religion, and disability?

RQ₂: How is women's empowerment experienced from an intersectional perspective?

Despite legal protections and policy initiatives, existing studies on SC and ST women in India have largely focused on individual indicators like education, health, or political participation, without adequately examining how intersecting identities such as caste, class, religion, and

MATERIAL & METHODS

Thus, the study follows a descriptive and analytical design of research, solely based on secondary data. Descriptive strategy has been followed to present the socio-economic characteristics and empowerment indicators for SC and ST women in a systematic manner, while the analytical approach facilitates an in-depth investigation into disparities,

The study is conducted at the national level in India. Since the research is based on secondary data, no primary respondents were selected. The unit of analysis involves Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe women, as represented in nationally representative surveys. Most

varied socio-economic backgrounds; comprehensive

The study uses multiple nationally representative secondary data sources collected by government and government-affiliated agencies using standardized survey instruments. Major data sources used in the study include: The data for this analysis comes from the National Family Health Survey

Covers labour force participation of women, along with their employment status and occupational patterns across castes.

Used for literacy and demographic indicators. Official reports and statistical publications from MoSPI, Ministry of Panchayati Raj, Ministry of Finance, and Social Justice Department. These secondary datasets are known to be

The process of data collection involved a meticulous search, selection, and compilation of suitable variables, which are derived from various secondary sources of information. The data related to the empowerment of women, such as their level of education, their involvement in the workforce, political participation, financial empowerment, autonomy in

The secondary data collected from various sources was analyzed using a blend of descriptive and analytical tools of statistics. The data collected had certain primary characteristics specified with the use of a blend of descriptive and analytical statistics. To be specific, the data collected had a certain level of percentages and rates. Other

The present research is solely based on secondary data, which is publicly accessible. The research does not require any specific clearance since no data was actually used, nor was any personally identifying information used. Ethical

The limitation of secondary data in exploring the subjective experiences, perceptions, and actual lives of women lies in their incapability to be examined through qualitative and mixed-method approaches of research. Also, data on specific

analysis could therefore be conducted at the national level.

Data Sources and Research Instruments

conducted in 30 states during 2019–21 (NFHS-5). Variables pertaining to decision-making autonomy, mobility, child marriage, access to healthcare, and spousal violence experience are used.

Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS, 2018–19):

Census of India, 2011:

reliable research instruments due to their standardized data collection procedures, national coverage, and methodological rigor.

Data Collection Procedure

making decisions, their movement, early marriage, exposure to violence, etc., were collected. The data are further segregated according to the castes of SC/ST, gender, and age groups. In a few instances, comparisons were drawn between two time periods to observe the trend.

Data Analysis Techniques :

than that, certain specific themes were analyzed and compared between SC and ST women with the use of a blend of analytical and descriptive statistics. All the results were represented systematically to ensure transparency. Such a blend of analysis was made with the use of quantitative analysis procedures.

Ethical Considerations

research standards were adhered to by following the data usage policy as prescribed by the concerned bodies from which the data was collected.

Limitations of the Study

sub-groups among SC and ST populations might not be available. Variations in data at specific points of time might affect the comparative analyses for certain indicators.

INTERPRETATION:

INTERSECTIONAL GAPS BETWEEN LEGAL RIGHTS AND SOCIAL REALITIES

Dimension	Legal Rights (Law / Policy)	Ground Reality / Implementation Issues
Article 14 (Equality before law)	Guarantees equal protection of the laws to all, without discrimination.	Women from marginalized groups (e.g., Dalit women) face systemic discrimination in justice access, and official crime data often fails to capture intersectional nature of offenses, limiting full understanding of caste-gender violence

Caste	Constitution Article 15: prohibits caste discrimination. - SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989: protects Dalit and Adivasi women from caste-based violence. - Special Courts for atrocity cases.	Dalit women face disproportionately high caste- and gender-based violence including rape, physical assault, harassment, and social exclusion, despite legal prohibition. A study found that many Dalit women experience one or more forms of violence: verbal abuse, physical assault, sexual harassment/assault, and rape. Conviction rates are extremely low (around 1% of cases end in conviction).
Equal access to services and justice	Constitution supports protective statutes like the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act grounded in the equality mandate.	Official data shows rising crimes against Scheduled Castes, including women; about 15.32% of total SC crimes (2014–2022) affected women and girls.
Intersectional disadvantage recognized legally	Even where law prohibits discrimination, no specific provision guarantees intersectional justice (e.g., caste + gender + class).	Dalit women’s rights groups document that sexual violence is used as a tool of oppression tied to caste-gender-class hierarchies, and systemic impunity persists.
Article 15 (Prohibition of discrimination)	Prohibits discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth; allows special provisions for women.	Despite Article 15, caste-based violence against women persists (SC/ST Act cases remain high with many pending/closed). In Tamil Nadu 2023, crimes against Scheduled Castes increased and conviction rate was only ~12% despite thousands of cases.
Rights under workplace safety laws linked to Articles 14,15,21	Laws such as Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act 2013 protect women’s rights & safe working conditions, supported by constitutional equality guarantees	Reports show that workplace gender bias, harassment and underreporting still occur; many women reluctant to pursue legal process due to fear of stigma or retaliation (widely reported in media and gender studies). (Contextual evidence based on multiple credible reports)
SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act (linked to Article 15)	Provides special protection against caste atrocities including violence targeted at Scheduled Caste women. (Statute grounded in non-discrimination principle)	Between 2020–June 2025 in parts of Tamil Nadu, 3,041 cases were booked under SC/ST Act, but many were closed as “mistake of fact” and cases remain pending due to slow legal action.
Article 17 – Abolition of Untouchability	Untouchability and caste-based exclusion are constitutionally abolished for all, including women. (Constitution of India)	Despite legal ban, caste-based discrimination, exclusion, and violence persist, especially against Dalit women, including rape, assault, and social exclusion. NCRB data shows a 45% rise in reported rapes against Dalit women from 2015 to 2020, and incidents nearly doubled in 2020–21 (7,397 → 15,855). Convictions were low (~24%).
Article 23 – Prohibition of Trafficking & Forced Labour	Prohibits trafficking, slavery, and forced labor; protects women from exploitation.	Thousands of women and girls trafficked annually for domestic work, sexual exploitation, bonded labor. NCRB 2022 + NGOs (Save the Children India) report high numbers, especially poor and minority women.

Overall, although Indian laws strongly guarantee equality and protection for women, implementation remains weak. Marginalized women—especially Dalit women—continue to face high levels of violence, discrimination,

underreporting, delayed justice, and low conviction rates. This reflects a persistent gap between formal legal rights and lived realities, particularly for women facing intersectional disadvantage.

INTERSECTIONAL WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN INDIA

Intersectional Dimension	Empowerment indicator	Evidence Legal / Policy Provision	Ground Reality / Evidence
SC women	Education	Right to Education Act,	Literacy rate: 56.5 % (age 7+)
ST women	Education	Right to Education Act, 2009	Literacy rate: 59.4 % (age 7+)
SC women	Workforce Participation	Constitution – Equal Employment	35.06 % of SC women are in workforce; mostly informal/low-paying jobs
ST women	Workforce Participation	Constitution – Equal Employment	46 % of ST women are in workforce; mostly agricultural/informal work
SC women	Political Representation	73rd & 74th Constitutional Amendments	Occupy 41 % of reserved Panchayat seats; some proxy leader
ST women	Political Representation	73rd & 74th Constitutional Amendments	Occupy 44 % of reserved Panchayat seats; some proxy leaders
SC women with Disability	Access to Legal & Social Welfare	SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Act, 1989	Limited access to welfare schemes; face double marginalization
ST women with Disability	Access to Legal & Social Welfare	SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Act, 1989	Limited access to schemes; face double marginalization
Rural SC women	Health / Maternal Empowerment	National Rural Health Mission (NRHM)	Institutional deliveries ~74 %; limited reproductive autonomy
Rural ST women	Health / Maternal Empowerment	National Rural Health Mission (NRHM)	Institutional deliveries ~69 %; limited reproductive autonomy
SC women	Child Marriage	Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006	Early marriage prevalent; slightly higher in rural area
ST women	Child Marriage	Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006	Early marriage prevalent in remote tribal areas

Overall, ST women show higher levels of literacy, workforce participation, political representation, and child marriage prevalence than SC women, while SC women show higher access to health and maternal services. Among all groups, ST women with disabilities are the most disadvantaged, experiencing the lowest access to legal and welfare support.

THE IMPACT OF FAMILY PRESSURE, SOCIAL STIGMA, AND FEAR ON MARGINALIZED WOMEN'S DECISION-MAKING.

Indicator	SC Women (%)	ST Women (%)
Women (15–49) who participate in decision about own health care	70.6	68.2
Women (15–49) who participate in major household purchase decisions	63.5	60.1
Women (15–49) who participate in decisions on visits to family/relatives	67.2	64.0
Women aged 20–24 years married before age 18	25.3	32.8
Women (15–49) allowed to go alone to market/health facility/outside village	54.9	49.1
Ever-married women (18–49) who experienced spousal violence	33.2	37.5
Women who sought help after experiencing violence	14.1	12.4
Women who reported violence to police/other formal institutions	4.2	3.1

Overall, SC and ST women exhibit lower autonomy and higher vulnerability than the national average, and the gap between legal rights and practical empowerment highlights

the urgent need for targeted interventions addressing social stigma, fear, and family-imposed restrictions.

RESULTS

TABLE 1. DECISION-MAKING AUTONOMY AMONG SC AND ST WOMEN

SOURCE: NFHS-5 (2019–21), GOVERNMENT OF INDIA

Indicator	SC (%)	ST (%)
Own health care decisions	70.6	68.2
Major household purchases	63.5	60.1
Visits to family/relatives	67.2	64.0

As depicted in Table 1, the Scheduled Caste women showed relatively higher levels of involvement in decisions taken on their own healthcare compared to Scheduled Tribe women, where the figures stand at 70.6% and 68.2%, respectively. In another important area like purchases made at home, Scheduled Caste women showed higher levels of involvement compared to Scheduled Tribe women, where

63.5% of Scheduled Caste women reported their involvement as compared to 60.1% of Scheduled Tribe women. Furthermore, Scheduled Caste women were more free to visit their families or relatives as compared to Scheduled Tribe women, where the figures stand at 67.2% and 64.0%, respectively, for Scheduled Caste women.

Table 2: Women’s Participation in Major Household Decisions by Caste

SOURCE: NFHS-5 (2019–21), GOVERNMENT OF INDIA

Indicator	SC Women (%)	ST Women (%)
Married before age 18 (20–24 yrs)	25.3	32.8
Allowed to go alone to market/health facility/outside village	54.9	49.1

Table 2 Reveals that child marriage is also more among ST women at 32.8% as opposed to SC women at 25.3%. Mobility restriction is also slightly higher among ST women

at 49.1%, which is allowed to go alone outside compared to SC women at 54.9%.

TABLE 3: EXPERIENCE OF SPOUSAL VIOLENCE AND HELP-SEEKING

SOURCE: NFHS-5 (2019–21), GOVERNMENT OF INDIA

Indicator	SC Women (%)	ST Women (%)
Ever-married women (18–49) experienced spousal violence	33.2	37.5
Women who sought help after experiencing violence	14.1	12.4
Women who reported violence to formal institutions	4.2	3.1

Table 3 presents a higher prevalence of spousal violence among ST women, which accounts for 37.5%, than among SC women, at 33.2%. Despite such high levels of violence, help-seeking behavior remains very low among the SC and ST groups of women. Only 14.1% SC women and 12.4% ST women reported having sought any kind of help after

violence. Reporting to formal institutions such as police or legal is extremely limited, ranging from 4.2% among SC women to 3.1% among ST women. This reveals a wide gap between the legal provisions and actual access to justice by women.

TABLE 4: EDUCATION, WORKFORCE PARTICIPATION, AND POLITICAL REPRESENTATION

SOURCES: NFHS-5 (2019–21), PLFS (2018–19), GOVERNMENT OF INDIA

Empowerment Indicator	SC Women (%)	ST Women (%)
Literacy rate (age 7+)	56.5	59.4
Workforce participation	35.1	46.0
Political representation (reserved Panchayat seats)	41	44

The level of literacy (59.4 %), employment rates (46.0 %), and political representation for ST females is more prominent in reserved Panchayat seats at 44 % in comparison to their SC counterparts, where the respective

rates for the SC females are 56.5 %, 35.1 %, and 41 %. However, the attained figures for ST females are still lower and indicate a very moderate scale.

Differences in autonomy, empowerment, and vulnerability have been observed in SC women compared with ST women, which the study reveals. SC women show a slightly higher level in participation in terms of their health, purchasing decisions, and decisions regarding family visits compared with ST women (Table 1), which indicates a difference in the exercise of legal rights (RO1). Similarly, higher rates of child marriage are evident among ST women compared to their counterparts from other groups (32.8% vs 25.3%), confirming the issue of practiced social norms restricting actual empowerment (RO2; RO3). A higher incidence of

DISCUSSION

spousal violence is observed among the ST women (37.5%) compared to SC women (33.2%), whereas the incidence of seeking refuge and formal reporting is still very low for these women (Table 3). All these factors influence the decision-making of women as a whole, based on the report of RO3. In education, labor force participation, and political representation, ST women are marginally higher than SC women (see Table 4). This is indicative of some positive impacts of affirmative policies. However, in comparison to the national averages, as mentioned in RO2, these figures still portray underrepresentation.

Recommendations

- **Context-Specific policies:** The strategies employed during the intervention must consider the empowerment needs of women from various caste categories, particularly marginalized groups.
- **Violence Prevention Programs:** Enlarge community-based initiatives for the prevention of violence and integrate socio-cultural education messages in public health campaigns.
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The NFHS-5 (2019-21) data has shown that the women belonging to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in India are still in a disadvantaged position in the exercise of decision-making autonomy. Though a reasonable percentage of women are involved in the decision-making of their own health care plans, major household purchases, and visiting their family or relatives, they are still restricted in their movements. The practice of early marriages is still prevalent,

- **Continued Data Monitoring:** Future studies employing mixed methods research can further explore the empowerment processes.

Conclusion:

especially among ST women, and a sizable number of married women are often subjected to spousal violence. However, a very trivial percentage of them take measures to seek assistance in these situations. This reveals the fact that, despite the much-claimed legal provisions and constitutional guarantees to women empowerment, the real empowerment of these women is significantly restricted by their families, societal norms, and their fear of these consequences.

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