

# SUSTAINING OUR DALIT WOMEN LEADERS WHO ARE FRONTLINE DEFENDERS IN CASTE ATROCITY CASES



INTERVIEW WITH RIYA SINGH FROM  
DALIT WOMEN FIGHT BY GOPIKA BASHI

## Tell us more about Dalit Women Fight and the work that you do

Dalit Women Fight is India's single & largest dalit women-led collective. We work in six states of northern India. Our core work areas are a) access to justice to the survivors of caste atrocity, primarily dalit women, b) Promoting & facilitating young dalit women leadership, and c) dalit women & local governance.

We extend our support to more than 100 families in a year to access justice, work with & train 60 young leaders and we have 500 active volunteers. We do extensive advocacy with the Ministry & National Commissions in the country and also engage in international advocacy through platforms like UNHRC, UN Women, IDSN.

## What are some of the significant ways in which the COVID19 pandemic has affected the lives of dalit women, girls, trans and non-binary youth?

Covid 19 has made it difficult to reach out to survivors physically and assist them in going to the police station to file a complaint. In several cases of rape & gang rape, the medical tests were postponed since hospitals were a hub of viruses & infections. Atrocities did not stop even when the whole nation was under lockdown, however the state used this excuse when it came to taking action & providing protections to survivors. The most basic legal process that is required to file an atrocity is already tough in a non-pandemic state; it became tougher during the pandemic.

**Have the challenges been different during the most recent second wave that is ongoing in India? If so, how?**

With respect to the atrocities cases & access to justice, it is similar. What is even worse is that the hearing process now takes place online and most of the women we work with have almost zero resources and very little or no knowledge of technology. Accessing the internet, having a smartphone, operating an app- all this is a big challenge.

**How has DWF had to adapt your ways of organising during this pandemic? What are some of the strategies that you've adopted to continue the important work you do? Could you share any specific examples that you feel have been successful in organising and mobilising during the pandemic?**

We assist and train our activists to be more internet-savvy and adapt to new mediums. They further assist the survivors to adapt with the new ways. We do most of our work via phone & other apps. But in a case of atrocity, we have to move out and be outside with the survivors. Last year, despite pandemic we took up 18 cases of atrocities.

Last year, in the case of gang-rape in Hathras we managed public

advocacy and also engaged with the state. We have filed petitions in the high court as well as the Supreme Court. We used digital mediums for advocacy.

**Has resourcing and funding been a challenge? In what way has COVID19 affected how your work is resourced?**

Definitely. We separated from our parent organization to claim full autonomy and independence in early Jan 2020. And a pandemic hit us in March 2020. We didn't have a single amount with us and had a team of 29 dalit women to sustain. I won't hesitate to say that we faced the worst time. We could reach out to our alliances, couldn't meet our team, couldn't sit together in struggling times. Funds, obviously we are still under funded. We are sustaining ourselves with basic resources but we still do not have offices and basic equipment.

Most of the grants were directed towards covid relief. Most of the organizations also shifted from their core work to covid relief. We would have also loved to support our community with covid relief however, atrocities continued and our time and resources went into tackling that. It was tough to choose between what was more an emergency & what wasn't.

## **What is some of the critical work that you do that remains under-resourced?**

Sustaining our leaders who are frontline defenders in the cases of caste atrocity. Their physical & mental health.

## **What message would you like to share with funders who want to support Dalit feminist movements in India during this critical time?**

What we need at the moment is to support & sustain our Dalit women leaders who work with us. They are the ones who are out in public, standing with survivors in police stations, hospitals, court rooms. It has been the

organization's consistent hard work over years that trained these women, and at the moment it is becoming extremely tough to sustain them and provide them financial, physical & mental security. ■

*Gopika Bashi is an Indian feminist activist & campaigner, with over 11 years experience in the field of gender justice and human rights. Her experience is rooted in working with women & diverse young people on issues including access to justice, sexual & gender-based violence, gender & sexuality, and labour rights. She served on the panel of the Global Resilience Fund, and currently works at AWID.*