

Promoting Intersectional Development Research

Case study report | Number 5

Using an Intersectional
Lens to Build Stronger
Evidence and Action at
the Grassroots Level in
India to Build a
Comprehensive Response
to Sexual and
Gender-Based Violence

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The research initiative “Promoting Intersectional Development Research” is a joint project between the Southern Centre for Inequality Studies (SCIS) and Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC) that aims to understand, inform and promote intersectional approaches to development research. Its main purpose is to document and critically assess the application of an intersectional lens or approach in IDRC-supported research projects committed to advancing transformative social justice goals. This documentation encompasses a broad spectrum of applications, not confined to research explicitly labelled as “intersectional”. Rather than prescribing a rigid, one-size-fits-all approach, the case study reports provide valuable insights into the benefits, limitations and challenges of incorporating intersectionality in research and practice. Furthermore, they shed light on its influence on policy decisions and actions intended to combat social inequalities and injustices.

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Executive summary

This case study is based on a project that aimed to generate evidence on sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) against young girls and women in India. The project, Pathways to Gender Transformative Change: Using Evidence Towards Effective Public Systems to Address Gender-Based Violence in India, was implemented with support from the International Research Development Centre (IDRC) through a collaboration between the American Jewish World Service (AJWS) and the Centre for Enquiry Into Health and Allied Themes (CEHAT).

The genesis of the project was based on CEHAT's recognition that most grassroots organisations working on SGBV collect and record data and information in different ways but do not have the time, skills or resources to carry out the synthesis of their data. Very often, on sensitive issues such as SGBV, the service data of grassroots organisations is the only available data. Thus, service data generated by grassroots organisations while providing services to survivors of SGBV has untapped potential for policy engagement. Further, these organisations are in a key position to provide data and influence the formulation of policy and programs. Thus, using a feminist intersectional approach, this project sought to build the capacity of grassroots organisations to analyse their service data and generate evidence on SGBV.

CEHAT collaborated with three grassroots organisations who work with and provide different support services to survivors of SGBV, in varied geographical contexts. The organisations include the Association for Advocacy and Legal Initiatives Trust (AALI), Stree Mukti Sanghatana (SMS) and Jan Sahas. AALI provides legal aid to survivors and supports them in their journey to seek justice. Jan Sahas provides support to sexual violence survivors and has established models for the rehabilitation of the survivors. The frontline workers of these organisations document a lot of information while providing support services to survivors, but face several constraints regarding establishing standardised formats for documentation, systems for data management and training frontline workers. CEHAT worked to empower and amplify knowledge production that takes place at the community level by partnering with grassroots "data holders", who have information that is critical to better understand SGBV trends and the context-specific needs of survivors.

The overall objective of this project was to use feminist action research to generate new evidence on young women's experiences of gender-based violence and to capture how structural barriers and power imbalances in public systems hinder holistic SGBV responses. CEHAT worked with the partner organisations to support and strengthen their research and data skills. The research questions and processes were developed alongside the grassroots groups as partners. For example, a two-day meeting was organised by CEHAT with representatives of three organisations to co-develop a research agenda based on the existing work of these three organisations with young women and girls. This approach acknowledges the different contexts organisations work in and ensures the research agenda arises from the grassroots context. This approach also endeavoured to create an equal relationship among all partners and prioritised grassroots needs and interests

in using evidence to refine and create new programs and policies and advocate for resources to support these programs.

A two-day training session helped team members from the three organisations build their understanding and skills in analysing service records along with prospective qualitative data collection. Representatives of the organisations were also trained to develop user-friendly management information systems with specific indicators.


In the analysis of service data, the organisations attempted to highlight the vulnerabilities of the marginalised groups and needed to adopt the interventions for addressing SGBV in these groups. CEHAT looked at sexual violence within the marital relationship and established a case for the criminalisation of marital rape. Jan Sahas's analysis generated very crucial evidence on adolescent pregnancy among sexual violence survivors and the response of the health system. The findings indicated how the girl's identity determined the case's outcome, where girls from lower castes and class were pressurised to compromise with abusers. In the majority of the cases where girls were from a lower caste, the survivors were forced to compromise. AALI's findings shed light on the prevalence of violence from natal families and how the identity of the survivor shaped the experience of accessing the criminal justice system.

The analysis of service data was a rewarding experience for frontline workers, especially when they were themselves able to see the linkages between various variables, as well as the existing gaps in their own management information systems when collecting and inputting data. During their work on specific cases, frontline workers were able to identify the connections across different variables as well as the need for data to be collected across these variables. This shift in perspective led them to view data collection as a means to enhance their understanding of the issue at hand, rather than a funder-driven exercise for the purposes of writing annual reports.

The project provides important lessons on approaches for bringing social change through intersectional feminist praxis. Knowledge creation based on lived experiences, empowerment, addressing power imbalances, collaborative process and action, and reflecting on experiences are the important dimensions of intersectional feminist praxis which were addressed to translate the evidence into action.

Frontline workers were provided a platform to share their experiences in the form of a dissemination seminar. The findings were used to build alliances and engage different stakeholders to address inequities. SMS's study on the impact of adolescents witnessing domestic violence led to the development of an intervention program by the organisation. Findings were shared in the network of organisations to build consensus on advocacy plans and raise awareness about the importance of integrating the analysis framework with the service data.

However, making room for frontline workers to engage in such processes requires a top-down recognition of their value and an adequate allocation of resources. Often, because funders do not value them, there are



insufficient funds allocated to data collection, entry and analysis. This includes everything from building the capacities of the entire team, to the time required to input the data, to investments in technology to help grassroots workers to upload data to a shared database.

One of the lessons from the project is that creating fluidity between research and service provision, allowing for an understanding of each other's work, flattens the hierarchies that exist between civil society organisations and the research community. Breaking that hierarchy should be seen as an integral part of feminist intersectionality.

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Abbreviations

AAI	Association for Advocacy and Legal Initiatives
AJWS	American Jewish World Service
CEHAT	Centre for Enquiry Into Health and Allied Themes
CSW	Commission on the Status of Women
IDRC	International Research Development Centre
NGO	Non- governmental organisation
SGBV	Sexual and gender-based violence
SMS	Stree Mukti Sanghatana

Introduction

With support from the International Research Development Centre (IDRC), American Jewish World Service (AJWS) used socially situated feminist research to generate new evidence on sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) against adolescent girls and young women. The research aimed to illustrate how structural barriers and power imbalances in public systems hinder holistic SGBV responses in India. Gender inequality is cited as a key determinant that underlines violence against girls and women; the connection, however, is complex and requires deeper learning to better understand how gender inequality leads to violence and shapes girls' and women's experiences of seeking justice. In addition, domestic violence is largely understood as either intimate partner violence or marital family violence, and not much attention has been given to the natal (birth) family as perpetrators. The project Pathways to Gender Transformative Change: Using Evidence Towards Effective Public Systems to Address Gender-Based Violence In India set out to fill this gap while also supporting grassroots organisations in integrating an intersectional framework of analysis in their service data.

The next section of the report will provide an overview of the research project, followed by a discussion of how our project is grounded in an intersectional feminist approach. This is followed by a discussion on processes involved in capacity building, data analysis and findings. The report also describes successes and challenges involved in building the capacity of grassroots organisations to analyse their service data.

Overview of the Project

The American Jewish World Service (AJWS), a human rights organisation with a commitment to the most marginalised, prioritises a feminist research framework that seeks out the voices of those who are historically marginalised (AJWS, 2020). AJWS's approach consists of partnering with grassroots and feminist researchers and providing them with flexible grants, locally sensitive capacity building, networking opportunities and sharing knowledge that emerges from other research projects supported by AJWS. Furthermore, this project is part of a mix of targeted research projects that AJWS has commissioned to address knowledge and program gaps that constrain resources and opportunities for young girls vulnerable to early and child marriage. AJWS's advocacy strategy leverages the lessons of this research to influence key actors in Indian and global social movements and policy spaces, thereby shifting how adolescent girls' rights are understood.

Through this research, AJWS sought to better understand the prevalence of, forms of and conditions under which SGBV manifests in the Indian context and to contribute to understanding how gender inequalities in the health and legal systems hinder or support effectively addressing SGBV. The project focused on understanding the vulnerabilities of girls and young women as unique rather than in the aggregate. This project generated evidence from the ground up on SGBV by supporting grassroots organisations which provide services to

survivors of violence to organise and analyse their data so that it reveals trends and gaps. Results were used strategically for advocacy purposes and to strengthen policies that address the root causes of SGBV.

AJWS formed a collaboration with the Centre for Enquiry into Health and Allied Themes (CEHAT) to leverage the unique strengths of AJWS and CEHAT to conduct, utilise and leverage research related to support services for young girls experiencing SGBV. AJWS and CEHAT's collaboration was informed by findings from a mid-term evaluation of AJWS's work in India, which demonstrated that building solidarity and networks is a key outcome of feminist research processes. These solidarity networks not only amplify the concerns of previously marginalised communities such as adolescent girls, but they also create a more holistic response that addresses the health issue of violence and shifts norms to address the root causes of that violence. AJWS supported CEHAT to train grassroots organisations working on SGBV to develop a systematic method to analyse their service records. AJWS and CEHAT had ongoing touchpoints throughout the project to think through challenges and sharpen the inputs that CEHAT was providing to partners. The overall objective of this project was to use a feminist intersectional approach to generate new evidence on young women's gender-based violence experiences, and to capture how structural barriers and power imbalances in public systems hinder holistic SGBV responses.

CEHAT is a Mumbai-based organisation involved in research, training, welfare, service and advocacy on health and allied themes (CEHAT, 2023). CEHAT conducts academically rigorous and socially relevant health research and health action with a primary focus on improving the well-being of marginalised communities, strengthening public health movements and advocating for the realisation of the right to health and health care. CEHAT acts as an interface between progressive people's movements and academia. It has deep knowledge of the local context and credibility in the public health and civil society communities. With years of experience in pushing for violence against women to be seen as a public health issue, CEHAT brought a strong feminist lens to the project.

The genesis of the project is based on the fact that most grassroots organisations collect and record data and information in different ways but do not have the time, skills or resources to carry out the synthesis of their data. Further, the data collected during casework proves even more valuable, given the challenges of collecting primary data on SGBV in general and the limited data already available in the public domain. Often, this existing data is not valued, with an emphasis on conducting new primary research on aspects and issues for which information already exists in service data.

Thus, in the context of SGBV, organisations which provide services to young women and girls are in a key position to provide evidence and influence the formulation of policy and programs using their service data. The framework for analysis of service data was designed with feminist intersectional principles, and calls for research to influence the policy and practice of stakeholders providing support services to survivors of violence. The intersectional lens helped in understanding the multiple axes of inequality and varied outcomes,

and designing interventions for marginalised groups. The project teams' engagement with feminist intersectionality shaped and informed the conceptualisation of the project, aligning it with the principles of social justice and the pursuit of social transformation, which lie at the heart of intersectionality. In other words, the application of the intersectional approach not only resulted in managing the complexity of the research but also helped in developing appropriate methodologies that give voice to marginalised voices, keep their interests at the centre and remain sensitive to the contextual aspects of inequalities. In this project, analysis of service data was grounded in the lives of adolescent girls and young women, in particular those who are traditionally invisible. We looked at the intersections of age, caste, region and relationship with an abuser while analysing the experiences of SGBV survivors.

CEHAT partnered with three grassroots organisations – Association for Advocacy and Legal Initiatives (AALI), Jan Sahas, and Stree Mukti Sanghatana (SMS) – who have a long history of working on SGBV, to help build their capacity to streamline their service data and to assist them to look at their work and data analytically. These organisations were selected to capture a wide spectrum of forms of violence against women and girls in diverse locations and communities (urban, rural and semi-urban). All three organisations work with adolescent girls and women on various issues and all already have some sort of system or framework in place to collect data. They provided geographic diversity to collectively develop a broader understanding of gender-based violence across India. The organisations work in communities in which caste structures, class distinctions and poverty all feed into gender inequalities in different ways. These are feminist organisations with a strong understanding of gender, and each has its strengths. A short description of each organisation is provided below:

- **The Association for Advocacy and Legal Initiatives (AALI)**¹ is an Uttar Pradesh organisation that provides legal support in a broad range of cases, including inter-caste and inter-religious marriages, honour-related crimes, domestic violence from the marital or family of birth, forced marriages, child sexual abuse, custodial violence, and rape. AALI's Casework and Legal Support team also engages in outreach to enhance general legal awareness, around gender-based violence and the right to choice in sexual relationships.
- **Jan Sahas**² in Madhya Pradesh launched the National Helpline for girl and women survivors of rape and sexual abuse to provide online and offline support, including information and advice related to police, medical services, legal support, and counselling.

¹ Website at <https://www.aalilegal.org/>

² Website at <https://jansahas.org/>

- **Stree Mukti Sanghatana (SMS)**³ in Maharashtra has a large network of experienced, trained and dedicated counsellors involved in providing counselling and other support services to survivors of violence. They also facilitate free legal aid services to survivors of violence.

A Feminist Intersectional Lens

AJWS and CEHAT ground their work in a feminist intersectional approach. AJWS asserts that patriarchy plays an important role in shaping the gender norms that produce unequal access to power, and patriarchy manifests in all human rights issues. We define the feminist social change objective as equality for all. We believe that a feminist perspective is an ethical imperative and that it can increase the sustainability and impact of social change. As part of the feminist dedication to diversity, equity and inclusion, we use the reality of intersectional marginalisation to expand our analysis and action to encompass multiple factors including (but not limited to) race, ethnicity, nationality, indigeneity, sexuality, age, caste and economic status (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016).

Intersectionality is an important contribution to feminist theory, especially with regard to transforming how gender is discussed (Shields, 2008). While the term was coined by Kimberle Crenshaw (Crenshaw, 1989), the focus on examining multiple axes has been a long-standing part of feminism in multiple contexts, including India (Menon, 2015). Intersectionality has pushed feminist researchers to reflect on social location, mutually reinforcing axes of inequalities and power relations embedded in social identities. Intersectionality offers an important tool for feminist methodologies, to understand the impact of intersections of different social categories on gender, the need for inclusiveness and effective collectiveness. It calls for research to be attentive to categories of identity as being situated in the historical and present-day context and interconnected.

From the design of the project, AJWS wanted to ensure that the framework of analysis used a feminist intersectional approach that included a deep understanding of (1) the historical, structural and systemic inequality that adolescent girls and young women face, and (2) how age, caste, class and conservative gender norms limit what society deems permissible or possible for women and girls. In addition to a feminist understanding of gender-based violence, AJWS thought that it was important for the research to make visible young women and adolescent girls as a distinct population, whose experiences of SGBV are different from those of adult women and who thus need different interventions to address these needs.

This feminist intersectional lens is embedded in the work of all organisations in this project. CEHAT has used an intersectional approach extensively to highlight how health is experienced differently by various people and why it is important for a healthcare provider to have an understanding of intersectionality. The other

³ Website at <https://streemukthisanghatana.org/>

organisations involved in this project use feminist intersectionality as an integral aspect of their work on SGBV. A feminist intersectional lens brings in the question of who is most vulnerable and faces the most marginalisation. In the case of SGBV, this lens causes the organisations, first, to focus on including adolescent girls and young women who are traditionally denied access to sexual health and legal services and, second, to seek changes in the social, political and legal environment that causes increased inequity for adolescent girls. The organisations' research identified with a feminist perspective to unmask inequities and to generate evidence on how social categories are shaping experiences. The organisations sought to create change on a larger scale through close engagement with communities with high rates of inequality. The work of the organisations is underpinned by the principle *"Nothing for them, without them"*. For example, Jan Sahas believes that their role is only to facilitate or provide a platform to sexual-violence survivors. They see that a civil society organisation can create space for the voiceless to be heard, but they cannot be the voice of the voiceless. The ways in which a feminist intersectional approach is integrated into the work of organisations is outlined below:

- Jan Sahas trains survivors to assume leadership and develop strategies for organisations' work on sexual violence. These survivors belong to marginalised communities, including girls and women from lower castes, classes and rural areas. Every year Jan Sahas organises a dignity march which is spearheaded by survivors of sexual violence to end victim shaming and shift the focus from victim to perpetrator.
- Stree Mukti Sanghatana works on developing self-help groups for survivors of violence at the community level. These groups are important sources of support and services for survivors. Thus the intervention strategies of the organisation are based on the lived experiences of the survivors.
- AALI attempts to establish an intersectional perspective among police and criminal justice personnel by building their perspective on how women from marginalised communities face additional barriers to accessing the criminal justice system. The organisation also provides legal aid to marginalised groups by building the capacity of members of the group to work as para-legal workers.

Grassroots organisations that offer essential services to survivors of SGBV often document cases they encounter but typically lack the systems or expertise required to effectively manage, consolidate and analyse this information. These grassroots groups are frequently constrained by limitations such as insufficient time, funding or capacity to document and analyse the cases they address. Moreover, these groups are seldom engaged in policy discussions because of language barriers, their small size, or structural barriers that hinder their participation. As a result, they cannot produce and package "evidence" in a way that is accepted in national and global discourse. This project underscores the significance of evidence originating from grassroots efforts, redistributing power to those actively engaged in the struggle for inequalities. In line with Paulo Freire's perspective, the project highlights involving people in the knowledge generation process and creating horizontal, collaborative processes instead of extractive ones (Freire, 2000).

CEHAT worked to empower and amplify knowledge production that takes place at the community level; partnering with grassroots “data holders”, who have information that is critical to better understand SGBV trends and context-specific needs of survivors. A feminist participatory approach was used by CEHAT where research questions and processes were developed alongside the grassroots groups as partners (Jan Sahas & CEHAT, 2022). For example, a two-day meeting was organised by CEHAT with representatives of three organisations to develop a research agenda based on the existing work of these three organisations with young women and girls. This approach acknowledges the different contexts they work in and ensures that research needs arise organically from the context. This approach also endeavoured to create an equal relationship among all partners and prioritised grassroots needs and interests in using evidence to refine and create new programming and advocate for resources to support these programs.

CEHAT then worked with the partner organisations to support and strengthen their research and data skills. For example, CEHAT organised a two-day virtual training for the three organisations on the design of mixed-methods research studies, led by a resource person with more than two decades of experience in conducting similar studies. The training helped team members of the three organisations build their understanding and skills in analysing service records along with prospective qualitative data collection. Representatives of the organisations were also trained to develop user-friendly management information systems with specific indicators.

The capacity-building support provided to partners was not prescriptive but met them “where they were at”. For example, CEHAT’s capacity-building work with SMS was not as much about deepening their gender perspective as it was about helping them to better understand a feminist ethical approach to research. The training focused, in part, on enhancing an intersectional lens for their work serving marginalised populations, to encourage data collection about under-reported elements of SGBV. For example, Jan Sahas made changes to their documentation formats to capture unsupportive responses of the natal family towards survivors of sexual violence, where girls are often forced to get married to the abuser for the honour of the family.

CEHAT also built the capacity of all three partners regarding research ethics, as the need emerged. For example, SMS learned about ways to respond to underage girls who disclose consensual sexual activity.

Analysis of Service Data

Sources of data

The three partner organisations’ primary sources of data were the forms collected and maintained by frontline workers, who are usually the first point of contact for survivors of SGBV. These contain valuable information with untapped potential to provide useful insights on lived experiences of survivors. The forms for case

documentation and provision of services include information on vulnerabilities of the survivors, which varies with the context in which organisation is working. Social categories which are commonly documented by frontline workers working with the survivors of SGBV include age, marital status, residence, caste, sexuality, socioeconomic status, availability of resources and support mechanisms. Based on the context, organisations collect various additional information while intervening in the cases. For example, SMS carry out a detailed documentation of movable and immovable assets that a survivor has in cases of domestic violence. Jan Sahas documents the responses of village level formal and informal bodies such as Panchayats towards survivors of sexual violence, which helps them to capture the varied responses towards survivors, which are largely determined by the social identity of a survivor.

Process of data cleaning and analysis

The process of cleaning and analysing commenced in March 2019. However, the landscape shifted dramatically in 2020 with the onset of an unprecedented global pandemic. India quickly imposed a strict and prolonged lockdown that created significant challenges for the project. During the lockdown, the frontline workers were occupied with leading the relief work. Furthermore, the capacity building of frontline workers had to be carried out virtually. However, with time, CEHAT adapted to the virtual format and developed mechanisms to support organisations in cleaning and analysing their service data.

The process was built on the principle of accountability, fostering regular communication between AJWS, CEHAT and grassroots organisations. Solutions to challenges faced by frontline workers during the process were developed jointly. For example, CEHAT assisted SMS in identifying and articulating the gaps in using a cloud-based dashboard proposed by a funder in the management of service data. SMS was able to highlight how the dashboard's lack of user-friendliness prevented frontline workers from using service data for their intervention.

Framework of analysis

The analysis' focus was decided collaboratively by the organisations, with the objective of highlighting the significance of survivors' lived experiences of SGBV and the necessity to contextualise interventions based on these experiences. The decision on what aspect of service data to be analysed took into consideration the need to generate evidence from the ground up on SGBV, to highlight the experiences of young girls and women from the perspectives of their identities, and to illuminate the structural and normative factors that deny them vital support services. Additionally, grassroots organisations often have staff from marginalised communities, having an insider-outsider perspectives, which enabled selecting aspects they would like to dive deeply into.

The analysis attempted to foreground the lack of value placed on the lives of young girls and women and their differential vulnerabilities. This evidence is the first step towards transformative gender change since it contributes to the development of our understanding of the ways in which SGBV is normalised or neglected. For example, Jan Sahas and CEHAT decided to highlight the vulnerabilities of adolescent sexual violence survivors aged ten to eighteen years by assessing the complexities and relationships of caste, class, religion and urban-rural location with the severity of the sexual violence, the response of health system towards survivors and the outcomes of cases (Jan Sahas & CEHAT, 2022). Through this analysis, the organisation wanted to generate evidence on how the survivors from lower castes face insensitive responses from the community. The analysis looked at the specific practices of health care providers that were insensitive, and even harmful, to survivors seeking treatment following sexual violence.

AALI looked at the social categories of caste, class, religion and sexuality together with the experiences of SGBV survivors in accessing support from various stakeholders, including formal and informal systems. The organisation wanted to shed light on natal family abuse, which is often neglected.

The capacity building efforts also enabled organisations to do primary research. Recognising the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on women, AALI conducted a rapid telephonic survey with survivors. During the pandemic, the lockdown imposed by the government led to an increase in domestic violence, leaving women trapped with their abusers, and without any mobility or support services. The survey focused on the lived experiences of survivors of violence who were disproportionately impacted due to their sex, gender, sexual orientation and socio-economic context. The survey looked at women's experiences of violence during lockdown, their access to essential commodities and healthcare, and abuse of power by police against them.

AALI also analysed their service records to put forward evidence supporting a social innovation involving barefoot legal aid providers for marginalised communities (AALI & CEHAT, 2022). These workers either hail directly from marginalised communities or work closely with communities and are trained by AALI to provide basic legal aid. The fact that these caseworkers spend a large amount of their time facilitating access to basic needs for communities helps them to build a unique trust. This enables community-based workers to go beyond conversations regarding socio-economic rights, and into the domain of the private from which survivors approach them for support in cases of gender and identity-based violence. AALI's analysis focused on getting insights into who the women were who sought assistance from the workers and on understanding their expectations.

Similarly, SMS conducted a primary survey to understand the experiences of adolescents (eleven to seventeen years) facing or witnessing domestic violence (SMS, 2022). A survey done by SMS was grounded in their experience of working with survivors of domestic violence and recognising how their children also need support services. This survey formed the basis of a needs assessment study to identify the support services required by the adolescents, informing the development of an intervention. The survey captured

socio-demographic details, education, employment, social support, health, coping strategies and safety of adolescents. These factors were included in the survey due to well-documented evidence that exposure to violence impacts the education, social sphere, coping, health and safety of adolescents.

SMS also analysed their service records to gain insights into the practice of arranging joint meetings with abusers as an intervention strategy for survivors of domestic and intimate partner violence (SMS, 2022). Joint meetings between women and their husbands to negotiate for non-violence, taking into account the needs of women, is currently regarded as an important strategy for engaging with men. This area of analysis was significant because, while feminist interventions primarily concentrate on responding to survivors of violence with an emphasis on empowering women for decision-making and improving their safety, interventions involving men are oriented toward confronting and challenging their abusive behaviour. Despite concerns about the safety of women and the risks of reinforcing gender stereotyping, patriarchal norms and victim-blaming, joint meetings are considered an important intervention by feminist organisations such as SMS. However, there is limited information available on the process and the outcomes of the joint meeting. The analysis looked at the relationship among categories such as age, years of marriage, years of abuse, severity of violence, expectations of women from joint meetings and outcomes of meeting with the abuser.

SMS's analysis of service data tried to fill a gap in information about feminist principles to be followed for women-centred joint meetings, and the common outcomes and effectiveness of such joint meetings in fulfilling the needs of survivors.

In addition to providing extensive capacity-building support to its grassroots partners, CEHAT analysed data from its study that examined the plight of rape survivors who are routinely denied abortion services (Bhate-Deosthali & Rege, 2019). CEHAT developed a paper on the criminalisation of marital rape that presented evidence on how marital rape is normalised in the Indian context and affects women in the same way as rape by strangers (Deosthali et al., 2021).

Findings and Implications for Work on the Ground

The findings translated organisations' first-hand experiences of working with the vulnerable groups of the community into substantiated evidence. By analysing the service record data through a feminist intersectional lens, the findings shed fresh light on lived experiences that would have been missed without considering intersecting forms of marginalisation. AALI's experience of analysing their data about providing legal aid to survivors of SGBV revealed the response of natal family and police towards survivors. The findings showed that young, newly married girls were forced by the natal family to compromise with an abusive husband. Further, police often refused to register complaints by young girls and women, citing domestic violence as a private matter. Women who got married younger, with less education and from lower castes, were found to be less likely to access any kind of support services for SGBV. The data indicated that, in the majority of cases

where police refused to file a complaint for violence, the women were from lower castes. While the police are recognised as an important service provider in cases of SGBV against women and girls, the response of the police was found to be highly contradictory, as they made survivors compromise with the abusers by not filing a formal complaint. The findings also assessed the strategies used by frontline workers to file a police complaint when survivors were denied. The data showed that filing a written complaint to the district superintendent of police was the most effective strategy for registering a formal police complaint for survivors from lower castes.

AALI's research with survivors of violence during the Covid-19 pandemic showed how women from poor socio-economic context suffered the most in terms of their experiences of violence and access to support services. The findings indicate that it is important to apply a feminist intersectional lens in policy making especially in situations like the pandemic. The state's response during such a situation should account for women's needs so that they don't have to bear the brunt of the uncertainty of accessibility and outcome.

For AALI, the data became a way to quantitatively establish qualitative knowledge collected through feminist research methods such as narratives and case studies. These qualitative methods are sometimes criticised by formal and legal institutions for having small sample sizes or being "anecdotal". The research contributed to the development of a strategic foundation for district-level programs. Presenting this data to district-level stakeholders, to showcase the conditions of adolescent girls in the district, highlighted the need for interventions and pushed the agenda forward.

SMS looked across the lived experiences of adolescents witnessing domestic violence and analysed their data by age, the experience of intergenerational trauma, socio-economic status, educational levels, employment status and other factors such as social support and health status. The findings indicated that adolescents witnessing or experiencing domestic violence were more likely to discontinue education, engage in substance abuse and have poor mental health status. For SMS, entering data into a spreadsheet, coding and analysing it and drawing up charts from the data was itself a revelatory experience in understanding the "trends" that emerged from the work. While frontline workers understood some of these dynamics on a case-by-case basis, to look at them as a pattern was itself a big lesson for the team. For instance, the team was able to quantify the connection between the level of education and the likelihood of seeking help, and how long into suffering violence does a survivor seek help.

Jan Sahas's research provided insights into the narrative built around sexual violence in the country and allowed them to understand the roadblocks on the route to justice faced by the survivors, particularly at the hands of medico-legal institutions (Korth, 2006). The data on adolescent sexual survivors stressed the relational nature of oppression – one group's advantage is linked with the disadvantage of another group. In a large number of cases, a compromise or settlement happened between the survivor belonging to a lower caste and the accused from the upper caste through various economic, political and social mediation. In such

cases, the mediation was forced by the accused through using their financial and social power to coerce the survivor and her family into a settlement.

Further, the analysis generated evidence on numerous problems faced by adolescent survivors at different levels of the social system, irrespective of which part of the world they live in. In India, there are various stringent laws and associated protocols that are prerequisites to facilitate abortion services to survivors of sexual violence. This legislation creates barriers at the procedural level to access to abortion for young girls and women. The data indicated how adolescent girls reported pregnancy late due to stigma and lack of awareness. As a result, the girls had to approach the judiciary to seek legal abortion. The analysis provided useful insights into the nature of sexual violence reported among the survivors, hindrances faced by the survivors in seeking abortion services, and the outcome of the cases. The findings pointed out that young girls from ten to twelve years of age experience chronic abuse, unwanted pregnancies and insensitive responses from the health system.

CEHAT's analysis of service records was based on their work with healthcare providers, to improve their responses to violence against women and help them build their capacity to provide psychosocial support to survivors and their families. The analysis presented the barriers faced by survivors of violence in accessing abortion and highlighted how healthcare providers' training needs to include an understanding of the concept of reproductive rights and the agency of those who have been raped to know what is best for them. The analysis revealed the reality on the ground where sexual violence survivors are denied abortion services on the basis of the age of a woman, her marital status, the duration of gestation and the relationship with the abuser. The findings showed that there is lack of recognition among healthcare providers about unwanted pregnancy as both a physical as well a psychological health concern.

Another important analysis done by CEHAT was on sexual violence experienced by women within marriage (SMS & CEHAT, 2022). The analysis was important from the perspective of increasing discussions around the need to criminalise marital rape in the Indian context. The findings brought in much-needed evidence around the pervasiveness of sexual violence within marital relationships, its impact on the physical, reproductive, and mental health of women, and the role of the health system in creating an enabling environment for disclosure of abuse and provision of relevant care and support. The analysis highlighted the importance of addressing all forms of oppression for survivors of domestic violence. It showed how sexual violence within marital relationships, along with other forms of violence, interact with each other to create unique experiences. Thus the interventions need to address all forms of violence simultaneously.

The adolescent sexual violence survivors' service data indicated that the majority of the survivors were from disadvantaged social categories, and they tend to face barriers and insensitive responses during their quest for justice. Girls from lower socio-economic strata were forced by abusers to compromise and reach out-of-court settlements through the use of social and financial power. Further, the data also indicated the

vulnerability of young girls to natal family violence and the absence of any support mechanisms. These young girls reached out to barefoot legal aid providers with complaints of being forced into marriage by natal families. The analysis also provided useful insights for action, as findings indicate that for young women facing natal family violence, community-based workers are the most important, and often the only, source of support. The case study data allowed grassroots organisations to consolidate their work, analyse it and gain insights that were based on experiential knowledge but previously lacked substantiating evidence. The data has also proven to be crucial in developing appropriate, context-specific responses for addressing SGBV, as the next section demonstrates.

Towards Intersectional Feminist Praxis

AJWS considers feminist research to be decidedly political and action-oriented (Mullinax et al., 2018). AJWS does not consider research value-neutral, which scholars such as Barbara Dennis have argued is not the goal of feminist research, nor is it attainable (Korth, 2016). Within this feminist framework, the commitment to intersectionality includes a focus on improving intersectional inequalities beyond the individual. AJWS supported and facilitated conversations, building space for action-oriented use of the data. Gender data has been proven an effective tool, and necessary precondition, for influencing decision-makers. In the context of this project, the analysis of case records generated data that identified gender gaps in practice and supported recommendations for correcting this inequality. An intersectional gender analysis helped reveal the blind spots around adolescent girls and young women who are vulnerable to SGBV in India, as well as the bottlenecks and barriers that prevent young women from obtaining medical and legal services. The purpose of this analysis was to emphasise the importance of looking at the differentiated vulnerabilities of girls and women, rather than invisibilising their experiences in the aggregate data. Intersectionality offered an important conceptual framework for analysing service data to understand the different ways in which violence occurs and is experienced by women with various social identities. The analysis of data conducted by grassroots organisations challenged the idea of sameness and demonstrated how social categories determined the outcomes. It indicated how oppression and power are central to the marginalisation of young girls and women facing violence.

In this project, an intersectional lens has had a significant impact on feminist praxis for translating actionable knowledge into social change. Intersectional feminist praxis foregrounds the ways in which lived experiences shape knowledge. Reflection, action and accountability are core components of intersectional feminist praxis. Reflection entails recognition of differences, and hence the strategies for inclusion. In this project, the involvement of frontline workers working with marginalised communities ensures the inclusion of intersecting vulnerabilities and lived experiences.

The project's immediate impact was building the capacity of frontline workers. It empowered them to embrace an intersectional perspective and develop internal strategies to meet the unique needs of girls and women facing violence in India. Strategic dissemination of the findings and recommendations, including through events and convening, has contributed to expanding and shifting the understanding of SGBV in India. This encompasses an understanding of its root causes and the necessity for gender transformative approaches. It has also helped global actors to better understand how current policies affect power dynamics between men and women.

Beyond enhancing frontline workers' capacity, the project's impact was evident in how various organisations have used the data to influence discussions and drive societal change. Examples include:

- In addition to age and gender, this research focused an intersectional lens on family and location. Much attention has been given to natal families as oppressors or abusers in India. CEHAT's evidence indicates that 8% of girls and women reported natal family abuse (based on care records of Dilaasa), and the largest number of women were in the age group 16 to 18. This prompted CEHAT to work with grassroots non-governmental organisations and assist them in generating evidence based on their interventions related to natal family abuse.
- Based on the findings of the primary study carried out by SMS with adolescents, they decided to implement an intervention project, Jidnyasa, which means curiosity. The team conceptualised and implemented strategies to increase awareness among adolescents about their rights, providing career counselling to adolescents, organising parenting sessions for survivors of domestic violence, and establishing a community resource centre for adolescents. A frontline worker of SMS also wrote a newspaper article based on the study findings in the local language.
- AALI's data on the plight of women during Covid-19 was featured in local and national newspapers to highlight the issue of SGBV during the pandemic and difficulties faced by women in accessing basics like food. The organisation was able to take this data and learning to various networks such as Aman Network, a national network of organisations working on gender-based violence, as well as VAMA, a network based in Uttar Pradesh, of which AALI is the secretariat. Sharing this data helped planning and strategising interventions around ration distribution as well as engaging with government's Public Distribution System (PDS). AALI's presentation in the network also raised awareness among these organisations of the need to integrate a research framework into the direct services imparted by them to survivors of violence.
- To bring evidence on marital rape into the public domain, CEHAT published a paper in a peer reviewed journal. The paper presents much-needed evidence on how marital rape is normalised in the Indian context and affects the women in same way as rape by strangers. It presents a case in favour of recognising marital rape as a crime in India.

- CEHAT, as part of a National Coalition on Advocating Adolescent Concerns (NCAAC), presented evidence on the unintended consequences of child marriage laws in the Indian context at the NGO CSW (Commission on the Status of Women) virtual platform (Partners in Law Development, 2021). During this panel discussion, NGO CSW represented the civil society perspective at the UN Commission on the Status of Women. Within this panel, CEHAT presented evidence highlighting the interaction of young girls with the public health system and how the health system responds to the needs of young girls within the framework of existing laws and regulations.
- AJWS reviewed and provided comments on the research produced by CEHAT to help increase readability, sharpen analysis, and connect to the larger body of literature. At the end of the project, AJWS facilitated learning amongst all of the partners through sharing lessons online, a reflection space to articulate the value of the project, and a collaborative internal documentation of learning. AJWS also provided advice on where the research could be presented in national and global forums.

The knowledge generated from this project fills a significant gap in global data on SGBV. Documenting and increasing awareness about how gender inequality leads to SGBV, and how the identities of survivors shapes their experiences, are essential steps towards ensuring all girls and women have basic rights and opportunities. Overall, AJWS, CEHAT, and the grassroots partners used the analysis of SGBV cases to develop and disseminate materials to help inform policies related to SGBV across India and globally. The findings of CEHAT are already being used to inform interventions and policies. For example, one issue that was presented during CEHAT's research process was safe access to abortion for young people, particularly in instances of reported rape. In their casework in hospitals, they saw that many young survivors ultimately could not access abortion because a judge had to rule on the legality of the abortion and decisions were often made when safe abortion was no longer possible because of the late stage of the pregnancy. In taking this further, CEHAT is now part of a collective of diverse individuals, organisations, networks, alliances and people's movements that work on improving access to abortion. CEHAT, as a part of this collective, drafted and submitted *Civil Society Recommendations on Making the Medical Termination of Pregnancy (Amendment) Bill 2020 a Rights-Based Legislation* to the committee. CEHAT also drafted a recommendation document highlighting the need to focus on access to abortion as well as sexual and reproductive health services during Covid-19. This document was submitted to the National Human Rights Commission which constituted a committee to assess the impact of Covid-19 on the lives of people. Below are mentioned some ways in which data findings were used by the organisations.

- AALI created a uniform intake form across its drop-in centres, centralised its management information system, and trained its staff to manage the data.
- By adopting an intersectional lens, Jan Sahas disaggregated its data according to caste and religion to gather evidence of caste-based violence. The organisation also consolidated its data into one spreadsheet and developed a note on working with the health system in the case of sexual violence.

The organisation used this note to collaborate with the health system on building a comprehensive response to survivors of sexual violence.

- SMS developed and shared findings from its needs assessment study in the form of a PowerPoint presentation, which was a first for the organisation. With the assistance of CEHAT, SMS published an article in *Marathi Wire* newspaper on their findings.
- AJWS developed a resource page on the organisational website to further disseminate results to inform and support the work of various stakeholders, including advocacy networks and policymakers. AJWS has worked to connect other grassroots partners to CEHAT so that they could benefit from similar partnerships. CEHAT has also grown as a resource organisation with expertise in training grassroots service providers on the analysis and application of GBV data.

The findings from the research conducted by grassroots organisations furthered the discourse on violence faced by young girls and women and on strategies that work and do not work in interventions. The research dissemination plan focused on building alliances and engaging different stakeholders. Networks of organisations and theme-based consortiums are important opportunities for grassroots organisations to present their data and provide opportunities to individuals who otherwise won't get a chance to speak about their work and share their experiences. This promotes mutual learning of the organisations and alliance building for policy engagement. To do this, a seminar was organised by CEHAT providing a platform for the dissemination of findings of this research conducted by grassroots organisations. The findings were presented by frontline workers of the organisation and nearly 50 researchers and practitioners from organisations working in the field of SGBV attended it. The seminar provided an important opportunity to discuss ways of improving systematic responses to SGBV.

Often, ministries and government bodies such as the National Commission for Women call for submissions from the general public and civil society organisations on issues such as review of laws, amendments, implementation of certain programs and so on. In such situations, evidence from organisations' service data can be a catalyst for setting a research agenda and addressing inequalities on the ground. Globally, the call for submission of evidence from a United Nations rapporteur with a mandate to monitor, promote and raise awareness on a particular human right all around the world, as well as facilitating a global discussion, is an important opportunity for civil society organisations to share their evidence. It is important to note that the mandate of the Special Rapporteur emphasises using an intersectional lens to address multiple forms of violence, rather than addressing each form in isolation.

Success and Challenges

In order to stimulate research activity in grassroots organisations, it was critical to highlight the benefits of research for the communities they serve. The CEHAT team provided examples to emphasise the ways in which

research enables organisations to become more effective advocates and the ways in which they can use research to involve the community in the decision-making process. Participatory methods were used to help grassroots organisations identify the areas of service data analysis most relevant to their work (Gouin et. al., 2011; Maguire, 1987). The CEHAT team enabled frontline workers to understand how and where the data would be used, ensuring clarity on why data needed to be entered a certain way and the importance of building the capacity of the entire team. Any changes in the documentation format and management information systems of the organisations were implemented through a bottom-up approach that instilled a sense of ownership in frontline workers. The process also aimed to enable organisations to recognise the potential of their service data to engage and shape the direction of programs and policies. Furthermore, the project aimed to increase awareness amongst CSOs on the need to integrate a research framework into the direct services they provide to survivors of SGBV.

The process to support grassroots organisations was conceptualised with a feminist intersectional approach because CEHAT had to understand the intersecting marginalisation that grassroots organisations experience and their diverse access to information. Civil society organisations often face several questions on the scientific rigour of research conducted by them, especially when engaging with government programs and policies. This project has shown how valuable it is for organisations to develop a standardised system of documentation and management of their service data, and the important role played by an advisory board comprising experts who can guide the research and analysis of service data. Additionally, addressing the significant barriers posed by a lack of human and financial resources is crucial to enable organisations to undertake this work. These organisations often lack dedicated personnel for data entry and lack resources for building the capacity of existing staff. It is important for organisations to make funding agencies understand how an integrated system of routine service data analysis can lead to better outcomes. Additionally, while service data has untapped potential, there are gaps in standardising documentation formats, data entry, data cleaning, coding and running analyses. These gaps often act as bottlenecks in completing a fruitful process of analysing data and generating evidence.

These challenges were discussed with team members of the organisations during the training workshops with frontline workers, which brainstormed context-specific solutions. For example, one approach was to have interns enter the data after signing a confidentiality agreement. In the case of SMS, front-line workers (counsellors) providing services were identified as key personnel for entering the data. Their perspective was invaluable for validating and contextualising the qualitative information captured during counselling sessions with survivors of violence. The involvement of frontline workers was also critical in the interpretation of the qualitative data present in the service records. The involvement of frontline workers who work closely with the community was thus critical to understanding the on-ground realities of young girls and women. However, the process for data analysis was customised for each organisation depending on the organisation's existing

datasets and available resources, as well as the gaps and strengths in their current documentation and management information systems.

There are ethical challenges that arise from having service providers become researchers. It is important to note that SGBV is a complex issue and researching this subject involves several ethical and methodological issues (Kelmendi, 2013). Concerns related to safety and confidentiality are paramount for respondents, as they may face social stigma, and trust grassroots organisations with their information under the promise of confidentiality. We acknowledge that young girls and women seeking SGBV services trust grassroots organisations with their information under the promise of confidentiality, and share their information for service provision, not research. Given the constraints on doing primary research on SGBV, it is our view that organisations working on this issue of SGBV have an ethical responsibility to bring this data into the public domain without compromising the confidentiality of women. This is specifically important in the Indian context, given the dearth of any literature on this issue and the need for reliable information to eradicate this problem. Regarding obtaining advance consent (Deosthali, 2005) we believe it can harm the integrity of the service provision process and the services, jeopardising the trust of girls and women while also creating distress or confusion. Therefore, the basic principle that needs to be followed when using service records is to maintain anonymity while reporting the information (Watt, 2006). Thus, there are no direct risks to the girls and women whereas the benefits of research based on these service records can have far-reaching positive impacts on society at large and girls and women specifically.

Lastly, the dissemination of research that highlights intersectional inequalities carries the risk of further stigmatising an already stigmatised group, intensifying stereotypes, or perhaps leading to misleading interpretations. Thus, it is important for organisations to present data responsibly and target appropriate audiences who are genuinely interested in bringing about change on the ground.

Discussion

The use of a feminist intersectional framework in this project prompts a critical examination of who is recognised as an expert and who is granted the authority to generate and possess knowledge. It also seeks to remove power imbalances inherent in the research processes and correct for biases that shape our understanding of the world, which is an important dimension of feminist praxis. In this manner, CEHAT strove to keep the team members of grassroots organisations at the centre of the whole process, empowering them as leaders in the creation of knowledge. The goal was to enable frontline workers to reclaim ownership and management of the data produced through their service provision. The feminist intersectional lens not only brought attention to the power imbalances in the creation of knowledge but called for action to address these inequalities. Therefore, CEHAT designed the process to centre the experiences and perspectives of frontline workers, while also deconstructing the hierarchies that exist between civil society organisations and the

research community. It did so by building the capacities of grassroots organisations to integrate a framework of analysis into the collection of service data in their routine work. The methodology for building capacity was co-created and tailored to each organisation's context, recognising the agency of grassroots organisations. It was built on ethical principles of collaboration and participation, which aim to value and build on the existing knowledge of frontline workers. The whole process was transformative, seeking to dismantle the traditional approach to evidence generation while acknowledging and addressing the positionality of CEHAT as a research organisation.

While there tends to be a divide between service providers and those engaged in research, one key insight from this project is the importance of building the research capacities of grassroots providers. Since civil society organisations work closely with marginalised communities, they are in a key position to generate evidence on intersectional inequities and producing actionable knowledge.

CEHAT's reflection throughout this process highlights that the data collected and analysed by frontline workers holds the potential to address gender inequality and drive positive change. The analysis of service data was a rewarding experience for frontline workers, especially when they were themselves able to see the linkages between different data variables, as well as the existing gaps in their own management information systems when collecting and inputting data. During their work on specific cases, they were able to identify the connections across various variables as well as the need for data to be collected across these variables. This shift in perspective led them to view data collection as a means to enhance their understanding of the issue at hand, rather than a funder-driven exercise done for the purposes of writing annual reports.

However, making room for frontline workers to engage in such processes requires a top-down recognition of its value and an adequate allocation of resources. Often, because funders do not place value on this, there are insufficient funds allocated to data collection, entry and analysis. This includes everything from building the capacities of the entire team, to the time required to input the data, to investments in technology to help grassroots workers to upload data to a shared database. Most of the organisations have multiple centres across different cities or states where they work, making such technical support crucial. It is important for the funders to see the value of data collection for research, rather than limiting data to reports on the work done with resources allocated accordingly.

Importantly, funders need to provide support that goes beyond data collection to facilitate activities that help researchers, organisations and communities to increase their use of the new findings. For example, AJWS funds opportunities for our research partners to network, collaborate and expand the reach of their findings with local communities and in global spaces – with the goal of improving programming and policy related to girls' rights. As we expand the definition of evidence, we must also expand how we think of the use of evidence in innovative ways to ensure new knowledge can fuel social change. Similarly to how intersectional feminism calls to broaden the scope of feminism to include diverse experiences from different groups, it calls for us to

broaden our understanding of using evidence to include different forms of knowledge-sharing that privilege dialogical spaces. Furthermore, there has been limited cross-learning among organisations working on SGBV that adopt different approaches and strategies for marginalised groups. Addressing this requires the creation of collaborative resources by grassroots organisations to guide the implementation of a common set of indicators. These resources could take the form of flyers, educational videos and training manuals for guiding the integration of common indicators in the documentation format and the data management systems across organisations. Based on what was learned through this project, CEHAT is working on a manual for grassroots organisations which will guide development of documentation formats for facilitating intersectional analysis, managing and analysing service data, and creating resources for knowledge sharing and policy advocacy.

Conclusion

An intersectional lens ensured that the analysis of service data considered the specific context, as well as bringing to the surface intersecting systems of oppression. A shared reflection from all organisations in the project is that the frontline workers, many of whom are from the same communities they serve, are the best equipped to collect data in an ethical manner that takes into account the safety of women and the critical importance of accurate data collection.

Given the intersectional nature of the work of the grassroots organisations who are working for and through the marginalised communities, they are well-positioned to conduct intersectional feminist research. The data documented during service provision recognises the varied experiences and the need for adopting the intervention strategies to address needs of marginalised communities. Thus, it is crucial for building the capacity of frontline workers to analyse the service data and transform it into knowledge for bringing social change. This is also important given the struggle of researchers to come up with appropriate methodologies for conducting intersectional research, especially the challenge of addressing who decided what to research and the power dynamics between researchers and communities.

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