



AMERICAN
JEWISH
WORLD
SERVICE



PROMOTING
HUMAN RIGHTS IN
INDIA



OUR MISSION

Inspired by the Jewish commitment to justice, **American Jewish World Service (AJWS)** works to realize human rights and end poverty in the developing world. AJWS promotes civil and political rights; advances sexual health and rights; defends land, water and climate justice; and aids communities in the aftermath of disasters. We pursue lasting change by supporting grassroots and global human rights organizations in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, and by advocating for U.S. and international policies for justice and equality worldwide.

ABOVE Street scene in Delhi. All photographs by Jonathan Torgovnik unless noted.

FRONT COVER Young women dance in rural Rajasthan, taking part in activities organized by AJWS grantee Vikalp designed to increase their confidence and their understanding of their rights.



In Pune, Maitreyi Shankar (center, black vest) talks to "wastepickers"—women who earn their living sorting trash and recyclables. With support from AJWS grantee Kashtakari Panchayat, the women are demanding fair wages and seeking education for their daughters.

PROMOTING HUMAN RIGHTS IN INDIA

With 36 states and territories and 1.3 billion people, India is the world's largest democracy and second most populous nation. It is also one of Asia's leading economies, boasting a bounty of natural resources and robust agriculture, industry and service sectors. In recent years, this prosperity has brought dramatic urban renewal to the streets of major cities and ushered in a new era of tech-sector jobs and rising wealth.

Despite this boom, India is also known for pervasive poverty and widespread human rights violations. Gender inequality is rampant, and India has the highest number of brides married before age 18 in the world. Due to widespread discrimination, people considered to be lower caste¹, as well as sexual, religious and ethnic minorities, have limited access to jobs, education, and health and other services—contributing to an ever-widening gap between the very rich and the very poor. Meanwhile, the launch of various development projects driven by India's aspiration for economic growth has displaced many rural communities to areas where they struggle to survive.

American Jewish World Service is supporting 94 Indian organizations working to address these challenges, end poverty and achieve greater equality for all. Our work in India focuses on safeguarding the sexual health and rights of women, girls, LGBTI people and sex workers; ending the harmful practice of child marriage; and enabling rural communities to prosper and live with dignity through greater access to the land, food and water they need to survive and thrive. By supporting national and grassroots groups working in these three critical areas, we are helping build a more tolerant, just and equal Indian society.

¹ Established in ancient times, India's caste system divided society into a rigid social hierarchy consisting of five distinct groups: the four "castes" and the "untouchables." Though the caste system was officially abolished in the mid-20th century, discrimination based on caste continues—especially against the "untouchables," who are now called the Dalits, which means "oppressed."

OUR GRANTEEES

Aajeevika Bureau
 Abhivyakti Media for Development
 Alternative Law Forum
 Alwar Mewat Institute of Education and Development
 ANANDI-Area Networking and Development Initiatives
 Anusandhan Trust
 Anveshi Research Centre for Women's Studies
 Avehi Public Charitable Trust
 Awaaz-e-Niswaan
 Azad Foundation
 Bhumika Women's Collective
 Creating Resources for Empowerment in Action
 Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee
 Feminist Approach to Technology
 Foundation for Social Transformation
 Front for Rapid Economic Advancement of India
 Going to School Fund
 Gramya Resource Centre for Women
 Hill Social Welfare Society
 Humsafar
 Institute of Social Studies Trust

Jadavpur University, School of Women's Studies
 Jana Sanghati Kendra
 Jeevika Development Society
 Kashtakari Panchayat
 Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangathan
 Mahila Sarvangeen Utkarsh Mandal (MASUM)
 MAMTA Health Institute for Mother and Child
 Mohammad Bazar Backward Classes Development Society (MBBCDS)
 New Alipore Praajak Development Society
 Nirantar
 Nishtha
 Parodevi Pictures
 Partners For Law In Development
 Payana
 Point of View
 Pravah
 RAHI Foundation
 Rajsamand Jan Vikas Sansthan
 Rubi Social Welfare Society
 Solidarity and Action Against the HIV Infection in India (SAATHII)
 Sadbhavana Trust

Sahayog Society for Participatory Rural Development
 Sahiyar
 Sakhi Trust
 Sama Resource Group for Women and Health
 Sampada Grameen Mahila Sanstha Samvada
 Sappho For Equality
 Shaheen Women's Resource and Welfare Association
 Streamline Stories
 TALASH Society for Inner Strength, Peace & Equality
 Talking About Reproductive and Sexual Health Issues
 Tata Institute of Social Sciences
 The Aangan Trust
 The Hunger Project
 The YP Foundation
 Thoughtshop Foundation
 VEDIKA – A Platform for Women
 Vikalp
 Visthar
 Women's Initiatives
 Yakshi

Some grantees are not listed due to security considerations.





BACKGROUND: History and Human Rights

FROM ANCIENT TIMES TO THE ARRIVAL OF THE EUROPEANS

The Indian subcontinent is one of the oldest inhabited regions of the world, with evidence of human activity dating as far back as 250,000 years. The region's first known inhabitants were the Indus Valley civilization, which thrived from at least 5000 B.C.E. until around 1700 B.C.E., when a nomadic people known as the Aryans began migrating onto the subcontinent.

The Aryan migration coincided with the rise of a caste system that divided society into a hierarchy of classes. At the top of the system were the Brahmana (priests and scholars), followed by the Kshatriya (warriors), the Vaishya (farmers and merchants) and the Shudra (laborers). A fifth group of people—the “untouchables,” now known as Dalits (which means “oppressed”)—fell outside the system and were at the very bottom of society. While it appears that caste was initially linked to a person's occupation, over time it became a fixed social status inherited at birth.¹

The period between 500 B.C.E. and 1500 C.E. saw new waves of migration to India and the rise and fall of various kingdoms and empires. During this period, Greeks, Persians, Arabs and Turks all set foot on the subcontinent, where they introduced their unique cultures, religions and political systems, and laid the foundation for modern India's cultural and religious diversity.

COLONIZATION, NATIONALIST MOVEMENTS AND INDIAN INDEPENDENCE

In 1498, Portuguese traders landed on India's western shores. Hungry for Indian spices, dyes, silks and fabrics, more Europeans followed—notably the British and the French. With the support of their respective monarchies, British and French explorers launched companies in India. The British East India Company (EIC) was most expansive and influential of these ventures. But it also oppressed the people of the region.²

ABOVE To celebrate National Girl Child Day in India, girls gather for a fair organized by The Hunger Project in rural Rajasthan. The girls learned about non-traditional career paths for women and played games like "Chutes and Ladders of Equality."



Rekha Sapkal makes her living in Pune by picking through garbage and selling scrap and recyclables. With support from Kashtakari Panchayat, Rekha and her colleagues have demanded greater respect for the critical work they do for their cities.

The EIC collected taxes from the local population and, through violence and the threat of violence, forced them to grow cotton, jute and indigo—raw materials that could be processed in British mills. In some areas, the EIC also established vast tea plantations, seizing land from local people then forcing them to till the fields. Those who tried to rebel against this occupation were swiftly quashed by the EIC’s army. By the early 19th century, the EIC controlled most of the southern Indian peninsula.

In 1857, the people of India attempted to oust the EIC via a war of independence (which the British termed the “Mutiny”). The EIC put down the uprising, then the British government took control of the territory and formally incorporated India into their growing empire. In the years that followed, the colonizers imposed their own system of governance, continued collecting taxes, and passed various laws and acts to govern the local people—despite the fact that the population had no voting power or representation in the colonial government. The British also declared English the official language, changed the education system to mimic the British system and built railroads to consolidate their economic and political hold on the subcontinent.

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, a number of Indian nationalist movements rose in response to the colonial government’s continued discrimination against the populace, as well as its plundering of India’s natural resources. The most famous figure from this period was Mohandas “Mahatma” Gandhi, who led a peaceful campaign of civil disobedience. The tireless efforts of Gandhi, his fellow leaders, and their many followers paid off in 1947, when the subcontinent won its independence from Britain.³

MODERN-DAY INDIA: ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AT THE EXPENSE OF EQUALITY

India’s history of ancient civilizations, foreign migrations, colonization and nationalist campaigns has given rise to a complex modern society characterized by unparalleled diversity. Unfortunately, it has also produced a country of deep social divisions and entrenched inequality. This inequality persists despite strong social justice movements and a number of post-independence laws and policies that promote the rights of people in lower castes, women and other marginalized groups—at least on paper.

For example, India’s Constitution outlawed the caste system in 1950, yet many Indian people—and even government institutions—continue to discriminate based on caste. And despite a strong women’s movement that has had a massive impact in advancing women’s rights, traditional norms about gender and sexuality persist. Sexual abuse and domestic violence against women occur at alarming rates. Girls trail their male peers in access to education, and women are often discouraged from pursuing careers outside the home.

ADVANCING CHANGE FOR A MORE JUST FUTURE

India’s robust social movements and civil society groups are working to remedy the country’s complex social and political problems. AJWS is by their side, supporting 94 social change organizations at the forefront of innovative campaigns for human rights.

Read the following pages to explore contemporary challenges in India—and discover how AJWS’s grantees are working in communities and across their nation to overcome these challenges and advance a more just and equitable future.

¹ Mark, Joshua J. (2012, November 13). “India: Definition.” *Ancient History Encyclopedia*.

² The National Archives of the United Kingdom. “India Before the Europeans.”

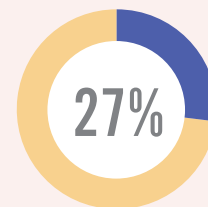
³ The BBC. (2015, June 30). “India profile - Timeline.” BBC Online.

SNAPSHOT OF POVERTY & INEQUALITY

1 IN 5 PEOPLE LIVE IN POVERTY¹



India's diverse economy has grown rapidly over the years. Yet about 270 million people—or the equivalent of 84 percent of the U.S. population²—lives in poverty.



27% OF WOMEN IN INDIA MARRY BEFORE AGE 18

About 1 in 4 women in India get married before reaching adulthood.⁵ The majority of these girls marry between ages 15 and 18.⁶

4 IN 5 RURAL PEOPLE SUBSIST FROM FARMING, FISHING OR FORAGING



More than 80% of rural Indians generate their food, water and livelihoods from their local waterways, farmland and forests—vital natural resources that are increasingly threatened by climate change.³

62 TRANSGENDER PEOPLE MURDERED



India's LGBTI community has faced ongoing discrimination, harassment and violence. There is a national law banning same-sex relations. And at least **62 transgender people have been killed since 2008**.⁷

INDIA TRAILS GLOBAL STANDARDS FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS

India ranks **#131 out of the 188** countries on the United Nations Development Programme's Gender Inequality Index (the U.S. is in the top 10). For example:



16% of married women in India do not participate in household decisions.



Less than half of women in rural India have their own bank account.



Only 68% of women in India can read and write, compared to 86% of men.⁴

3 MILLION SEX WORKERS AT RISK

Criminalized by law and stigmatized by society, **sex workers in India face discrimination, violence and heightened risk of preventable illnesses, including HIV/AIDS**.⁸

¹ The World Bank. (2016, May 27). India's Poverty Profile. Retrieved from: <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/infographic/2016/05/27/india-s-poverty-profile>

² U.S. population = 321 million. The World Bank. (2015). Population, Overview Per Country. Retrieved from: <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL>

³ Oxfam India Website, Economic Justice Webpage. (2000-2016). Oxfam India.

⁴ International Institute for Population Sciences. (2017). National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4), 2015-2016, India Fact Sheet. Mumbai.

⁵ Ibid

⁶ UNFPA. (2012). Marrying Too Young: End Child Marriage.

⁷ Transgender Europe. (2017, March 30). Trans Murder Monitoring Update. Retrieved from: <http://transrespect.org/en/tdov-2017-tmm-update/>

⁸ *The Economist*. (2014, November 1). "Prostitution in India: Make it legal." *The Economist* online.



AJWS GRANTEES TAKE A STAND

Challenges and Solutions

Despite the many challenges to their work, India's vibrant social movements and a multitude of national and grassroots groups remain steadfast in their commitment to building a more just Indian society.

AJWS is standing with these changemakers by supporting organizations working in three key areas: safeguarding sexual health and rights, ending child marriage, and improving rural communities' livelihoods through access to land, food and water. Across these diverse initiatives, AJWS grantees consistently prioritize the needs of oppressed people who have historically been ignored and abused by those in power.

SAFEGUARDING SEXUAL HEALTH AND RIGHTS

Although there has been progress in advancing women's rights in India, conservative beliefs about gender and sexuality continue to dictate what is considered possible for many women and girls.

For example, under the prevailing social norms, the husband serves as the primary breadwinner and decisionmaker, while the wife maintains the home, raises the children and—despite working inside and sometimes even outside the home—often holds less decisionmaking power.

Sex is seen as appropriate only within the confines of marriage, and thus any signs or rumors of sexual activity outside marriage can lead to serious consequences. These consequences range from ostracism—and with it, great difficulty finding a husband—to “honor killings,” in which family members murder girls and women they view as promiscuous, in an attempt to restore the family's honor! The social responsibility for upholding this chastity falls disproportionately on young women, leading many parents to closely monitor their teenage daughters and rarely allow them out of the home.

ABOVE In rural Maharashtra, AJWS grantee MASUM leads a rally to demand gender equality and an end to child marriage.

Conservative views on gender and sexuality have also led to the widespread persecution of LGBTI people in India. A colonial-era law criminalizing same-sex relations has left LGBTI people with few legal protections when they experience persecution, and has fueled discrimination and even physical attacks against them—including at the hands of the police, who detain, harass and arrest LGBTI people. In a welcome development for transgender activists, the Supreme Court of India passed a judgment in April 2014 upholding the rights of transgender people, including the right to identify as male, female or a “third gender” on all government documents and IDs. The law also affirms the rights of transgender people to be protected from discrimination, harassment and attacks based on gender identity, and to enjoy full and equal access to health services and other public facilities. But unfortunately, these provisions are not always implemented, and many trans people continue to face discrimination and abuse.

Another deeply oppressed group is sex workers. In India—as in many countries—poverty pushes thousands of people into sex work. Many sex workers are women who have few options for employment because of their class, gender or caste, making sex work the best available option. Some are mothers with the difficult choice of working in dangerous sweat shops or doing back-breaking manual labor, or doing sex work and earning more money. Choosing sex work may mean a better life for their families; but sadly, if they make this choice, they face pervasive discrimination, stigma and, often, violence.

While selling sex is not officially illegal in India, activities surrounding sex work are prohibited. For example, it is illegal to own a brothel, to live off the wages of sex work or to work as a pimp. These laws have left sex workers with few legal protections, rendering them highly vulnerable to abuse. Considered immoral or dirty by many, sex workers are often unfairly blamed for India’s HIV epidemic; fined, detained and arrested by law enforcement personnel; and raped, beaten and robbed by their clients and even the police. Under the guise of “rescue operations,” religious groups, police officers and aid organizations routinely carry out raids on brothels, detaining or forcibly relocating the inhabitants. But these operations fail to make the important distinction

between victimized women and children who are being trafficked into sex work, and consenting adults who work in the industry by choice.

Finally, women, girls, LGBTI people and sex workers in India all face barriers to accessing quality medical care and accurate information about sexual and reproductive health. These barriers range from outright discrimination by providers, to lack of services in their areas, to norms that discourage discussing sexuality altogether.

AJWS is supporting grassroots groups seeking to challenge social norms around gender and sexuality, to overturn the laws and policies that enable the persecution and oppression of LGBTI people and sex workers, to foster greater safety and respect for LGBTI people and sex workers, and to promote the sexual health and rights of all of these vulnerable populations. In the case of women and girls, we place a special emphasis on groups working with rural communities and minority groups, such as Dalits and Muslims.

For example:

Alternative Law Forum (ALF) works to defend the rights of women, LGBTI people, Dalits and religious minorities who experience discrimination or violence. The organization advocates for the passage of stronger laws and policies to protect these groups and the repeal of existing legislation that oppresses them, such as the colonial-era law criminalizing same-sex relations. It also recently brought together LGBTI people, women and girls, Dalits, religious minorities and other groups to examine the common forms of prejudice and abuse they face, and to develop an “anti-discrimination” bill to address them.

Sampada Grameen Mahila Sanstha (SANGRAM) has organized 5,000 sex workers from Maharashtra region to stand up for their rights and increase awareness about safe sex practices among their peers. Members distribute condoms, teach their peers how to prevent HIV and access treatment, protest violence against sex workers by the police and clients, and advocate for new laws that would remove criminal repercussions for sex work, provide sex workers with legal protection from violence and create a safer overall work environment. UNAIDS credits SANGRAM for yielding a marked improvement in the availability of HIV treatment, care and support for sex workers in India, helping slow the spread of the disease among this vulnerable population.

¹ Deol, S. (2014). “Honour Killings in India: A Study of the Punjab State.” *International Research Journal of Social Sciences*, 3(6), 7-16.



Shital Waikar teaches a sexual health session for MASUM. By increasing young people's knowledge of sexuality, MASUM prepares them to make decisions about their own lives and bodies.

Samvada supports young people from disadvantaged backgrounds across India to overcome injustice and expand their opportunities. Samvada has launched youth resource centers and a community college in the state of Karnataka, offering courses in counseling, journalism and other fields. By combining professional education with human rights training, Samvada enables young men and women to deeply understand social justice and gender equality and apply what they have learned in their careers and personal lives. With support from AJWS, Samvada has launched a new training program to foster the leadership of young women working with grassroots groups across India to confront gender inequality.

ENDING CHILD MARRIAGE

An important subset of our sexual health and rights portfolio is our work to end child marriage. Under international law, child marriage is defined as any union in which either the bride or the groom are under the age of 18.² Around the world, 15 million underage brides are married each year—that's 28

every minute. A third of these young brides live in India, where 27 percent of all girls get married before their 18th birthday. Today in India, this practice primarily affects adolescents between the ages of 15 and 18—and many marry against their will. To better capture this reality, many activists are increasingly using terms like “early marriage” and “forced marriage.” Child marriage is one expression of the longstanding gender inequality that persists despite progress made by India’s women’s movement. The practice often deprives girls of the freedom to make informed and independent choices about their lives, relationships, education, employment and sexuality.

A Major Investment in Ending Child Marriage

Thanks to a generous grant from **The Kendeda Fund**, AJWS is investing \$30 million over six years to end child marriage and promote gender equality in India.

The causes are complex and closely linked to the social norms and values that place men at the head of families and restrict girls' life choices. In impoverished areas, marriage is seen as an important way for women to gain financial security, housing and food. And in traditional communities, most people value women primarily as wives, mothers and daughters—and girls who wish to finish high school, pursue higher education or start a career are often unable to do so. Under intense parental and societal pressure, and without the financial wherewithal to support themselves, many girls consent to—or are forced into—arranged, early marriages.

Recognizing the harmful consequences, Indian legislators have tried to stop child marriage for more than 140 years—passing multiple laws, including the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act in 2006. Although the average age of marriage has risen by a few years, laws have failed to change the deeply entrenched social norms that drive child marriage and hold women and girls back in so many ways.

AJWS launched a \$30 million investment in 2014 to develop a comprehensive and locally-based strategy to address the root causes of child marriage and the multiple factors that exacerbate them. Guided by this strategy, we have funded 24 local research projects and supported more than 50 Indian organizations—many of them led by activists who come from the very communities that they seek to help.

These grantees are empowering women and girls to make choices for themselves, change the ways their families and communities perceive their roles and abilities, and gain access to the information, resources and opportunities they need to pursue full lives as equal members of society. Through collectives organized by these grantees, more than 125,000 women and girls are now learning about their rights and working to foster gender equality in their communities.

For example:

Vikalp works to end child marriage by supporting young people; educating parents, community members and other key decisionmakers; and advocating for policy change. So far, Vikalp has stopped more than 8,000 child marriages and helped more than 10,000 girls pursue higher education. Recently, Vikalp has

² In India, the legal age of marriage for boys is higher than for girls, and child marriage is defined as any union in which the bride is under 18 or the groom is under 21.



THE FOUR A's: A Comprehensive Approach to Ending Child Marriage

Our approach to ending child marriage combines grantmaking, research and advocacy in order to advance four key concepts in the lives of girls: **aspirations, agency, availability** and **access**.

Together, these “4 A's” give girls the freedom to choose whether, when and whom to marry—and, ultimately, empower them to transform their lives.

Our grantmaking supports groups that are addressing the 4 A's throughout their work with girls, and the research we support complements our grantmaking by helping us better understand child marriage and the effectiveness of various efforts to stop it. In turn, our advocacy leverages the learnings from both our partners and our research to change how fellow advocates and funders around the world understand child marriage, respond to it, and measure progress toward ending it.

ABOVE Girls in rural India rarely get to play sports and are often isolated at home once they hit puberty. Vikalp organizes volleyball games that offer a fun, safe place for girls to discuss challenges and build confidence.



Girls in Rajasthan pose with Manju Meghwal (purple scarf), who encourages them to think of futures beyond early marriage. The Hunger Project trains Manju and other women serving on village councils on ways to support and empower girls.

expanded its efforts to help girls who are already married gain more control over their lives. Because married girls are often isolated and rarely get to leave their homes, Vikalp regularly reaches out to the girls, invites them to empowerment camps and helps them negotiate with their families for the freedom to pursue education or employment.

Shaheen supports Muslim adolescent girls from the lowest socioeconomic caste in Hyderabad to make informed decisions about their own lives. In the neighborhoods where they work, many young women have faced pressure to drop out of school and marry as teenagers. By educating girls about their rights, training them in skills they can use to pursue desirable jobs, and raising community awareness

about the harms of child marriage, Shaheen creates supportive spaces where girls begin to speak up for themselves. Shaheen reports that as a result, the numbers of girls who continue their education through high school has increased, and many girls have stepped up to confront critical issues in their communities, from child marriage to sexual violence.

Feminist Approach to Technology (FAT) offers classes in computers, literacy, photography and filmmaking to adolescent girls and young women from impoverished neighborhoods in South Delhi. Combined with workshops on sexual health and rights, these classes build students' self-confidence and provide them with the skills needed to support themselves financially. FAT projects also aim to change how communities

view girls by enabling girls to participate in community discussions, and by raising topics that affect girls—including child marriage—during those talks. For example, a group of students is currently making a film about child marriage with the hope of prompting community dialogue.

LAND, WATER AND CLIMATE JUSTICE

Our third body of work in India focuses on critical problems of land and natural resources. Eighty percent of India's 1.3 billion people live in rural areas where they depend on the land and natural waterways to survive. Yet, today, few rural people own sufficient land to cultivate the crops they need to feed their families, causing both widespread hunger and health problems. This is especially problematic for women, who rarely own any land at all.

With agriculture becoming an increasingly difficult venture, many young people have fled from rural areas and are migrating to cities in search of work. Unfortunately, many of them settle in impoverished urban slums, where they find few jobs and face new challenges—and this migration is draining the communities they leave behind of the skills and potential that could help lift them out of poverty.

Climate change is also putting the livelihoods and survival of tens of thousands of rural communities at risk. Record-high temperatures and prolonged

droughts are decimating the crops of small farmers and desiccating rivers and streams used for fishing and drinking water. And deforestation is preventing local communities from accessing rich sources of food and medicinal herbs.

AJWS is supporting grassroots groups working to help rural communities grow the food they need to survive and learn new skills to generate needed income. Our grantees are training small farmers to improve their crop yields despite the impacts of climate change and teaching women and youth new skills that lead to jobs, businesses or income for their families.

For example:

Yakshi works with rural, indigenous communities in Telengana, training them to advocate for their rights to the forests where they have lived for centuries and the natural resources that they depend on. As a result of Yakshi's educational efforts, many small villages have shifted from growing cotton to producing traditional, local crops. Yakshi has supported women, in particular, to take on leadership roles in this initiative. For example, in an effort to diversify their food crops and preserve local species of plants that might have gone extinct otherwise, more than 180 women have collected and shared over 2,000 pounds of unique seed varieties with villagers in other districts—ensuring that these rare crops will thrive and benefit farmers across the region.



A farmer in rural Maharashtra herds goats.



OUR COMMITMENT IN INDIA

AJWS is committed to supporting Indian activists in advocating for their sexual health and rights, and in protecting the land and natural resources they depend on for survival.

Our 94 grantees are:



Enabling girls and young women to stay in school, learn marketable skills and understand their sexual health and rights in order to give them opportunities beyond marriage—and to help those who are already married have greater agency and live healthier lives



Creating environments within which young girls can openly discuss marriage, sexuality and other issues that concern them, and where they can learn tactics to discuss these issues with their families in order to gain greater freedom over their futures



Equipping women and girls with the knowledge they need to make informed choices about their lives and bodies—including if, when and whom to marry



Helping rural communities improve their access to land and vital natural resources, adapt to the changes wrought by global warming, reduce hunger and make rural life a viable option for the next generation



Engaging with community members and key leaders to stop discrimination against women, LGBTI people, sex workers and other vulnerable groups, and to influence the way communities discuss and think about gender and sexuality



Educating young and emerging leaders so they can develop and shape innovative solutions to these challenges



Advocating for laws and policies that respect and protect human rights for all



Girls practice a dance performance at a school run by AJWS grantee MBBCDS in rural West Bengal. In addition to traditional schooling, MBBCDS offers education about human rights and a hostel for girls who face challenges at home, such as pressure to marry early.

\$22.5 MILLION INVESTED
IN INDIA SINCE 1988

BEYOND GRANTMAKING:

How Does AJWS Make a Difference?

AJWS goes beyond grantmaking. To support movements, we:

- Offer multi-year grants, because sustainable change takes time
- Invest in nascent organizations and help them grow bigger and stronger
- Address the root causes of human rights abuses
- Bring clusters of similar and complementary groups together, enabling them to learn from each other and from experts in order to build strong, united movements
- Promote our grantees in the media and foster their leadership on the international stage
- Ensure that women, indigenous people, LGBTI people, ethnic and religious minorities, and other groups remain at the center of all our social change efforts
- Conduct research and share our findings with grantees and fellow funders, strengthening social movements that advocate for human rights

AJWS GRANTEES IN INDIA: A Closer Look

The social change organizations we support in India are making progress against tremendous odds. Their stories show how grassroots activists are empowering local people to bring about change and empower their country's most vulnerable people to achieve justice.



Sunita Jaiswal embarked on a new profession as a private chauffeur after receiving training from Azad Foundation. With support from AJWS, Azad helps girls launch careers that expand their choices and opportunities in life.

AZAD FOUNDATION

An AJWS grantee gives young women the keys to a career and a future of their own choosing.

Sunita Jaiswal can't remember a time when she was happier. On a Saturday afternoon in her tiny house in Delhi, her daughters grin and perch along the narrow stairs, bounding up or down to make way for passing guests. Meanwhile, Sunita pours cold soda into steel cups and passes them around, beaming with pride. Her refrigerator is a hard-won luxury, offering a rare respite from the harsh midday heat.

It's taken Sunita, 29, a long time to get here. After the 8th grade, her parents didn't have enough money to keep her in school, so she dropped out. She was 15 when they arranged her marriage. At 17, she gave birth to her oldest daughter, Monika. Then came Manisha, then Pari. This was not unusual. In Sunita's village, people expected teenage girls to marry—and to bear their own children shortly thereafter.

But Sunita's story didn't proceed the way her parents had planned. Her husband drank heavily and sometimes he beat her. He also drove drunk, until he got into an accident that left him unable to work for months. With no money coming in—and her husband's abuse spiraling out of control—Sunita grew desperate.

"He would not even let me go out of the house on my own," she said. "He sometimes threw me out of the house at night, along with my kids."

EXPLORING A NEW PROFESSION—AND THE FREEDOM THAT COMES WITH IT

One day, Sunita saw an advertisement recruiting women to drive taxis. It came from **Azad Foundation**, an AJWS grantee that trains low-income women with limited education to become professional drivers. The goal is to expand career options for these women, helping them break into a male-dominated profession. For Sunita, the program promised a level of freedom and earning potential that had long seemed out of reach.

Her parents opposed the decision, insisting that driving was not a proper job for a woman. She kept going to Azad anyway.

"This was my dream," Sunita said. "[My parents] said things ... But my work was to hear it, and then just ignore it. I did not lose hope."

As Sunita learned to drive, she also took lessons on everything from women's rights to self-defense. Unlike Sunita's parents, who urged her to return to her husband, Azad told her she could file a report with the police when he beat her. With Azad's support, she also filed for divorce.

Sunita then found a job as a private chauffeur. The new income enabled her to cover school fees not only for her children, but for her younger brother and sister.

SUPPORTING WOMEN TO MAKE THEIR OWN CHOICES

Her work with Azad also led to something unexpected: a new partner. One morning, near the end of her training program, she met a kind man on her way to class. Ramchandra, whom she later married, is nothing like her first husband. She sometimes blushes when she talks about him—and says he believed in her at a time when her own parents did not.

"He said, 'I would not stop you from doing anything,'" Sunita said. "This is what I liked the most about him. There are very few people who actually support us and help us go forward in life."

Today, Ramchandra lives with Sunita and her three girls. In the mornings, he helps prepare meals for the day, chopping up vegetables as Sunita makes chapati. In the future, Sunita wants to make sure that her daughters get the education that she missed. Asked what she's most proud of, she smiles and speaks about her girls and the tiny house she purchased a couple years ago.

"Even if it is small," she added, "it is mine."

LOCATION: Based in Delhi

2017 ORGANIZATIONAL BUDGET: \$459,000

AJWS FUNDING HISTORY: \$300,000 total since 2014

Women work in a rice paddy in rural West Bengal.



LOCATION: Based in Telangana **2017 ORGANIZATIONAL BUDGET:** \$175,000
AJWS FUNDING HISTORY: \$30,000 total since 2016

YAKSHI

Farmers confront the high costs of an unjust food system.

Since 1995, more than 300,000 farmers in India have taken their own lives.¹

The country is in the midst of a food and agriculture crisis that has caused widespread despair in rural communities, according to Sagari Ramdas. She's an activist who has worked with a variety of grassroots organizations in India, including one of AJWS's grantees, **Yakshi**. While many small farmers have historically had low incomes, more and more are struggling to survive—and sinking deeper and deeper into debt they cannot repay.

Why?

RISING TEMPERATURES, RISING DEBT

Many reports have found a link between this epidemic of suicide and climate change, because many crops in India are highly vulnerable to rising temperatures. For example, a 2017 article in the journal *PNAS* found that an increase of 5 degrees Celsius on any single day in India was associated with an additional 335 farmer suicides.²

Additionally, India's small farmers are dealing with the complex effects of Indian land reforms and global trade agreements and economic policies that have favored the growth of large-scale, industrial food production at the expense of small family-run farms. For instance, in the mid-1990s, India ended direct subsidies to farmers and reduced the costs of importing foreign food, which opened the gates wide to international conglomerates. As a result, Sagari said, many Indian farmers have seen their incomes drop dramatically.

Many farmers, faced with rising debt, have sold their land for cheap and moved to cities in search of scarce employment. Still more people have been pushed off their land to make way for government-sanctioned economic development projects.

Some who still have their land have attempted to keep their farms by switching from growing traditional, varied food crops to producing just one or two more lucrative crops, like cotton and sugar cane. This

practice of “monocropping” leads to a variety of long-term problems, as the farmers shift from traditional, local crops to using genetically modified seeds and chemical pesticides.

“The impact of that on the land has been dreadful,” Sagari said—with the ultimate effect of leaving crops more vulnerable to disease and shifts in weather, and the farmers more vulnerable to dramatic losses in income.

“When you're in huge debt,” Sagari said, “there reaches a point where the farmer says, ‘I can't do anything else and the only thing for me to do is take my life.’”

BUILDING A MOVEMENT TO DEFEND SMALL-SCALE FARMERS

Sagari is working with a variety of organizations in India to turn this desperate trend around and increase small farmers' control over agricultural and food systems. She and her fellow land rights activists argue that the government's trade and farming policies violate rights enshrined in India's constitution. “It's not about changing laws,” she says. “We have got constitutional protections. We want to make those protections work [to] prevent further damage.”

Sagari illustrates this with the example of the Forest Rights Act, which was created to defend indigenous communities' rights to protect their forests and veto development projects that threatened forests in their territories. But the law has not been enforced and the government continues to allow the land to be plundered.

To counter this injustice, Sagari continues to work with a variety of groups that educate farming communities about their rights—through activities like debates, theatre, music and art—and how they can work together to demand justice from their government.

“Change can happen only when we as communities actually organize for that change,” Sagari said. “We organize where we are, right from the field, in our villages, in our local markets, and also engage with our political representatives. It is about making them hear that we are not going to take business as usual.”

¹ Agence-France Presse. (2016, Jan. 13). “Thousands of farmer suicides prompt India to set up \$1.3bn crop insurance scheme.” *The Guardian*.

² Carleton, T. (2017, Aug. 15). “Crop-damaging temperatures increase suicide rates in India.” *PNAS*, 114 (33).

SAATHII

LGBTI rights activists work to overcome fear and unjust laws.

In 2013, India's movement for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) rights took a major blow. The country's legal landscape around homosexuality has a complex history that's changed rapidly in recent years. During the colonial era, the British rulers introduced Section 377—a law that banned LGBTI sexual relations, which it called “carnal intercourse against the order of nature.” After years of advocacy by human rights groups, the High Court of Delhi struck down the law in 2009.

Unfortunately, this happy news did not last. On Dec. 11, 2013, the country's Supreme Court restored Section 377, and sex among India's LGBTI community became officially illegal—yet again.

STANDING UP TO DISCRIMINATION

LGBTI rights activists didn't take the news quietly. Just two days later, more than 2,000 people attended a beauty pageant in Manipur exclusively for transgender contestants, who sported glamorous costumes and signs with slogans like “Legalize Love” and “Stop Homophobia.”

One of AJWS's grantees, **SAATHII—Solidarity and Action Against the HIV Infection in India**—helped organize the pageant protest. Originally founded in 2000 to curb the HIV/AIDS epidemic in India, SAATHII now advocates more broadly to overcome the obstacles LGBTI people face because of persecution and poverty. As L. “Ramki” Ramakrishnan, vice president of SAATHII, explained: “Health is just one issue for this community, and not necessarily the top priority for people who can barely afford to eat.”

Many LGBTI people in India deal with discrimination when they try to attend school, apply for jobs or seek health care. Many also get forced into heterosexual marriages or face abuse from their families. To address these challenges, SAATHII has organized groups across the country to educate LGBTI people about their rights, train them on skills that they can use to increase their income, and empower them to demand fair treatment from employers, doctors, government officials and their own families. The groups also provide an important source of emotional support for members, especially those living in isolated, rural areas.

SIGNS OF PROGRESS, STRATEGIES TO COUNTER IGNORANCE

Despite these profound challenges, the LGBTI community has had reason to celebrate, as well. In 2014, the Supreme Court denounced the discrimination that transgender people face and established the right to change one's gender identity on government documents. This might surprise some, given the Supreme Court's ruling on homosexual sex the year prior—but diverse rulings are not unusual given that India's Supreme Court currently has 25 judges who rule on cases in groups.

While the court's ruling on gender thrilled the human rights community, it has been met with resistance in some parts of the country. For example, Ramki recalls that when some trans men in Delhi tried to change their gender on their ID cards, the clerk said, “You're not transgender. You're just, like, modern girls who wear your hair short.”

SAATHII now works to counter this ignorance and ensure that the ruling is enforced. It has helped more than 200 people successfully change their legal gender designation. The organization has also helped found the very first group for trans men and lesbian and bisexual women in Manipur state;

LOCATION: National, with offices across India

2017 ORGANIZATIONAL BUDGET: \$2.6 million

AJWS FUNDING HISTORY: \$367,000 total since 2006



Contestants for the 2013 Miss Transgender Queen for North East India Pageant in Manipur, which SAATHIII helped organize to call attention to LGBTI rights. **Photographs by Siddharth Haobijam**



trained government officials, medical professionals and lawyers on trans rights; and partnered with smaller, community-based LGBTI organizations around the country. Together, they have increased their power to advocate for trans rights via state coalitions and national meetings.

PRESSING FOR JUSTICE IN COURT

SAATHIII and its partners continue to press for a lasting reversal of Section 377, the law prohibiting homosexuality. It may not be far off. In August 2017, India's Supreme Court affirmed a universal right to privacy in the country and described sexual orientation as a component of that right. Another hearing challenging Section 377 should be held in coming months—and India's LGBTI rights advocates are optimistic that a huge step toward equality and justice is finally on the way.

AWAAZ-E-NISWAAN

Muslim women and girls take to the streets for gender equality.

More than 70 teenage girls waited near a busy Mumbai intersection, fanning themselves in a vain attempt to stave off the afternoon heat. Aimless young men wandered over to leer.

The girls were planning to ride in a bicycle rally to stand up for women's rights—but for the moment, they had no bikes. Some men in the neighborhood had pressured local rental businesses not to rent to the girls, hoping to stop the rally. For the men, cycling symbolized a level of independence that women and girls weren't supposed to have.

But that was the point of the rally: to push back against the limits that extremely conservative, local leaders wanted to place on girls. And push they did. A few minutes later, a truck pulled up. The girls cheered as their leader, Kausar Ansari, emerged triumphant and smiling, wiping the sweat from her face: After hours of negotiation, the bikes had arrived.

BREAKING FREE THROUGH EDUCATION AND ADVOCACY

Kausar was a program manager at **Awaaz-e-Niswaan**, which Muslim women in Mumbai founded 30 years ago to challenge religious laws in their communities that restricted women's rights. Today, Awaaz brings Muslim women and girls together to learn how to advocate for themselves in ways both small and large, from convincing parents to allow their daughters into computer classes, to pressuring reluctant police officers to investigate domestic violence charges, to organizing demonstrations like the bike rally.

For many of the teenage girls, the simple act of attending Awaaz activities is radical. It may be the only chance they get to connect with their peers and the world beyond their front doors.

“If the girls go out with boys—get into relationships with them—then that will hurt their families' honor,”



Kausar Ansari and the young women of Awaaz prepare signs for a bike rally to demand gender equality.



Kausar negotiates to arrange last-minute bicycle rentals for the Awaaz rally. The previous arrangement fell through because men who oppose gender equality pressured local businesses not to rent the bicycles to Awaaz.

Kausar said. “When you reach puberty, it’s as if you are trapped in your house. Girls aren’t allowed to talk to boys, and they are stopped from attending school after 10th grade.”

Like many girls with whom she grew up, Kausar was married when she was 15. She found her way to Awaaz after years of disrespect and abuse from her husband’s family. Awaaz helped her secure a divorce, and since then, she’s been running programs that help teenage girls gain confidence and pursue opportunities—for education, for jobs—that she never had.

RIDING FOR THEIR RIGHTS

At the rally that day, since the traffic cop was late, Kausar stepped into the crush of honking cars and motorcycles and directed traffic herself. The cars slowed and veered to one side, and a single lane opened up. Some girls peered at the traffic with tense brows and wobbled as they began to pedal. Others traded high-fives.



Some members of Awaaz choose to cover their faces and hair in public, a practice called “purdah” (the veil), which is common in conservative Muslim areas of Mumbai. The girls at Awaaz have mixed feelings about purdah. Some said it was a symbol of oppression, but that the anonymity allows them to protest for women’s rights without worrying about family objections.

A girl called out protest chants on the loud speaker to keep spirits up as they pressed on and faced the scrutiny of people on the street. Day after day, they had faced pressure to focus on cleaning their homes and preparing to be “good” wives—to play by a strict set of rules for how women and girls should behave.

But on this day, they shouted in unison and demanded a change. They laughed at the strangeness of the moment they found themselves in: raising their fists in the air, claiming their place on the street.

(More photos of Awaaz on the following pages)

LOCATION: Based in Mumbai

ORGANIZATIONAL BUDGET: \$82,000

AJWS FUNDING HISTORY: \$754,000 total since 2001

Nearly 100 women and girls rode through the busy streets of Mumbai, a suburb of Mumbai, in a rally for gender equality organized by AJWS grantee Awaaz-e-Niswaan. In this conservative community, bike riding is often seen as inappropriate for women.





Women and girls cool off after the bike rally and honor Kausar for her work to make the event a success.



LEFT: Yasmeen Dureshi, center, teaches a computer class to Fatima Ansari and Saima Shaikh, students at Awaaz. The classes give girls with strict parents an excuse to leave the house.



BELOW: Rukhsar Javed Sayyed, 18, started taking English classes at Awaaz years ago. Her mother was pressuring her to get married, but Rukhsar has insisted on finishing college first. "After learning to speak English, I got so confident," Rukhsar said. "Now I want to stand on my own two feet, to become something."





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BACK COVER *A spice market in Delhi.*

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