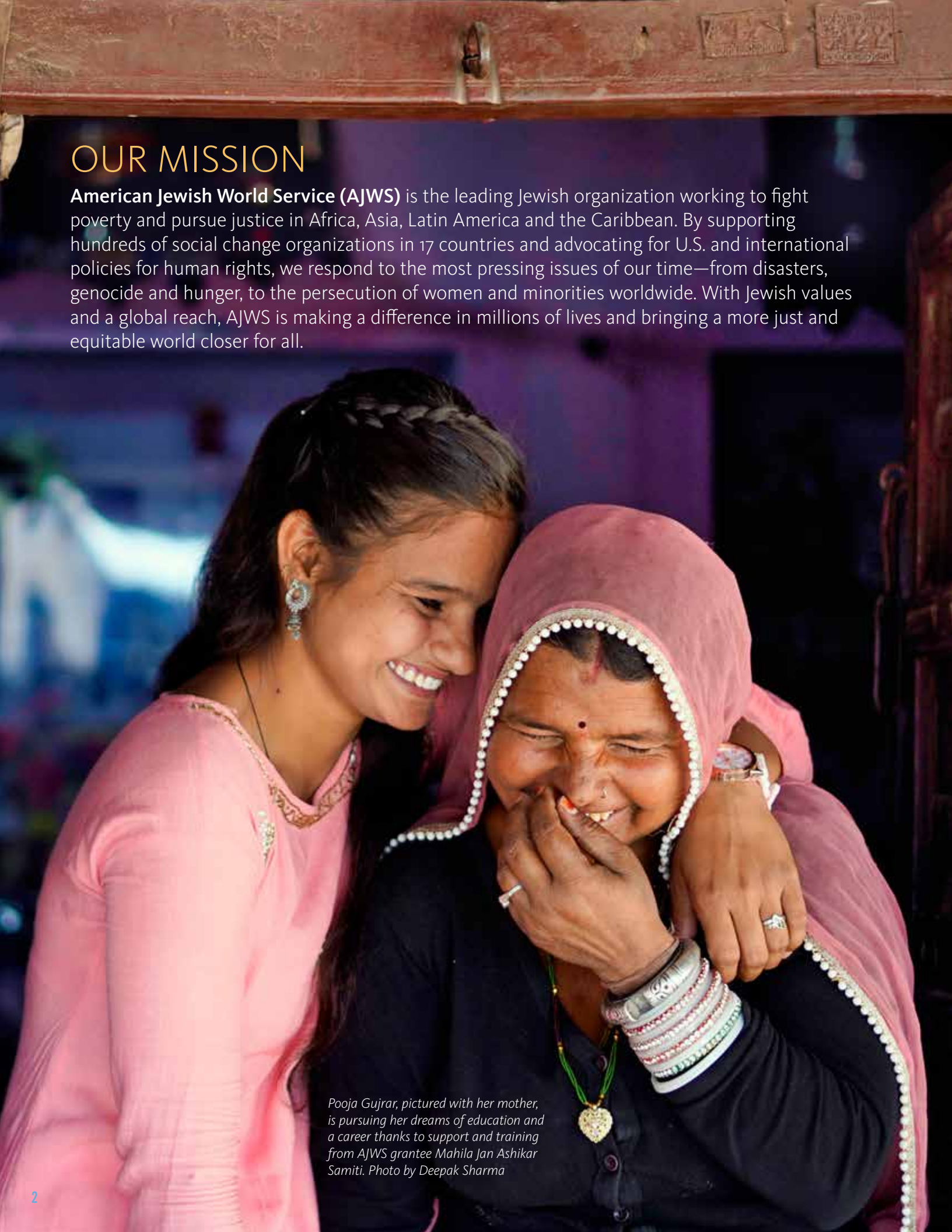
AMERICAN JEWISH WORLD SERVICE



PROMOTING HUMAN RIGHTS IN INDIA

OUR MISSION

American Jewish World Service (AJWS) is the leading Jewish organization working to fight poverty and pursue justice in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean. By supporting hundreds of social change organizations in 17 countries and advocating for U.S. and international policies for human rights, we respond to the most pressing issues of our time—from disasters, genocide and hunger, to the persecution of women and minorities worldwide. With Jewish values and a global reach, AJWS is making a difference in millions of lives and bringing a more just and equitable world closer for all.



Pooja Gujrar, pictured with her mother, is pursuing her dreams of education and a career thanks to support and training from AJWS grantee Mahila Jan Ashikar Samiti. Photo by Deepak Sharma



PROMOTING HUMAN RIGHTS IN INDIA

With 36 states and union territories and 1.4 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 girls married before age 18 in the world. Due to widespread discrimination, people considered to be lower caste—as well as sexual, religious and ethnic minorities—have limited access to jobs, education, health and other services. This contributes 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 93 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, LGBTQI+ people and sex workers; investing in youth-led efforts to promote and achieve gender equality; 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 critical areas, we are helping build a more tolerant, just and equitable Indian society.

ABOVE Across India, Feminist Approach to Technology empowers girls to develop their leadership skills and pursue studies in science, math, engineering and technology. Photo by Sasithon Pooviriyakul


AFGHANISTAN
PAKISTAN
CHINA
Indus
New Delhi
NEPAL
BHUTAN
Agra
Ganges
Brahmaputra
BANGLADESH
Udaipur
Varanasi
INDIA
Kolkata
BURMA
LAOS
Arabian Sea
Mumbai
Pune
Hyderabad
THAILAND
Bay of Bengal
Bangalore
Chennai
SRI LANKA



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.

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 the most expansive and influential of these ventures. But it also oppressed the people of the region.

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 and 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

ABOVE In Bangalore, Samvada's Youth Resource Centers are spaces for young people to gather and explore their inner lives. These unique centers are often the only place where youth are asked about their dreams and opinions, and where they can form and learn to articulate their own views. Photo by Sara Hylton



ABOVE With the support of Samvada, Narendra and Kavitha were able to negotiate with their parents to get married, despite belonging to different castes and traditions. Photo by Sara Hylton

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 Karamchand "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.

However, the partition of India, whereby India gained independence from the British, also led to the birth of Pakistan. Using religion as a wedge, the British colonists magnified existing divides between Hindus and Muslims that lived on the subcontinent and assured both sides that each would get a land of their own. Their "divide and rule" policy resulted in the creation of two states—but it also unleashed a massacre between the two communities. As a consequence of the partition, between 200,000 and 2 million people were killed, and over 14 million people were displaced.

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 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. Anti-Muslim sentiment also

continues to date, and Muslims are treated as second-class citizens, with dismal employment rates and educational achievement levels. Riots between Hindus and Muslims erupt on the smallest pretext, and hatred and distrust between communities is rampant.

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 93 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 advance a more just and equitable future.

SNAPSHOT OF POVERTY & INEQUALITY

1 IN 8 PEOPLE LIVE IN POVERTY[1]



India's diverse economy has grown rapidly over the years. Yet about 170 million people live in poverty.

INDIA TRAILS GLOBAL STANDARDS FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS

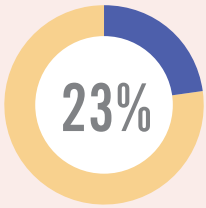
India ranks #132 out of the 191 countries on the United Nations Development Programme's Gender Inequality Index[2]. For example:

Just 13% of seats on India's Parliament are held by women.

Fewer than 20% of women in India participate in the labor force.

Only 66% of women in India can read and write, compared to 86% of men.[3]

[1] World Bank Data
[2] UN Data
[3] World Bank Data



OF WOMEN IN INDIA MARRY BEFORE AGE 18

Nearly 1 in 4 women in India gets married before reaching adulthood. The majority of these girls give birth as adolescents, and fewer than 2 in 10 married girls remain in school.[4]

2 OUT OF 3 INDIANS LIVE IN RURAL AREAS[5]



Nearly half of the population relies on their local waterways, farmland and forests—which are increasingly threatened by climate change—for their livelihoods.

[4] UNICEF
[5] Press Information Bureau, Government of India


Amied



In Rajasthan, India, AJWS grantees MJAS and AMIED are emboldening hundreds of girls like these to continue their educations and expand their aspirations, so they can gain financial independence and make decisions about their own lives. Photo by Deepak Sharma



AJWS GRANTEES TAKING 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, promoting gender equality and empowering women and girls to choose their own futures, and improving rural communities' livelihoods through access to land, food and water. Across these diverse initiatives, AJWS grantees consistently prioritize the needs of 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 decision-maker, while the wife maintains the home, raises the children and—despite working inside and sometimes even outside the home—often holds less decision-making power.

Sex is seen as appropriate only within the confines of marriage, and people are expected to marry within their religion or caste. And thus, any signs or rumors of deviation can lead to serious consequences. These consequences range from ostracism—and with it, great difficulty finding a husband—to "honor killings" 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 West Bengal, Jeevika Development Society trains and empowers women to become engaged in local governance—shifting the power structure in traditionally male-dominated spheres. Photo by Sasithon Pooviriyakul

Conservative views on gender and sexuality have also led to the widespread persecution of LGBTQI+ people in India. Although a colonial-era law that criminalized same-sex relations between consenting adults was struck down in 2018, LGBTQI+ people have few legal protections when they experience persecution. And in 2023, the Supreme Court struck a further blow to gay and lesbian Indians when they rejected a plea to legalize same-sex marriage—though the panel of judges ruled that transgender people can marry other transgender people, provided the couple constitutes one person identifying as a man and another as a woman.

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, the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act of 2019 limited most of these rights, most importantly the right to self-identification. Trans people continue to face discrimination and abuse.

Another deeply oppressed group is sex workers. 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, LGBTQI+ 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 LGBTQI+ people and sex workers, to foster greater safety and respect for LGBTQI+ 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 persecuted minorities such as Dalits (the lowest level group in the caste system) and Muslims.

AJWS GRANTEES EFFECTING CHANGE

Solidarity and Action Against the HIV Infection in India (SAATHII) supports LGBTQI+ communities in geographically remote regions, empowering them to advocate for justice and demand health, legal and social services free of stigma. They link LGBTQI+ activists to local and national governments, run peer-counseling facilities and develop advocacy strategies to transform laws and policies. In 2018, SAATHII led the charge to have the Indian Supreme Court decriminalize same-sex relationships, guiding the India Psychiatric Society to submit a pivotal statement that homosexuality is not a mental disorder. And in 2021, SAATHII was instrumental in influencing a prominent judge to issue a watershed order on behalf of the Madras High Court, demanding sweeping changes to eliminate "illegal discrimination" against members of the LGBTQI+ community.

Alternative Law Forum (ALF) works to defend the rights of women, LGBTQI+ 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. In 2018, ALF's documentation of human rights violations was integral to the Supreme Court's decision to repeal



SAATHII organizes groups across India to educate LGBTQI+ people about their rights and empower them to demand fair treatment. Photo by Sasithon Pooviriyakul

Section 377 of the Indian Constitution, which criminalized consensual sex between same-sex adults. ALF has also brought together LGBTQI+ people, women and girls, Dalits, religious minorities and other groups to examine the common forms of prejudice and abuse they face, and to use existing "anti-discrimination" laws to address them.

Sampada Grameen Mahila Sanstha (SANGRAM) has organized thousands of sex workers from the 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/AIDS and access treatment, and protest violence against sex workers by police and clients. They also advocate for the decriminalization of sex work and provide sex workers with legal protection from violence. UNAIDS has credited SANGRAM with making HIV treatment more accessible in Maharashtra, and the organization now serves as a training ground for other NGOs fighting AIDS in rural India.

PROMOTING GENDER EQUALITY FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS

An important subset of our sexual health and rights portfolio is our investment in promoting gender equality and curbing child, early and forced marriage and unions (CEFMU). Around the world, 12 million girls and adolescents are married each year. A third of these young brides live in India, where 23 percent of all girls get married before their 18th birthday.

A Major Investment in Ending Child, Early and Forced Marriage and Unions

Thanks to a generous grant from The Kendeda Fund, AJWS has invested $50 million over 10 years to end child marriage and promote gender equality in India.

Although child marriage is defined by international law as any union in which either party is under the age of 18—today in India it primarily affects adolescents, not children. To better capture this reality, activists are increasingly using terms like "early marriage" and "forced marriage."

This phenomenon is one expression of the longstanding gender inequality that persists despite progress made by India's feminist movement. The practice often deprives girls of the freedom to make informed and independent choices about their lives, relationships, education, employment and sexuality.

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 India, marriage is seen as the way for women to gain financial security, housing and food. 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, girls consent to—or are forced into—arranged early marriages.

Recognizing the harmful consequences, Indian legislators have tried to stop the practice for more than 140 years—passing multiple laws, including the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act in 2006. Although the prevalence of girls marrying before 18 has declined from 47% to 27% in recent years, India still continues to have the highest number of women married before the age of 18 in the world. Also, while laws may have had this effect, they have failed to change the deeply entrenched social norms that deny women and girls the agency to make their own choices about marriage and other critical decisions about their lives and bodies.

In 2013, AJWS launched a robust initiative to develop a comprehensive and locally based strategy to address the root causes of child and early marriage and the multiple factors that exacerbate them. Supported by a $50 million investment from the Kendeda Fund, we have funded 45 local research projects and supported more than 100 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



THE FOUR "A"s:

A Comprehensive Approach to Ending Child Marriage

Our approach to ending child and early marriage combines grantmaking, research and advocacy in order to advance four key concepts in the lives of girls:

ASPIRATIONS
AGENCY
AVAILABILITY
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 through their work with girls, and the research we support complements our grantmaking by helping us better understand child and early 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 and early 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. Photo by Jonathan Torgovnik*



Girls participate in a leadership and empowerment workshop led by AJWS grantee AMIED. Photo by Deepak Sharma

and opportunities they need to pursue full lives as equal members of society. Through collectives organized by these grantees, more than 256,000 community members are now helping transform the lives of women and girls—and society at large.

AJWS GRANTEES EFFECTING CHANGE

Mahila Jan Adhikar Samiti (MJAS), an organization in Rajasthan that builds girls' leadership and skills, has curated a six-month grassroots journalism course whereby seasoned journalists train aspiring young women writers to investigate injustice and report on activism in their communities. Some of these young women have gone on to publish articles—including on AJWS's own blog—and even win awards.

Alwar Mewat Institute of Education and Development (AMIED) is helping girls stay in school so they can gain economic independence and make decisions about their own lives. In Rajasthan, where AMIED operates, girls are typically expected to drop out of school to marry. Until recently, not a single girl in AMIED's district was pursuing higher education—but today, more than 200 go to college. AMIED has achieved this by working with parents to change their hearts and minds, providing financial support when needed and leading empowerment workshops to expand girls' aspirations for what they can become.

Samvada mobilizes young people to build the lives they choose, while transforming society by challenging patriarchy, prejudice and discrimination. The organization has launched youth resource centers and a community college in the state of Karnataka, and they employ youth mentors to teach young people how to negotiate with their parents for the right to make their own decisions about their education, marriage and pursuing the career of their choice. Samvada also runs workshops for men and boys to examine their masculinity, and press for gender equality—thereby impacting their own lives and those of their families and communities.

Thoughtshop Foundation (TF)'s Residential Livelihood Training Program takes a similar approach, giving young women skills they can use to gain financial independence and make their own choices in life. In one project, TF runs a basic training course for young women to become nursing assistants. Before enrolling, most of the participants were on the brink of early marriage, but the course gave them a marketable skill that they could use to gain financial independence and negotiate with their parents for a different future. Today, young women trained by TF are now well-established in hospital careers, changing their community's views about what girls and women can achieve.

Vikalp similarly works to end child and early marriage—and they have also expanded their 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 works with them to help them assert themselves with their husbands and in-laws to pursue their choices and desires, including education or employment.

LAND, WATER AND CLIMATE JUSTICE

Our third body of work in India focuses on critical problems of land and natural resources. Sixty-five percent of India's 1.4 billion people live in rural areas where they depend on the land and natural waterways to survive. Yet today, many rural people do not 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.

Climate change is also putting the livelihoods and survival of tens of thousands of rural communities at risk. Record-high temperatures, prolonged droughts and a spate of unexpected heavy rainfall and flash floods 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.

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.

In response, 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.

AJWS GRANTEES EFFECTING CHANGE

SOPPECOM is supporting marginalized women from rural Maharashtra—including single women, women who were widowed during COVID-19 and those from particularly vulnerable tribal groups—to secure sustainable livelihoods. They offer women financial support and mentorship to set up small gardens, run seed exchanges and provide training in climate-resilient farming. Through these initiatives, SOPPECOM is ensuring that rural women can survive and thrive in an increasingly threatened environment.

Kashtakari Panchayat (KP) is a grassroots organization in Pune that supports waste-pickers—women who sort garbage and recyclables, selling scrap metal and cleaning India's streets. As these women remain one of the poorest and most stigmatized sectors of India's vast informal economy, KP is fighting for their rights and demanding greater respect for their critical work. During the COVID-19 pandemic, KP supplied over 3,500 waste pickers with sanitizer, masks and gloves; organized vaccination drives; and assisted nearly 500 women with direct financial aid. Today, they teach skill-building workshops in sustainable waste management and recycling practices and continue to advocate for the rights of the working poor.



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. Photo by Jonathan Torgovnik



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 93 grantees are:

Enabling girls and young women to stay in school and learn marketable skills in order to access opportunities beyond marriage—and to help those who are already married have greater agency and live healthier lives

Creating safe collective spaces where 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 understand their sexual health and rights and 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 the climate crisis, 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, LGBTQI+ people, sex workers and other vulnerable groups, as well as 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. Photo by Jonathan Torgovnik

BEYOND GRANTMAKING:
How Does AJWS Make a Difference?

*AJWS employs a three-part strategy to multiply our impact: We **fund** social change organizations working on key areas of human rights. We **accompany** our grantees with coaching, skill-building and resources, and bring them together to scale up their work and strengthen social movements. Meanwhile, in Washington and internationally, we amplify the voices of our grantees and **advocate** for laws and policies that promote global human rights. To accomplish this, we:*

- Support grantees for multiple years, because sustainable change takes time
- Invest in nascent organizations and help them grow bigger and stronger
- Address the root causes of human rights abuses
- Convene organizations that work on similar issues, enabling them to learn from each other and build allyship
- Help our grantees access global media platforms and foster their leadership on the international stage
- Ensure that women, Indigenous people, LGBTQI+ people, ethnic and religious minorities and other marginalized groups remain at the center of all our social change efforts
- Advocate on Capitol Hill for foreign policy that advances human rights worldwide
- Conduct research and share our findings with grantees and fellow funders, advancing the field of human rights

AJWS GRANTEES IN INDIA: A Closer Look

The social change organizations AJWS supports in India are making progress against tremendous odds. Their stories show how grassroots activists are empowering their communities to bring about change and achieve justice.



Sappho staff outside their offices. Photo by Sara Hylton

LOCATION: Kolkata, West Bengal
AJWS FUNDING HISTORY: $348,300 since 2013
WEBSITE: www.sapphokolkata.in

SAPPHO FOR EQUALITY

Creating a Community of Solidarity, Support and Pride

"You cannot experience pride individually," says Koyel Ghosh, a trustee at AJWS grantee **Sappho for Equality**. "It's a collective feeling of pride when we are able to do things for the community that has given us so much support and love."

Since 1999, Sappho for Equality has been providing community, solidarity, safety and support to lesbians, bisexual women and trans (LBT) people in Kolkata—a city where trans people and same-sex couples often face harassment, discrimination and violence. LGBTQI+ people are frequently ostracized from their families, have trouble getting leases on apartments and can even lose their job if their boss finds out that they are queer—giving them few safe spaces to be themselves.

Founded as a support group, Sappho has grown into a rights-based organization that is leading a movement to fight discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

A LIFE-CHANGING CONNECTION

For Archie, a lesbian in her early 30s, Sappho was an oasis. As a young person, she struggled to understand her sexuality. Her parents were devastated when she came out to them and pressured her constantly to marry a man of their choosing, often resorting to violence against her. A friend referred her to Sappho as a safe and supportive space where she could be herself and learn about the power she had to stop her parents' violence and control.

There, Archie met Malobika and Akanksha—Sappho's co-founders, who are also life partners. They were the first out lesbian couple Archie had met, and she immediately felt warm and comforted. "Sappho was life-changing," Archie shared. "To see an older lesbian couple living happily gave me hope."

With the support of Sappho and the community of friends she met there, Archie moved out of her parents' home and found a job as a teacher. Although she can't come out to many of her colleagues for fear of being fired, her living space is safe.

Bolstered by Sappho, Archie has also helped other LBT women figure out how to escape harmful family environments—sometimes literally, in the middle of the night—and thrive in a society that expects women to fit a traditional mold. Among younger Sappho members, Archie's courage and unwavering support has earned her the title "mother savior."

A HEALING COMMUNITY OF ADVOCATES

Sappho is also a safe haven for trans people. Neel, a trans man, received assistance from the organization as he underwent hormone therapy and two surgeries. Without support from his parents, he was able to lean on friends at Sappho during this physically and emotionally draining journey. When he had complications from his surgery, Sappho members were there to care for and comfort him.

Neel is now a role model and leader for other young people who are transitioning. He became deeply involved in Sappho's advocacy campaign for the Supreme Court to rule in favor of a "third gender" option and the ability to change one's gender on official government documents. And he volunteers at a hotline run by Sappho to help others navigate their family dynamics, update their names on government documents and more.

RISING TO THE CHALLENGES

The Sappho hotline is invaluable to the LBT community. Its volunteers have become like social workers, helping queer and trans people get jobs, find housing, develop livelihood skills, set up small businesses and more. They also call the police to intervene when an LBT person is facing violence or harassment and provide legal aid to help those in crisis.

Caller by caller, campaign by campaign, Sappho is building a more just and equitable India, so young queer people can lead lives of dignity and freedom.

In addition to funding Sappho's work, AJWS has supported its staff so they have the strength and resilience to make change. When we saw the burnout the staff was experiencing due to the risks and pressures they face, AJWS suggested an annual staff retreat. Today, this is a cornerstone of how Sappho builds resilience and wellness—and plans strategic initiatives that impact their community.



20-year-old Alpa recently completed a training to become a rickshaw driver. Photo by Suresh Bijlani

KUTCH MAHILA VIKAS SANGATHAN (Kutch Women's Development Organization)—KMVS

Challenging Gender Roles and Achieving Independence

For most of her life, 20-year-old Meriya Alpa Ramjibhai grew up doing what was expected of her: taking care of her siblings, doing household chores and keeping her opinions to herself. She was also expected, like so many young Indian women, to marry when her parents found a suitable husband. But things are changing for Alpa.

In 2023, she joined a summer-long training to become an auto-rickshaw driver—work traditionally reserved for men. This "Women Driver Project" was run by AJWS grantee **Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangathan** with an ambitious aim: to empower young women to take control of their futures and gain financial independence.

Alpa is the oldest sibling in a family of seven, from the ethnic minority Marvada community of Bhuj, in Western India. For the past six years, she'd helped her father, a construction worker, to support their family by working up to 12 hours a day in an ice cream factory. She earned about $85 a month and felt trapped by the low

wages and limited opportunities. So when she learned about KMVS's training, she was thrilled—by driving her own auto-rickshaw she could earn much more money, expand what's possible for her family—and gain more autonomy to determine her own future.

As she participated in the course, Alpa kept a journal of her journey. This is her story, in her own words:

APRIL 2023:
Before I started the training, I had a few major fears: That people would laugh at me when they saw me driving the rickshaw, and that people would taunt me for my choice of profession. I was fearful of my parents' reaction, too, but they were supportive—that helped me gather the courage to move ahead on this path... I want a better life for myself and my family. Becoming a rickshaw driver is a great opportunity—I can already see my bright future ahead.

In the first few weeks, I've already learned how to hold and release the clutch, how to apply the brake and change gears while driving. Right now I'm learning to drive on the road and manage the vehicle in traffic. Driving in reverse has been the most difficult.

As I've learned rickshaw driving, I finally feel that I have found a space just to be myself.

MAY 2023:
Somehow, driving a rickshaw has already become an integral part of my life. I find this process liberating. Earlier, I didn't even know how to ride a bicycle. Now, I'll be driving my own auto—that makes me extremely proud.

It's no matter if people are not accepting of my choice of profession yet; I'll be the first woman to drive a rickshaw in my entire community. And I feel proud to pass along such hopes to many other girls just like me—I hope they, too, will start to dream big and bold. At the beginning of this training, I was confined in a state of self-doubt. I don't fear anymore—not from social norms binding me in their rules, and not from driving. I've started laughing more. I am ready to live my life freely.

Some people in my community say: "If you drive an auto, no one will marry you!" My neighbors have ridiculed me. These comments make me anxious, but I cannot listen to them. I want this gender discrimination to end in my society and for all girls at large. Girls in my area should study and focus on their career-building. They should have a career of their choice, and agency to exercise it.

KMVS has a strong history of supporting women's rights, and AJWS encouraged them to include adolescent girls in their agenda as well. Thanks to this partnership, they are now supporting teens, adding younger women to the leadership of their collectives and fostering intergenerational dialogue between older and younger women and girls.

JULY 2023:
Now that I completed the training, I want to buy an auto as soon as possible! *(KMVS will help Alpa acquire a government loan to purchase a rickshaw.)* Working as a driver will definitely help my family. My father had a gambling habit, and my mother had to undergo a complex surgery — financially, my family came to ashes. I had to leave my education after eighth grade to work in the factory.

So what's happening right now is beyond my imagination. I used to live solely for others, but I am ready to live the life I want to live. Earlier, I wasn't able to make decisions for myself. Now, I have become more vocal. There's no fear in me regarding my marriage eligibility because of the profession I choose to pursue.

I'm going to help my family become financially stable, and then I want to resume my studies. I dream of having a smartphone of my own. I dream of wearing nice clothes—even jeans. Good days seem to be approaching my doorstep. All my dreams seem to be coming true, even if slowly.

And I want this for all the girls in my area. I hope my achievement will set an example for other girls—if I become a successful driver, many taboos in my community will shatter. Girls here may get the chance to fulfill their own dreams. And I want girls to flourish in their careers. I want them to become free like birds. And I hope professions like driving become gender-neutral.

Girls are not meant to be bound in the kitchen. Our society cages us and our dreams. So I want to say: Please, let us dream!

LOCATION: Bhuj Kutch, Gujarat
AJWS FUNDING HISTORY: $442,100 since 2014
WEBSITE: kmvs.org.in



Yakshi community members in their village. Photo by Christine Han.

LOCATION: Telangana **AJWS FUNDING HISTORY:** $155,000 since 2016 **WEBSITE:** www.yakshi.org.in

YAKSHI

Farmers confront the high costs of an unjust food system.

Since 1995, more than 400,000 farmers in India have taken their own lives.

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.

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 threaten 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, theater, 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."

JOIN US

We hope you'll support AJWS's work in India and around the world. Here's how:

FRONT COVER In West Bengal, girls supported by AJWS grantee Nishtha ride bikes together—a sign of growing autonomy in a community where their mobility is often restricted. Photo by Sara Hylton

DONATE

Your contribution helps AJWS pursue global justice worldwide. Visit **www.ajws.org/donate**, call **800.889.7146** or send your contribution to:
American Jewish World Service • 45 West 36th Street, New York, NY 10018

TAKE ACTION

Add your voice to AJWS's advocacy for human rights.
Visit **www.ajws.org/takeaction** or e-mail **getinvolved@ajws.org.**

TRAVEL

Join an AJWS Study Tour to witness the power of grassroots change firsthand.
Visit **www.ajws.org/travel**.

CONNECT

Join our social networks to become a part of our community!
/americanjewishworldservice /ajws /americanjewishworldservice
ajws.org/signup

AMERICAN JEWISH WORLD SERVICE

American Jewish World Service
45 West 36th Street
New York, NY 10018

t: 212.792.2900, 800.889.7146
f: 212.792.2930
ajws.org • ajws@ajws.org

We're proud to be an organization you can trust.

AJWS has received an "A" rating from the American Institute of Philanthropy since 2004 and has a top rating of four stars from Charity Navigator. AJWS also meets all 20 of Better Business Bureau's standards for charity accountability.