

From Tokenism to Transformation: Reframing Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in India Through a Feminist Lens

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Study Limitations

This study is shaped by certain limitations. Its qualitative and interpretive approach, while offering depth, limits generalisability across regions and sectors. Limited access to internal corporate processes also constrained the ability to fully unpack how CSR agendas are shaped from within.

Though efforts were made to foreground grassroots voices, the research's academic framing and language may miss certain vernacular nuances. Additionally, as a practitioner in the development consultancy space—particularly in monitoring and evaluation—my professional background may introduce an unconscious bias in how I interpret organisational behaviour and impact frameworks. While this insider perspective brings valuable insights, it also requires ongoing reflexivity about the lens through which this analysis is conducted.

Chapter 1: Introduction

"I was forced to leave my job after the Hyderabad rape case. My family decided it was no longer safe for me to travel alone. In losing my work, I didn't just lose my income—I lost the little agency and decision-making power I had."

- Nisha , 27 year old women, Ex employee of a CSR funded women's livelihood project

The Hyderabad rape case is one of visibilizes In 2019, a young veterinarian in Hyderabad was brutally raped and murdered by four men after her vehicle broke down on her way home. The case sparked nationwide outrage over women's safety and systemic failures in preventing gender-based violence.

The event points towards the distance between *the event and its consequences*—a crime that occurred nearly 1,000 km away triggered restrictions in an entirely different setting, reinforcing how women's lives are governed by collective notions of protection rather than personal agency.

This statement illustrates the gendered nature of risk and restriction, where women's autonomy is shaped not only by their immediate circumstances but by broader social anxieties and perceptions of safety. The fear of violence—whether real or anticipated—becomes a mechanism of control, dictating where women can go, what they can do, and how they navigate public and private spaces. Instead of addressing systemic failures—such as inadequate safety measures or deep-seated patriarchal norms—the responsibility of risk management is placed entirely on women, limiting their mobility, choices, and engagement with the world.

The conversation with nisha stayed with me and nudged me to reflect on the limitations of how impact is often measured in the projects I assess. While evaluations track participation rates, access to resources, and economic benefits, they rarely capture the differential engagement, needs, and lived experiences of women. The frameworks used to assess outcomes often assume a level playing field, overlooking the structural constraints and power dynamics that shape how women navigate and experience these interventions. If a

livelihood program increases employment but fails to account for the societal restrictions that dictate women's ability to remain in those jobs, can we truly consider it a success?

Even as these projects specifically targeted towards women's empowerment fall short in capturing gendered nuances, this realization prompted me to consider the roles of diverse stakeholders in perpetuating these gaps. In particular, it raises critical questions about how donor priorities, corporate strategies, and the involvement of NGOs and grassroots experts collectively contribute to this gendered oversight. Given CSR's central role in today's development sector, it becomes imperative to interrogate not only its inherent structures of knowledge interpretation and production but also the nature of its negotiations with other actors. Such an examination is essential to uncover how systemic gender biases are maintained—and, potentially, how they might be transformed. Hence in this study I attempt to critically examine CSR through a feminist lens—one that challenges how power operates within corporate philanthropy and development.

CSR does not function in isolation; it is embedded within hegemonic processes that shape, reflect, and reinforce existing social hierarchies. Rather than assuming CSR to be inherently progressive, I interrogate whether these initiatives are genuinely gender-transformative or merely adaptive, whether they dismantle structural inequities or subtly reproduce them. My years of field engagement and observation have shown me how implementation realities often diverge from policy intentions, making it imperative to ask: How can CSR move beyond incremental inclusion to actively shift power and agency toward women? This inquiry has driven my efforts to examine how CSR's relationship with implementing organizations can be reimagined—not just as a funding mechanism, but as a site for meaningful structural change.

Considering these complexities and structural factors that inform CSR's approach to gender issues. The study is guided by the following research questions:

- How do the power dynamics and structural factors within Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives shape their engagement with gender issues, and in what ways do these dynamics affect the ability of these initiatives to address the unique needs and challenges faced by women?

- How can Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives move beyond depoliticized, temporary solutions to better address the underlying systemic issues of gender inequality, and what role can intersectionality play in reshaping these frameworks for more transformative outcomes?

Chapter 2: The Ascendancy of CSR and Gendered Development (WIP)

Quick summary of the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) became mandatory in India in FY2014–15 following the Companies Act 2013. In that inaugural year, companies spent approximately ₹8,803 crore on CSR activities. This figure rose to ₹9,822 crore in FY2015–16, reflecting increased compliance and reporting. By FY2017–18, CSR spending had surged to approximately ₹17,100 crore, continuing to climb to about ₹26,278 crore by FY2021–22 (Ministry of Corporate Affairs, 2021). Despite this growth, CSR spending has recently plateaued. For instance, FY2020–21 and FY2021–22 saw nearly flat CSR totals (~₹26,211 crore vs. ₹26,279 crore). Factors contributing to this stagnation include project delays, unutilized budgets, and some companies not meeting the 2% spending mandate (The CSR Universe, 2022).

CSR budgets in India are heavily skewed toward certain sectors. In recent years, education and healthcare have been the top recipients. For example, in FY2017–18, education received 38% of CSR funds, while healthcare accounted for 25% (The CSR Universe, 2022). In contrast, initiatives explicitly focused on gender equality have received a minimal share. From 2014 to 2021, only 1.5% of CSR funds were allocated toward gender equality and women's empowerment (LSE South Asia Blog, 2022).

While large Indian corporations implement gender-focused CSR programs, these initiatives remain relatively small in scale. A survey of BSE-100 companies found that 72% reported some form of women's empowerment initiative. However, the total CSR budget allocated to these efforts was modest, totaling ₹251 crore across all projects in FY2017–18, with a median of only ₹1.97 crore per company (UNDP, 2019).

From a feminist and intersectional perspective, these CSR patterns are concerning. The minimal allocation to gender equality—just 1–2% of CSR budgets—suggests that mainstream CSR largely overlooks the structural roots of patriarchy. Instead, it often co-opts the rhetoric of women's empowerment without redistributing power or resources.

CSR initiatives tend to prioritize "safe" investments, such as education campaigns and health camps, rather than addressing deep-seated social norms. This focus can reinforce existing inequalities, as funds flow to visible causes or groups that fit the corporate narrative, while neglecting intersectional disadvantages faced by marginalized women, including those who are poor, Dalit, or disabled.

Furthermore, the reliance on voluntary CSR contributions places the burden of social development on corporations, potentially allowing the state to underinvest in public services for women. Companies are not accountable to citizens, and their gender programs often lack transparency and rigorous evaluation. Corporate gender-CSR in India appears largely symbolic. Increases in total CSR spending have not translated into proportional gains for women's programs. The current model reflects neoliberal logics, benefiting corporate image and general development more than it challenges gender hierarchies. A truly intersectional feminist critique would demand that CSR investments be scrutinized for whom they actually empower.

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in India has undergone a dramatic transformation since Section 135 of the Companies Act (2013) made it mandatory for firms to spend a minimum of 2 percent of net profits on social development.¹ CSR outlays leapt from approximately ₹8,500 crores in FY 2014–15 to over ₹26,200 crores in FY 2022–23, with an estimated 12–15 percent directed toward gender-focused initiatives in livelihoods, health, and education (MCA, 2023).² This surge in corporate funding has repositioned private firms as preeminent actors in India's development discourse, yet questions of power, representation, and genuine transformation remain insufficiently addressed.

Standardization, Efficiency, and Colonial Resonances

A defining trait of CSR programming is its reliance on standardized toolkits and replicable frameworks—"skill upskilling" modules, capacity-building kits, and behavior-change

communications—that prioritize efficiency over local relevance.³ Feminist scholars liken this to colonial governance strategies, which imposed uniform policies on diverse polities while ignoring indigenous knowledges and resistance traditions (Scott, 1998; Merry, 2006). For instance, many CSR-funded “women’s empowerment” projects channel resources into tailoring, handicrafts, or beauty-service training—sectors already overcrowded by gendered labour norms—without assessing regional value-chain dynamics, market access limitations, or the time-poverty caused by women’s unpaid care burdens (Kabeer, 1999). This one-size-fits-all logic not only marginalizes Dalit and Adivasi women—whose mobility and labour opportunities are circumscribed by caste figuration—but also erases the quotidian strategies these women employ to secure livelihoods.

Epistemic Erasure and Corporate Knowledge Regimes

CSR frameworks frequently position corporate donors and urban consultants as the primary architects of development knowledge, displacing both grassroots expertise and feminist epistemologies. This echoes the colonial epistemic erasure described by Spivak (1988), whereby indigenous knowledges were deemed “unscientific.” In maternal and child health interventions, for example, biomedical models dominate program design—marginalizing the experiential insights of Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs), traditional birth attendants, and women’s collectives. A project in Maharashtra reported universal distribution of micronutrient supplements but overlooked caste-driven refusals when Dalit workers prepared the meals, resulting in under-consumption that went unexplained by the official monitoring dashboard.⁴

Such technocratic approaches frame health outcomes as discrete technical problems—solvable via awareness drives and standardized training—while sidestepping structural barriers: the privatization of healthcare, deeply entrenched caste discrimination in service delivery, and the gendered labour demands that prevent timely clinic attendance (Béhague & Storeng, 2008).

Manufacturing Alterity: The Saviour Complex

CSR’s discursive power lies in its construction of beneficiaries as passive “Others” in need of corporate salvation. This saviour complex draws upon colonial binaries of the “civilized”

benefactor and the “uncivilized” beneficiary (Fanon, 1963). Annual CSR reports and marketing materials perpetuate this trope through carefully curated imagery—women in tattered saris receiving sewing machines, children in bare classrooms upgrading from mud to brick walls—evoking both pity and compliance. Freeman (2012) labels this phenomenon the “commodification of aid,” where poverty is packaged into a consumable spectacle for corporate branding. By translating complex, collective struggles into discrete “success stories,” CSR distorts development into a series of individual upliftment narratives, effectively depoliticizing demands for structural change.

Power, Privatisation, and the Limits of Inclusion

Despite rhetoric of “women’s empowerment” and “inclusive growth,” CSR remains embedded within neoliberal power structures that dictate resource flows and decision-making. Gond and Moon (2011) argue that CSR often functions as a legitimizing device for corporate interests, rather than as a vehicle for social justice. The prioritization of short-term, quantifiable outputs—number of workshops, beneficiaries reached, income increases—reinforces existing hierarchies and precludes deeper engagement with systemic inequities (Vogel, 2005).

Many CSR initiatives aimed at “women’s empowerment” from vocational training in tailoring to microfinance schemes clearly reflect a Women in Development (WID) logic, which seeks to integrate women into existing economic structures without challenging the underlying patriarchal paradigm (Moser, 1993¹; Tinker, 1989²). Under this liberal feminist model, the solution is simply to add “women’s projects” onto a development agenda that remains fundamentally unchanged. Consequently, these interventions often emphasize discrete, skill-based outcomes number of women trained, loans disbursed, or “awareness sessions” conducted while neglecting the power relations, unpaid care burdens, and caste-based exclusions that impede women’s genuine agency.

By contrast, the Gender and Development (GAD) approach calls for a paradigmatic shift: transforming the social and institutional structures that produce gender inequality, rather than merely addressing its symptoms through piecemeal projects (Chant, 2007³). GAD foregrounds the importance of redistributing resources, decision-making power, and social

norms objectives seldom embraced by CSR programming. Indeed, few corporate interventions tackle issues such as workplace sexual harassment policies, the inequitable division of care work, or the legal reform needed to secure women's land and inheritance rights, all of which are central to a GAD-informed agenda (Kabeer, 1999⁴).

This persistent alignment with WID frameworks highlights a critical tension in CSR's gender work: while corporate rhetoric proclaims a commitment to empowerment and inclusion, the underlying strategies remain technocratic and apolitical, effectively reproducing the very hierarchies they purport to dismantle. CSR operates not as a force for transformative justice, but as a tool of corporate hegemony that reproduces existing inequalities under the guise of benevolence. By crafting the "Other" as in need of saving, CSR distorts the politics of development, framing complex, collective struggles for gender equality as individual failings to be corrected through short-term, technical fixes. A truly transformative CSR model would move beyond integrating women into patriarchal systems and instead embrace the GAD imperative of structural change, co-creating interventions with grassroots movements to reshape power relations and institutional practices from the ground up.

Chapter 3: Depoliticization and Privatized Gender Solutions

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in India has increasingly positioned itself as a stakeholder in the gender and development discourse, funding programs that claim to empower women, address gender-based violence, and improve maternal health. Yet beneath this progressive veneer lies a deeper paradox: CSR interventions frequently co-opt feminist language while hollowing out its political meaning. What emerges is a technocratic vision of gender justice one that favours measurable outputs over structural transformation, individual behavioural change over collective political agency, and corporate visibility over accountability to women's movements.

This chapter argues that CSR does not merely overlook the structural foundations of gender inequality it actively depoliticizes them. Through the language of "capacity-building,"

"attitudinal change," and "value for money," CSR reduces gender to a problem of knowledge gaps or market inefficiencies, rather than a terrain of struggle marked by caste, class, labour, and social control. Programs designed to "empower" women often sidestep the very hierarchies that restrict their autonomy, particularly for those at the intersections of Dalit, Adivasi, Bahujan, and migrant identities.

In tracing how CSR turns gender equity into a depoliticized deliverable, this chapter draws on feminist critiques of neoliberal development (Kabeer, 1999; Freeman, 2012) and field insights from grassroots actors navigating CSR partnerships. It examines how corporate interventions often reframe political demands—such as reproductive rights, labour protections, or freedom from caste-based violence—into apolitical service provision. In so doing, CSR displaces the collective, movement-led roots of gender transformation with privatized solutions that are legible to corporate funders but alien to the communities they claim to serve.

Over-simplified Framings and the Erasure of Gender Politics

CSR interventions routinely frame gender not as a question of power, but as a deficit—of information, skills, or attitudes. Gendered problems are construed as "gaps" to be fixed through "capacity building" or awareness campaigns, rather than systemic injustices to be dismantled. This points to "NGO-ization of feminism," where grassroots political struggles are replaced by donor-friendly, logframe-compatible deliverables.

For instance, a CSR-funded maternal health program in rural Maharashtra attempted to address early child marriage through a village resolution mechanism (ref). Although community-based organizations advocated for a more holistic approach—including working with local police, sensitizing religious leaders, and tracking child marriage cases—the final program metric only recorded the number of villages passing the resolution. No attention was given to the depth of engagement, the resistance encountered, or the follow-up mechanisms. The structural drivers of child marriage—economic precarity, gender norms, and caste dynamics—remained untouched.

This technocratic logic neutralizes feminist praxis. As Naila Kabeer argues, empowerment cannot be reduced to the mere acquisition of resources or knowledge; it must involve the ability to make strategic life choices in contexts where this ability was previously denied (Kabeer, 1999). CSR programs often overlook this relational aspect of power, instead framing transformation as an individualized, market-oriented project.

The Commodification of Gender development work

CSR's relationship with feminist work is extractive. Grassroots women's organizations and community experts are often expected to deliver results within rigid timelines, produce neatly packaged narratives, and participate in evaluation processes that reflect donor priorities more than community realities.

Drawing from Freeman's (date) idea of "aid as a commodity," CSR programs often rely on what he calls "development branding"—where success is visually curated and made digestible for investors and corporate boards. Impact is showcased through dashboards and quarterly reports, often based on indicators that marginalize the experiential, political, and temporal depth of social change. This commodification is evident in the disproportionate focus on visibility: photo-ops with women receiving sewing machines or digital devices become symbols of "impact," erasing the ongoing labour of negotiation, advocacy, and resistance behind the scenes.

In India, this is particularly visible in CSR-funded gender programs that work with frontline workers like ASHAs or Anganwadi staff. These workers, often from marginalized caste backgrounds, are tasked with "delivering" empowerment but rarely included in program design or decision-making. Their time, trust-building efforts, and intimate community knowledge are seldom compensated as labour. Feminist scholars like Kabeer call attention to this asymmetry: while the grassroots is expected to perform for the donor gaze, the epistemic and material contributions of their work are invisibilized.

Privatization Non solutions for Gender Development

Corporate interventions often approach gender issues through the lens of privatized welfare: job-readiness, entrepreneurship, digital literacy, and financial inclusion. These framings

implicitly shift the burden of social change onto women themselves, obscuring the structural conditions that constrain their choices.

Consider a CSR-funded women's livelihood project in Gujarat that offered tailoring skills to increase income-generation. While the project reported high enrolment and completion rates, it failed to interrogate whether these women were able to access markets, negotiate wages, or challenge the stigma associated with "women's work." Furthermore, the design did not account for caste-based occupational segregation, where Dalit women were often relegated to menial forms of labour irrespective of their acquired skills.

This individualized approach to empowerment resonates with what Scott Freeman (2012) critiques as the commodification of aid: development work becomes a product, women become consumers of capacity, and transformation is reduced to a set of marketable outputs. By making gender a solvable "problem" in a service economy, CSR obscures the relational and systemic character of patriarchy.

Depoliticized Monitoring and Evaluation

CSR's evaluation frameworks prioritize measurability over meaning. Gender work is assessed through metrics like number of beneficiaries reached, percentage increase in income, or changes in "attitude scores." While these indicators offer surface-level accountability, they fail to capture the messy, contested terrain of social transformation.

The Knowledge-Attitude-Practice (KAP) framework widely used across CSR programs reduces gendered change to a linear, behaviourist model. As many feminist scholars argue, this model is poorly equipped to grasp structural shifts in power, especially when transformation is non-linear, contested, and embedded in intergenerational hierarchies.

For example, in a CSR project in Jharkhand focused on addressing malnutrition among pregnant and lactating mothers, program data showed high attendance in nutrition camps. REF? Dates? However, qualitative feedback revealed that food prepared by a lower-caste Anganwadi worker was being rejected by many upper-caste community members. The intersection of caste, food, and gender was entirely absent from the project's monitoring

reports. This signals a fundamental flaw: quantitative evaluations cannot substitute for socio-political analysis.

CSR as Gender Governance: Neutralizing Resistance

CSR functions not only as a funder but increasingly as a governance mechanism in the development space. Through funding flows, partnership conditions, and branding imperatives, it shapes the very contours of what gender justice is allowed to mean. Feminist resistance—once centred around structural critique and grassroots organizing—is increasingly redirected toward appeasing managerial expectations.

Gender work becomes fragmented, apolitical, and embedded within a logic of compliance. Programs that once aimed to build collective consciousness and challenge patriarchal structures are now bound by audit trails, donor timelines, and performance matrices. Moreover, CSR's embrace of "neutral language"—terms like "value creation," "inclusive growth," or "stakeholder engagement"—serves to dilute political contestation. It allows corporations to claim credit for change without addressing their own complicity in labour exploitation, environmental degradation, or caste-based exclusions.

The contradictions at the heart of CSR's engagement with gender are not incidental they are structural. CSR, by design, is a project of corporate legitimacy and market expansion, not social transformation. It borrows the language of feminism — empowerment, inclusion, rights — but deploys it within frameworks that are inherently incompatible with the redistribution of power. Gender justice becomes something to be branded, quantified, and delivered, rather than fought for, negotiated, and politicized.

Feminist struggles have historically been about contesting structural hierarchies not just between men and women, but across caste, class, labour, sexuality, and knowledge systems. CSR, on the other hand, flattens these struggles into palatable, manageable interventions, depoliticizing gender into a site of service delivery. The result is not a neutral failure, but an active reproduction of inequality dressed as progress. As Freeman (2012) warns, the commodification of aid transforms solidarity into service, and resistance into metrics. CSR programs do not merely fall short of feminist goals — they often work against

them by disciplining feminist labour into formats that serve corporate reputation rather than social change.

Can justice be funded by institutions that profit from the very systems feminist politics seeks to dismantle? Can feminist transformation emerge from structures that rely on invisibilized labour, extractive economies, and the erasure of caste and class? These are not rhetorical questions they are political imperatives.

To reclaim feminist praxis, we must reject the fantasy that the logics of capital and the imperatives of justice can coexist in harmony. It is not enough to "include" women in programs designed without them; we must reimagine the terms of engagement entirely. This means shifting power, redistributing resources, and listening to those whose voices are routinely silenced in boardrooms, donor meetings, and glossy CSR brochures. It means affirming that feminist transformation cannot be outsourced, branded, or commodified it must be fought for, from below.

Chapter 3: Depoliticization and Privatized Gender Solutions

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in India has become a dominant presence in the gender and development arena, underwriting projects that profess to uplift women, combat violence against them, and advance their health and well-being. Yet this façade of progressivism conceals a more troubling dynamic: CSR interventions frequently co-opt feminist language "empowerment," "inclusion," "agency" while stripping away its political substance (Kabeer, 1999¹; Freeman, 2012²). The discourse shifts from collective struggle and structural change to a technocratic model of gender justice that prizes short-term, measurable outputs over shifts in power, individual behaviour change over collective agency, and corporate visibility over accountability to grassroots women's movements.

At the core of this depoliticization is CSR's reduction of gender inequality to a series of "gaps" in knowledge, skills, or market access, to be "fixed" by capacity-building workshops, attitudinal-change sessions, or microcredit schemes. Such framings effectively erase the

complex matrices of caste, class, labour exploitation, and patriarchal norms that shape women's lives especially Dalit, Adivasi, Bahujan, and migrant women, whose intersecting marginalizations are rarely addressed. Rather than recognizing structural injustice as the root of gendered oppression, CSR reframes political demands reproductive rights, labour protections, freedom from caste-based violence into apolitical service-delivery package of services that align with corporate brand metrics but leave power relations intact.

Over-Simplified Framings and the “NGO-ization” of Feminism

One of the most important and universal features of CSR programmes is its reliance on standardized, replicable toolkits: skill-training modules, “gender sensitization” modules, and logframe-compatible “behaviour-change” campaigns. Cornwall, Harrison, and Whitehead (2007³) term this the “NGO-ization of feminism,” whereby grassroots political struggles are distilled into donor-friendly deliverables. As shared by a project manager in rural Maharashtra, a CSR-funded maternal-health project sought to reduce child marriage by facilitating village resolutions. Local NGOs had urged a comprehensive strategy engaging police, religious leaders, and women's collectives but corporate funders measured only the number of resolutions passed. There was no follow-up on resistance, legal referrals, or tangible declines in child marriage rates. The economic precarity, gender norms, and caste hierarchies driving early marriage remained unaddressed.

"Often, CSR interventions tend to oversimplify complex community issues by reducing them into neat boxes within a Logical Framework Approach (LFA). This not only restricts the scope of our work but also limits our ability to respond meaningfully to what the community actually needs. For instance, in a gender sensitization programme addressing domestic violence across five villages, the budget was allocated strictly for awareness sessions and capacity building. However, we know from ground experience that alcoholism is a major driver of domestic violence in the area. Despite this, our hands were tied—we couldn't intervene effectively because the LFA didn't account for it. The micro-level planning left no room for contextual responsiveness."

— NGO worker from rural Maharashtra

This technocratic logic neutralizes feminist praxis. As Naila Kabeer (1999¹) argues, true empowerment involves the capacity to make strategic life choices within contexts where such capacities were historically denied. CSR's individualistic, market-oriented solutions obscure the relational and political dimensions of power that determine whether women can act on their choices.

The Commodification of Feminist Labour

CSR's relationship with feminist work is often extractive, treating activism and community expertise as cost centres rather than collaborative partners. Freeman's (2012²) concept of "aid as a commodity" captures how CSR programmes rely on development branding drafting visually appealing dashboards and quarterly impact reports for corporate boards. Photo-ops of women receiving sewing machines or smartphones transform empowerment into a consumable spectacle, erasing the everyday labour of negotiation, solidarity-building, and resistance that underpins real change.

In India, frontline workers ASHAs, Anganwadi staff, local women's collectives are routinely tasked with implementing CSR initiatives but excluded from design and decision-making. Their time, trust-building efforts, and intimate knowledge of community dynamics are subsumed under corporate accountability frameworks. As Desalvo, Dossa, and Modungwa (2023⁴) observe, traditional Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) practices in philanthropy legitimize patriarchal, imperialistic, and colonial forms of knowledge, privileging funder-defined indicators and logframes while excluding alternative epistemologies.

"So often, when we enter villages to implement programmes—whether related to health, education, or livelihoods—the burden disproportionately falls on women, particularly frontline workers like Anganwadi and ASHA workers. These women are already stretched thin, carrying the weight of last-mile service delivery for the state, and then again for overlapping CSR initiatives. Some regions are so saturated with development projects that they're overexposed, leaving little breathing room for those on the ground. There have been instances when we've had to reschedule our workshops simply to give them a break. It feels deeply uncomfortable to

ask for their support, knowing we are adding yet another layer to their already overloaded responsibilities."

— Field practitioner working across multiple development programmes

Privatized “Solutions” and the Illusion of Market-Centric Empowerment

The default CSR approach to gender issues is privatized welfare: job-readiness programmes, entrepreneurship modules, digital literacy courses, and microfinance schemes. This market-centric logic shifts responsibility for social change onto women themselves (Chant, 2007⁵). A tailoring-skills project in Gujarat boasted high enrolment and course completion but offered no market linkages or strategies to combat caste-based discrimination. Dalit women, despite mastering new competencies, remained confined to poorly paid, precarious work—an outcome unexamined by program metrics.

"We completed the tailoring course and received certificates, but there was no real support after that. Shops won't hire us because of our caste, and starting something of our own needs capital and connections we don't have. The training gave us skills, but not dignity or income."

— Tailoring programme graduate, Gujarat

By positioning empowerment as a product to be consumed, CSR aligns with the commodification critique: women become consumers of capacity, and transformation is reduced to a series of marketable outputs rather than a collective political project (Freeman, 2012²).

Depoliticized MEL: Measuring Outputs, Silencing Context

CSR's MEL frameworks prioritise quantifiable deliverables—number of beneficiaries reached, percentage income increases, shifts in “attitude scores”—over qualitative insights into power dynamics and resistance. The ubiquitous Knowledge-Attitude-Practice (KAP) model treats gendered change as a linear behaviour-change phenomenon, ill-suited to capture the contested, non-linear processes at the heart of feminist transformation (Bowman & Sweetman, 2014⁶).

Desalvo et al. (2023⁴) document three Global South feminist funds—FRIDA The Young Feminist Fund, Purposeful, and Phenomenal that are actively disrupting oppressive MEL structures. These organisations employ participatory action research, youth-led co-evaluation, and story-based sense-making to challenge funder-defined log frames. Stories, they argue, have intrinsic value for narrators and can shift discourses of neocolonialism, transforming international development practices.

A nutrition campaign in Jharkhand exemplifies the limits of quantitative reporting: 90 percent attendance at feeding camps was heralded as success, yet beneficiaries only affirmed on paper that they ate the meals. Qualitative interviews revealed caste-based refusals of food prepared by lower-caste workers a socio-political dynamic invisible in the dashboard. Such examples underscore the need for feminist MEL that values context-rich, participatory methods over reductive indicators.

"When we're tasked with forming SHGs in villages, we often have to create caste-based groups just to ensure the project activities are completed smoothly. Inclusion takes time—it can't be rushed. If we had longer-term project commitments, we could invest more consistently in building trust and encouraging integration across caste lines. That kind of work feels far more meaningful and impactful."

— Field worker involved in SHG formation, Madhya Pradesh

CSR as Gender Governance: Enabling Managerial Compliance

Beyond financing, CSR shapes the very boundaries of acceptable gender justice through funding conditions, reporting requirements, and branding imperatives. Gond and Moon (2011⁷) describe this as CSR's role in legitimising corporate agendas rather than social justice. Srilatha Batliwala (2010⁸) decries the "NGO-ization" of feminist movements, where collective struggles are reconfigured into audit trails and compliance checklists.

Corporate adoption of "neutral" jargon "inclusive growth," "stakeholder engagement," "value creation" further depoliticises program narratives, allowing companies to claim credit for change without addressing their own responsibilities for labour exploitation, environmental harm, or caste-based exclusion.

The contradictions driving CSR's gender engagement are not incidental but systemic. CSR an instrument of corporate legitimacy and market expansion borrows feminist rhetoric to brand itself progressive, even as it operates within frameworks antithetical to redistributing power. As Freeman (2012²) warns, the commodification of aid transforms solidarity into service and resistance into metrics. CSR programmes therefore do more than underperform they actively work against feminist goals by channeling feminist labour into formats that bolster corporate reputation rather than social transformation.

To reclaim feminist praxis, we must reject the fantasy that capital's imperatives and justice's demands can coexist unchanged. CSR must be reimagined not as a technocratic dispenser of services but as a genuine partner in structural transformation. This requires:

1. Redistributing Power: Co-creating interventions with grassroots movements and local experts, sharing decision-making authority rather than dictating terms from corporate boardrooms.
2. Valuing Non-Financial Assets: Recognizing trust, social capital, indigenous knowledge, and storytelling as vital catalysts for change not secondary to monetary investments.
3. Adopting Feminist MEL: Embracing participatory, context-sensitive evaluation methods that capture the relational and contested nature of gender justice (Desalvo et al., 2023⁴).
4. Pursuing Structural Reforms: Going beyond WID-style integration projects to embrace GAD-informed strategies that challenge patriarchal, casteist, and neoliberal institutions (Molyneux, 1991⁹; Chant, 2007⁵).

Feminist transformation cannot be outsourced, branded, or commodified it must be mobilized for, from below, through solidarity, collective struggle, and an unwavering commitment to shifting power. CSR if conducted in a inclusive and meaningful manner has the potential to become a vehicle for genuine social justice.

Chapter 4: The Missing Layers: How CSR Overlooks Intersectional Inequities

Despite its professed commitments to social responsibility and inclusion, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in India continues to function within frameworks that obscure more than they reveal. Rather than engaging with the overlapping axes of caste, class, gender, religion, and migration that deeply shape marginalization, CSR routinely collapses these differences into homogenized categories of ‘the poor,’ ‘women beneficiaries’ thereby erasing the layered realities of oppression (Crenshaw, 1991¹; Kabeer, 1999²). This chapter unpacks two interrelated feminist critiques: first, the absence of intersectional thinking in the design and execution of CSR programs; and second, the politics of knowledge production and resource allocation that uphold existing power asymmetries. In doing so, it demonstrates how CSR not only neglects the transformative justice it claims to pursue but actively risks reinforcing the very hierarchies it purports to dismantle.

Intersectionality and the Politics of Gender Transformation

Universalizing ‘Women’ and Flattening Difference

CSR initiatives frequently adopt a universalist, decontextualized understanding of “women,” treating them as a homogenous group whose needs can be addressed through standardized interventions livelihood training modules, financial literacy workshops, or nutrition drives. This depoliticized approach obscures the diverse, intersecting determinants of women’s marginalization. As Kabeer (1999) emphasizes, empowerment must be understood not merely as resource access but as the ability to make strategic life choices within unequal structures; collapsing women into a single category undermines recognition of the multiple constraints like caste prejudice, religious discrimination, class exploitation that govern women’s experiences.

Consider, for instance, maternal and child health (MNCH) programs under CSR. While many such programs report high coverage of micronutrient distribution and regular antenatal check-ups, they often ignore caste-based exclusions. In one CSR-backed MNCH initiative in rural Maharashtra, community members refused to consume supplementary nutrition

prepared by Anganwadi workers from lower castes, fundamentally undermining program efficacy. Yet the project's reports lauded "95% meal coverage," without acknowledging the refusal rates or the underlying caste animosities that shaped them.

This example vividly illustrates how CSR's reliance on quantitative metrics like number of meals distributed, attendance figures at health camps hides the qualitative dynamics of power that determine whether such interventions succeed or fail. The program's universalist lens could not apprehend the caste hierarchies that precluded certain women from benefiting, nor did it allocate space or resources to address these social drivers.

"In my experience of working with women, even something as seemingly straightforward as a health awareness programme requires careful planning that accounts for the diverse realities of women's lives. For example, migrant women who return to the village towards the end of the project often miss the opportunity to engage. These nuances matter and should be addressed through context-specific assessments using tools like Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA)."

— *Community health programme facilitator, Karnataka*

Caste, Class, Religion, and Migratory Status as Sites of Exclusion

CSR's flattened categories are particularly damaging for groups at the intersections of multiple marginalizations. Dalit and Adivasi women, for example, face systemic discrimination in both public and private spheres. A CSR-funded tailoring-skills project in Gujarat reported impressive enrolment and course completion rates among women trainees. However, post-training, Dalit graduates found themselves blocked from market participation: local retailers refused to stock their products, and lack of access to financial services limited their ability to further engage and create livelihood opportunities for themselves.

Similarly, CSR-sponsored skill-building programs targeting Muslim women in urban peripheries celebrate numerical targets "500 women trained in digital literacy," "300 women placed in jobs" yet fail to interrogate how religious stigma and police profiling limit these women's mobility and employment security (Deshmukh, 2018³). The resulting "success" of market insertion for a few does not translate into systemic change for the many.

Migrant women, too, are frequently rendered invisible by CSR's universalist frameworks. In industrial zones around Bengaluru, CSR-funded health camps distribute antenatal supplements only to those with Aadhaar-linked health cards. Migrant mothers, lacking local documentation and language fluency, cannot register, effectively excluding them from ostensibly universal services.

"As a construction worker, I migrate to different places throughout the year, and survival becomes especially difficult when we travel with our families. But I must say, in many places, I've been able to seek help from local social organizations—at the very least, they've supported me in accessing my social security benefits."

— Migrant construction worker, shared during community discussion

These exclusionary practices highlight the need for an intersectional lens—one that recognizes how caste, class, religion, and migration status intersect to shape women's access to CSR initiatives. Without such analysis, CSR's universalist interventions risk perpetuating horizontal inequalities and reinforcing existing social hierarchies.

The Technocratic Turn and Behaviour-Change Campaigns

The predominance of technocratic, behaviour-change communication (BCC) approaches in CSR further flattens complex social relations into administrable "projects." BCC modules standardized scripts on nutrition, hygiene, or gender norms are deployed across heterogeneous contexts, often without adaptation to local languages, belief systems, or power structures. As Cornwall et al. (2007⁴) caution, treating gender transformation as a technical problem to be "fixed" through workshops and flipcharts depoliticizes the struggle, reducing it to individual behaviour rather than collective action.

In one CSR-sponsored campaign against gender-based violence, multiple villages hosted "attitude-change" sessions on "respect for women." Attendance was high, but follow-up data revealed no significant decrease in domestic violence incidents. This discrepancy stemmed from the program's unwillingness to confront caste-patriarchy within

village governance structures or to collaborate with local women's collectives pushing for police accountability and legal reform.

A truly intersectional, feminist approach would recognize that gendered violence cannot be eradicated solely by tweaking individual attitudes; it requires systemic interventions police training, community paralegals, economic support for survivors—and the redistribution of power away from patriarchal arbiters.

Decentring CSR: Centring Feminist and Community Knowledge

The processes through which CSR defines, produces, and legitimizes knowledge are deeply political: they shape whose voices are heard, whose realities are valued, and whose expertise informs policy and funding decisions (Spivak, 1988⁵). In CSR, this manifests through language supremacy, structural colonialism, and skewed accountability frameworks, all of which marginalize feminist and grassroots knowledges.

Language Supremacy and Epistemic Gatekeeping

CSR communication in India is dominated by English and corporate jargon “impact metrics,” “value creation,” “stakeholder engagement” which effectively serve as gatekeeping tools. Reports, proposals, and evaluations adhere to a consultancy-driven lexicon that sidelines vernacular expressions of gendered experience. Many tribal and rural communities archive their herstories through oral narratives, folk songs, and visual art. These rich epistemologies offerings of nuanced, context-specific knowledges are seldom accommodated in CSR documentation.

Desalvo, Dossa, and Modungwa (2023⁶) highlight how feminist funds in the Global South are rewriting MEL practices to center storytelling, poetry, and youth-led evaluations that value emotional, epistemic, and temporal dimensions of change. CSR, by contrast, prioritizes written reports and numeric indicators, excluding alternative registers of knowledge.

Integrating visual documentation, translated narratives, and participatory video methods already used by some feminist collectives would help begin to challenge and work

towards dismantle the hegemony in a collaborative manner of English-only reporting and open space for diverse epistemologies in CSR practice.

Structural Colonialism in CSR Interventions

CSR's standardization of development interventions mirrors colonial governance, imposing one-size-fits-all templates across India's heterogeneous socio-cultural landscapes (Scott, 1998⁷; Merry, 2006⁸). Capacity-building workshops, sensitization sessions, and "best practice" toolkits are deployed with minimal contextual adaptation, ignoring critical factors such as caste hierarchies, religious norms, and local power configurations and even something as relevant an important as translation in the local language with participation of the primary stakeholders.

For example, a corporate-led women's entrepreneurship program introduced digital marketing modules across urban, peri-urban, and rural sites without assessing local market infrastructures, internet connectivity, or prevailing gender norms around women's mobility. As a result, rural women struggled to implement digital strategies, yet CSR reports touted uniform "successful adoption" rates.

A decolonial reimagining of CSR would preclude external imposition of generic templates, instead of encouraging co-designed interventions that build on community-defined needs and local knowledges practices already evident in some participatory action research initiatives (Tuck & Yang, 2012⁹).

Shifting Accountability: From Upward Metrics to Participatory Ownership

Under current CSR paradigms, accountability flows primarily upward toward shareholders, corporate boards, and regulatory bodies measured through polished annual reports and standardized success metrics. This model engenders a trust deficit with grassroots organisations, which absorb implementation burdens without commensurate decision-making power.

Desalvo et al. (2023⁶) call for a radical accountability shift: from transactional funding relationships to genuine partnerships that honor the time, expertise, and opportunity costs borne by community actors. Such partnerships would embed participatory governance

structures steering committees with local leaders, community audits, and iterative feedback loops that distribute power more equitably. Practically, this entails reducing bureaucratic documentation, embracing longer project timeframes, and investing donor time in relationship-building measures that recalibrate power dynamics and foster the conditions necessary for transformative change.

"At times it's very frustrating, like there have been instances where we had to cancel trainings that took months of groundwork to organize, just because the donor didn't approve of the banner design and wanted the branding changed. This kind of last-minute interference doesn't just shrink our already tight implementation timelines but it also puts us in an awkward spot with state officials, whose permissions and schedules we've worked hard to secure. These challenges are entirely avoidable if NGO partners are treated as equal collaborators and given a genuine say in decision-making."

— Programme officer managing donor relations, Maharashtra

Intersections of Power, Knowledge, and Gender Discourse

The convergence of language supremacy, structural colonialism, and upward accountability frames CSR's gender discourse in ways that perpetuate existing power imbalances rather than dismantle them. Corporate narratives typically reduce women's empowerment to technical trainings or microcredit access, sidestepping how caste-based discrimination, patriarchal norms, and labour inequities intersect to circumscribe women's autonomy (Mohanty, 1988¹⁰; Crenshaw, 1991¹).

A CSR-funded microfinance scheme might celebrate a 20 percent increase in women's bank account ownership, yet the same program refuses to address predatory repayment demands by local moneylenders—actors outside the formal financial system who often target Dalit and Adivasi borrowers at higher interest rates. Such omissions underscore the insufficiency of outcome metrics that fail to grapple with local power webs.

Intersectionality is not a decorative lens to be appended to gender programming. It is a fundamental orientation reshaping how we define problems, whose knowledge we

legitimize, and how we pursue justice (Crenshaw, 1991¹; Collins, 2000¹¹). Without this, CSR risks replicating the exclusions it purports to eradicate.

Decentring CSR requires a feminist reorientation, redistributing accountability establishing participatory governance structures that legitimize community expertise and lived experience. Only through such holistic transformation can CSR transcend its narrow technocratic mandate and create meaningful contribution in the gender transformation discourse.

Chapter 5: Reimagining CSR through a Feminist and Inclusive Lens

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in India has traditionally emphasized quantifiable outputs—such as the number of workshops conducted or individuals trained—often at the expense of addressing deeper structural inequalities. This approach overlooks the intangible yet crucial aspects of social change, including trust-building, community solidarity, and the empowerment of marginalized groups. Drawing inspiration from the #ShiftThePower manifesto, which asserts that "money is not the only driver of change", and feminist critiques of conventional Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) frameworks, this chapter advocates for a reimagined CSR paradigm. This new approach centres on relational and distributive justice, deep community participation, and long-term structural transformation. (shiftthepowersummit.org)

Expanding the Conception of Value: Beyond Financial Metrics

The prevailing MEL and accountability systems in CSR prioritize short-term, easily measurable outcomes, often sidelining the essential work of building trust and fostering collective agency. This focus can inadvertently perpetuate patriarchal and colonial power dynamics by valuing funder-defined indicators over grassroots knowledge. (youngfeministfund.org)

To address this imbalance, CSR must broaden its understanding of value to include both redistribution and recognition, as articulated by Nancy Fraser. Redistribution involves allocating material resources to rectify historical exclusions, while recognition entails

validating diverse knowledges and cultural practices . Integrating these dimensions can move CSR from technocratic checklists toward holistic empowerment.([Ethical Politics](#))

Amartya Sen's capabilities approach further emphasizes the importance of what individuals are able to do and be with resources, rather than merely the resources themselves . This perspective calls for complexity-aware evaluation frameworks that combine quantitative and qualitative methods to capture emergent outcomes and power shifts.

Institutionalizing Deep Participation: From Consultation to Co-Ownership

True participation in CSR goes beyond token consultation; it requires co-design and co-decision-making. Sherry Arnstein's "Ladder of Participation" illustrates that most CSR initiatives occupy lower rungs, offering limited influence to communities . To ascend this ladder, CSR must embed structures like community steering committees with genuine decision-making power and transparent financial oversight.

Joanna Gaventa's "power cube" framework highlights the need for CSR partnerships to consciously open spaces for marginalized women to articulate their demands and shape solutions . This involves supporting grassroots collectives in organizing protests, conducting budget analyses, and engaging in legal advocacy , varied forms of political action that transcend narrow service delivery models.

Reimagining Funding Models: Embracing Flexibility and Long-Term Support

Structural transformation demands long-term, flexible funding that tolerates risk, failure, and adaptation. Feminist funds like FRIDA's Young Feminist Fund exemplify this by providing multi-year core support to community-led organizing, rather than time-bound project grants . Such patient philanthropy allows movements to build organizational capacity and sustain advocacy campaigns that may take years to bear fruit.(youngfeministfund.org) In contrast, CSR's typical adherence to annual budget cycles and predefined deliverables can hinder the unpredictable rhythms of social change. Embracing funding models that prioritize flexibility and long-term commitment is crucial for fostering genuine empowerment.

Integrating Policy Advocacy: Addressing Structural Inequities

CSR must recognize that technical trainings and awareness drives are insufficient if legal frameworks and public institutions continue to perpetuate discrimination. Corporations can leverage their influence to support women's legal empowerment by funding paralegal networks, backing land-rights litigation, and advocating for robust sexual harassment regulations. This structural lens acknowledges that empowerment involves dismantling discriminatory laws and practices as much as building individual skills.

Redefining CSR's Role: From Benefactor to Collaborator

Underpinning these shifts is a fundamental recalibration of CSR's role within the development ecosystem from a top-down benefactor to a genuine collaborator and solidarity actor. Collaboration entails joint agenda-setting processes where communities define their own indicators of success, transparent resource governance, and capacity co-creation involving both corporate staff and grassroots actors. CSR teams need to be on the ground—listening, adapting, and demonstrating humility and reflections rather than delivering pre-packaged solutions.

Institutional accountability is also essential. CSR programs should establish independent oversight bodies comprising community representatives, women's rights experts, and philanthropic scholars to review progress, surface power imbalances, and recommend course corrections. These bodies must have the authority to pause or redirect funding when projects deviate from local priorities or exacerbate inequalities.

Toward Authentic, Enduring Gender Justice

Ultimately, success in CSR should not be measured by the number of women trained or workshops held, but by the extent to which women and communities gain freedom, power, and collective agency. Key indicators might include women's participation in local governance, changes in harmful social norms, policy reforms influenced by grassroots advocacy, and the resilience of women's collectives beyond corporate funding cycles.

Gender-transformative work is not a philanthropic add-on to business operations; it is a profound political project that requires confronting CSR's own complicities in reinforcing power hierarchies. By embracing relational and distributive justice, participatory governance, long-term support, policy advocacy, and institutional accountability, CSR can become a catalyst for structural change, not just a dispenser of technical solutions.(youngfeministfund.org)

Chapter 6: Recommendations for CSR – Towards a Responsive and Inclusive Framework

This concluding chapter offers a set of forward-looking recommendations aimed at transforming the CSR ecosystem in India. Rooted in feminist theory, decolonial thought, and grassroots praxis, these recommendations move beyond surface-level fixes to propose a radical reorientation of how corporate social responsibility operates. They challenge the technocratic and instrumental logics that currently dominate CSR approaches and instead call for responsive, inclusive, and trust-based models of development that are grounded in local knowledge, lived realities, and transformative politics. Across the previous chapters, we have unpacked how CSR often reproduces the same structural inequities it claims to challenge through rigid metrics, top-down accountability regimes, and the depoliticization of gender justice. This chapter now turns to the task of reimagining CSR as a partner in long-term, systemic change where development is not seen as a charitable act, but as a collaborative, aware and political process driven by the ethos of equality

Redefining Success: Moving Beyond Quantitative Metrics

One of the central challenges or limitation of mainstream CSR practice lies in its obsession with output-based metrics—school enrolment numbers, toilets constructed, workshops delivered—at the cost of deeper engagement with long-term change. Gender-transformative work, as the earlier chapters showed, is rarely linear or quantifiable in conventional terms. A girl choosing not to drop out of school, a woman deciding to contest for panchayat elections, or a community negotiating better wages with local employers—these are outcomes that are deeply relational, often invisible in corporate logframes.

Recommendations:

- Develop multi-dimensional evaluation frameworks that combine quantitative indicators with narrative, participatory, and longitudinal methods. These should include tools such as outcome mapping, most significant change (MSC) stories, and participatory video documentation.
- Integrate feminist evaluation principles, which place value on process, empowerment, and voice rather than efficiency alone.
- Fund baseline studies and impact assessments that are designed and led by community-based organizations and researchers, ensuring epistemic justice in what gets measured and how.

Actionable Example: CSR funders could pilot a model of “slow evaluation” where community-defined indicators (e.g., increase in mobility for adolescent girls, reduction in domestic violence stigma) are tracked over three to five years in collaboration with local women’s collectives.

Strengthening Trust and Reciprocity in Grassroots Partnerships

As shown in earlier sections, many CSR relationships with grassroots NGOs are transactional and extractive—characterized by one-sided reporting demands, short-term grants, and little space for co-creation. This dynamic reinforces power asymmetries and delegitimizes community expertise.

Recommendations:

- Replace top-down reporting templates with mutual accountability charters, co-developed with grassroots partners.
- Create platforms where grassroots organizations can provide anonymous feedback to CSR donors about the funding process, as a means of closing the feedback loop.
- Embed trust-building mechanisms into the funding cycle—e.g., orientation retreats, joint field visits, storytelling circles.

Actionable Example: CSR departments could institutionalize “relational audits” every

two years to review not just financial compliance but also relational health with partner organizations—covering trust, communication, mutual learning, and voice.

Centring Intersectional and Contextual Realities in Program Design

Gender is not a standalone category. As earlier chapters discussed, gender inequality is compounded by caste, religion, location, disability, and class. Yet, CSR programs tend to treat women as a homogenous group, often designing “women’s empowerment” initiatives that ignore the structural violence faced by Dalit, Adivasi, Muslim, or migrant women.

Recommendations:

- Make intersectionality a non-negotiable principle in CSR program design. This includes disaggregated data collection, consultation with marginalized sub-groups, and context-specific program tailoring.
- Fund programs led by organizations with lived expertise—e.g., collectives of domestic workers, sex workers, LGBTQIA+ persons, and disability rights groups.
- Avoid “add women and stir” models by ensuring interventions do not reinforce existing patriarchies—such as unpaid care burdens or tokenistic representation.

Actionable Example: Instead of generic women’s skilling programs, fund initiatives co-designed with informal sector unions where women workers shape training curricula and negotiate workplace rights, not just employability.

Investing in Knowledge Production from the Margins

As highlighted in our critique of CSR’s knowledge hierarchies, grassroots organizations are often treated as implementers rather than knowledge producers. Their insights, drawn from lived experience, rarely inform strategic planning or policy discourse.

Recommendations:

- Allocate specific budgets for research, storytelling, and documentation by partner NGOs as part of core project costs.

- Establish feminist learning labs or communities of practice where organizations share learnings, reflect on failures, and co-create new models.
- Support translation and dissemination of grassroots knowledge into policy spaces—through media partnerships, fellowships, or cross-sector dialogues.
Actionable Example: Support a coalition of rural women farmers to publish an annual “People’s Report on Gender and Climate,” which documents community-led climate resilience practices, challenges, and policy asks.

Encouraging Holistic and Flexible Funding Practices

The “Bridging the Gap” report (Venkatachalam et al., 2021) underscores that only 10–20% of Indian NGOs report receiving adequate funding to cover core costs. This creates a starvation cycle where NGOs are forced to underreport costs, leading to burnout, high attrition, and program discontinuity.

Recommendations:

- Shift from project-based funding to ecosystem-based support covering salaries, infrastructure, mental health, and movement-building.
- Provide multi-year, unrestricted grants that allow NGOs to be agile and context-responsive.
- Recognize and compensate “hidden labour” in program implementation—such as emotional labour, community mobilization, and translation.
Actionable Example: Design a pooled CSR fund focused on feminist infrastructure—e.g., safe spaces, digital security, leadership pipelines, legal support—which can be accessed flexibly by grassroots collectives.

Re-politicizing CSR and Supporting Structural Change

As we’ve argued throughout this study, CSR’s reluctance to engage with the political roots of inequality undermines its transformative potential. Issues like land rights, labor laws, domestic violence, or caste-based exclusion are treated as apolitical or “too sensitive.” This erasure limits CSR’s ability to support genuine change.

Recommendations:

- Support advocacy efforts that challenge exclusionary policies and amplify marginalized voices e.g., campaigns against child marriage or caste discrimination.
- Join collective platforms with civil society actors to advocate for more enabling legal frameworks for NGOs, especially in the face of shrinking civic space.
- Fund work that strengthens local governance, accountability, and women's participation in decision-making structures.
Actionable Example: Back a feminist legal aid network that supports survivors of gender-based violence in rural and tribal areas, and simultaneously advocates for more survivor-centric policy reforms.

CSR as a Partner in Justice, Not a Patron of Welfare: The future of CSR lies not in scaling what works but in transforming how we define success, who holds knowledge, and what power dynamics are maintained or disrupted in the name of development. As the Shift the Power manifesto urges, we must expand our horizon beyond money as the central driver of change and instead value trust, time, and local relationships as vital currencies.

These recommendations are not just strategic—they are ethical imperatives. They call on CSR to move from compliance to conscience, from optics to solidarity, and from temporary fixes to lasting transformation.

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