

IC Bangladesh Case Study 4

Promoting the Rights and Leadership of Dalit Women in Bangladesh

Description of the practice:

What was/is the background to the practice? Describe any key events or actions that led to it?

Dalit women in Bangladesh face multiple forms of discrimination and violence. Patriarchal social systems pervade and all types of freedoms are extremely limited. Many girls marry young and women are often unable to leave their homes without being accompanied. Girls' education is not prioritised and many drop out of school at a young age. The dowry system means that girl children are often viewed as a burden. Women usually have no financial independence and little choice about who they marry. Among some Dalit communities a widow is not allowed to get married again. In urban areas the few Dalit women that are allowed to work face regular abuse from both employers and the public. The standard government maternity leave is 4 months but Dalit women often are denied leave or only receive 1 or 2 months. In a country where 84% of its 137 million people live on less than \$2 a day, Dalit women, excluded both by caste and gender, are the poorest of the poor.

In the face of this entrenched oppression and extreme poverty a small but powerful group of Dalit women have found the courage and strength to organise their communities and to demand change.

What was/is the title/name of the practice?

Promoting the Rights and Leadership of Dalit Women in Bangladesh

What was/is the aim/purpose of the practice?

- To encourage and support existing Dalit women leaders
- To encourage Dalit women to organise and to give them the confidence and skills to advocate for change.
- To raise awareness about the issues facing Dalit women and to support Dalit women to improve their lives.

What was/is the target group(s)?

Dalit women in Bangladesh – specifically existing and potential leaders.

Who were/are the partners involved (e.g. community based, NGO-based, government institutions, and other related stakeholders)?

- Community based Dalit women's organisations.
- Dalit Women's Forum.
- Support from BDERM and Nagorik Uddyog (NGO)

What was/is the duration of practice?

Ongoing (last 5 years)

Legal and institutional frameworks:

This case has drawn on international conventions such as CEDAW and nationally agreed commitments in relation to women's rights and gender equality.

Implementation of the practice:

Strategies have all aimed to strengthen the capacity and resources of Dalit women and the organisations that represent them. Interventions have been relatively small scale and although effective have not involved large numbers. Activities have included:

- Formation of **Dalit Women's Forum in Dhaka in 2006** with the assistance of Bangladesh Dalit Human Rights, Nagorik Uddyog and One World Action (funder). The Forum's aims are:
 - To raise awareness about issues facing Dalit women.
 - To create equal opportunities for Dalit women in education, health and permanent housing.
 - To arrange trainings and workshops in order to improve the leadership skills and employment opportunities of Dalit women.
 - To carry out research on Dalit women and train Dalit women about their rights
 - To create a quota system in the government and private educational institutions to facilitate Dalit women's education.
 - To work towards creating national policies in favour of the women of Dalit and excluded communities.
 - To develop the Dalit Women's Forum as a stronger organisation in establishing rights of Dalit women.

The Dalit Women's Forum are a key member of BDERM and are involved in all of their campaigning and advocacy activities – the forum encourage Dalit women to become involved in the movement and raise specific issues in relation to Dalit women. For example in July 2009 a human chain was held in protest against the sexual harassment of a Dalit girl. 80 activists demanded the right of women's security in the workplace. BDERM organise events on International Women's Day.

The Forum now has several hundred members across several Dalit colonies in Dhaka. 300 Dalit women have been trained in skill development and in running small scale business' (candle making, sewing, and embroidery) to give them financial independence and reduce their poverty. Without economic independence it is very difficult for women to have a role in decisions even within their families. *To eliminate discrimination based on work and descent, it is important to give women alternative jobs to sweeping/cleaning.*

The Dalit Women's Forum also provides human rights and literacy training, legal and health advice, support with family mediation and are setting up simple financial services so women can access credit, save or take out insurance.

Regular group meetings are held in Dalit colonies to discuss issues relating to health, family planning, malnutrition, education, women's rights etc. Participating in these meetings have made women more aware of their rights and given them confidence.

- **Formation of National Dalit Women's Federation in November 2010 in Dhaka.** The federation brought together small community organisations working for the rights of Dalit women from 12 different districts: *Dalit Women Forum, Avijan, Institute of Social Advancement, Dalit Nari Parishad, Mothers Club Forum, Auntoj Nari Parishad, Harijon Nari Kollyan, Samitee, Shreemongol Upazila Indigenous Development Samitee, Young Monipuri Association, Ashru Mochon Dustho Mohila O Shishu and Unnyon Sonstha.*
- **Developing the leadership of Dalit Women** through various trainings and exposure visits. For example a two day workshop in March 2011 trained 28 representatives from 11 Dalit women's organisations. The participants developed an action plan to develop Dalit women's leadership, and to facilitate networking and sharing.
- **International learning and visibility** - Dalit women's leader Sonu Rani Das participated in the Global Exchange Programme - working for three months with a team of volunteers in Scotland and three months in Chittagong in 2008. Sonu also participated in the international conference, For a Better Urban Future, held in March 2010 in Brazil organized by UN-HABITAT.
- Dalit women's leaders Tamanna Sing Baraik and Pinki Rani Das also participated in the Global Exchange Programme in 2010 both in Scotland and in Rangpur, Bangladesh.

- BDERM ensure that Dalit women's issues were included in the NGO shadow alternative report to the CEDAW Commission.
- In December 2010, UK MP Bridget Phillipson visited Dalit communities in Dhaka. Later in the month Moni Rani Das visited Bridget in London and made a presentation to the UK All Party Parliamentary Group of MPs, to the Bangladesh High Commissioner and the Department for International Development. One World Action awarded their Sternberg Award to the Dalit Women's Forum in recognition of the Forum's work, vision and success in tackling caste discrimination and poverty amongst Dalit communities in Bangladesh.

Describe the successes and challenges to implementing the practice, if needed with inspiration from the following guiding questions:

Very recently there were no Dalit women who could speak in public. Now a growing number are gaining confidence and becoming leaders. Moni Rani Dass, Sonu Rani Dass, Tamanna Sing Baraik, Pinki Rani Das and Banani Biswas are all young Dalit women who have proven to be leaders in their community. They have participated in various seminars and conferences raising the problems facing Dalit women in Bangladesh. Attitudes towards Dalit women (from their own communities and families, and wider society) are starting to change.

Challenges:

- The vast scale of poverty and desperate need of Dalit women particularly the lack of income, poor health and nutrition, crowded and inadequate housing, lack of adequate water and sanitation, and limited access to or exclusion from land and government benefits. **Difficult for Dalit women to join campaigns when they are concerned about the day to day survival of themselves and their families.**
- Complex and multidimensional forms of discrimination, exclusion and **self-exclusion**, and violence that women experience (from communities and wider society).
- Education, illiteracy and high dropout rates from schools - with no perceived chance of job opportunities education for girls is not always valued..
- Early marriage of Dalit girls (e.g. 12-13) and lack of access to family planning/birth control - women lack control over their fertility and family size.
- Lack of political representation of Dalit women at every level.

- Identify three key recommendations for similar practices/initiatives that can be replicated in the future. How could the process have been improved and sustained?

Recommendations and observations:

- **Human rights training and confidence building** have been vital to encourage women to take on leadership roles within their families, communities and the wider Dalit movement.
- Economic rights are critical – advocacy needs to be combined with programmes that provide decent jobs and basic services in the short term. ***We can't campaign on an empty stomach.***
- Dalit women leaders have spent a lot of time trying to influence and dialogue constructively with male family members – this has been a successful strategy despite being frustrating and time consuming Should Dalit leaders (both men and women) and the wider national and international Dalit movement do more to **challenge patriarchy within Dalit communities** particularly in relation to issues such as early marriage, girls education, violence against women and dowrys. Some important human rights issues are never discussed. Do we keep silent because we don't want to create negative publicity, cause offence or seem culturally insensitive? This is particularly problematic when discussing issues in relation to the Hindu minority in Bangladesh.

- How can we avoid viewing women's rights as secondary to overall struggle for Dalit rights – and avoid women's rights being seen as an add on. BDERM's Governance, Board and membership structures are based on gender equality to try and avoid this.
- We need to find new ways to sustain interest and commitment from young Dalit women. It is understandable that they stop coming to meetings and events that are often dominated by older men who are not willing to share public space and who are resistant to new ways of doing things.
- Activists and leaders are often expected to work long hours, travel regularly and work for free – this is not compatible with having a family and running a household. Need to find ways to make the Dalit movement more women friendly and keep women involved after they have got married.

Case Study

Moni Rani Das is Co-ordinator and founding member of the Dalit Women's Forum. From a tiny room she is educating her community and raising awareness about the existence, culture and problems of Dalits in Bangladesh. An eloquent and powerful speaker she lobbies the Government and international donors for the equal treatment of Dalits, for their inclusion in development and to tackle caste discrimination. Very few Dalit children go to school and as a child Moni Rani was the first Dalit girl to be allowed in her community due to support from her father. Throughout her life she has faced discrimination, violence and attacks - she has also faced criticism from her own community.

Women are strengthening their position within their families and communities. When we work with women and provide them with work, community leaders get angry because they feel threatened - they don't want women to come into the light because they want to keep things as they are.

Dalit women have problems understanding their own situation but they are now more aware, there is more consensus and they have become more demanding due to our meetings, trainings and campaigns .They now go outside their houses and it is an incredible precedent for Dalit women to earn their own money. This is the first time that they have understood the lives they lived before were not human lives.

We want our children to have the opportunities of education - to be teachers, doctors and engineers - the chances we could never dream of.

Moni Rani Das, Co-ordinator Dalit Women's Forum

Publicity:

Can IDSN use this case publicly, e.g. on an open conference website or in a conference report? Yes
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