

Bangladesh Dalit and excluded rights movement (bDerm)

Solidarity, growth and action are the keywords that characterise the work of BDERM in 2010. Inspirational actions of solidarity across the country saw Dalit activists travelling to support others in standing up for their rights through peaceful protests, human chains and other demonstrations of resistance. The platform is growing in strength and expanding, and BDERM played a key role this year in the formation of The Dalit and Excluded Women's Federation. This new national platform for Dalit women brings together 11 Dalit women's organizations from across the country. The rapid growth and flourish of activity reflects the desperation many Dalits in Bangladesh face.

The Dalits of Bangladesh, an estimated 5 million people, continue to be discriminated against on the basis of caste and considered 'untouchable'. It is therefore encouraging to note the growing mobilisation of Dalit human rights defenders across the country, building awareness of rights in the communities, tackling cases of atrocities and seeking justice for victims of caste discrimination.

Dalits in Bangladesh need protection by law. The constitutional provisions against discrimination clearly prohibit caste discrimination. Despite this provision, discrimination against Dalits is rampant, suggesting a need for additional legislation and other measures.

BDERM has therefore lobbied the Review Committee for Constitutional change to include anti-discriminatory legislation focusing on Dalits. The Co-Chairman of the Committee in the Parliament responded positively to a recent meeting and a memorandum on specific anti-discrimination legislation has been submitted to all 340 MPs. BDERM also organised a press conference to demand legal action be taken in three separate incidents of murder of people belonging to the Dalit community in the southern part of the country.

BDERM has called for political action with regards to housing. The platform lobbied for the provision of water and sanitation to Dalit communities with some success, especially in one Dalit colony in Dhaka. A memorandum was also submitted to the Finance Minister and the Dhaka City Mayor demanding special allocation in the National Budget for housing development for Dalit communities.

At a press conference organised by a forum of 13 organisations that will monitor the National Budget, BDERM presented a charter demanding special allocation of resources towards the basic rights of Dalit communities in education, special safety nets, protection of employment, housing facilities and health care services.

Development actors and donor partners to Bangladesh, including bilateral and multilateral agencies, increasingly seek to understand and assume a joint responsibility to address the situation of Dalits. With a view to take steps to promote targeted policies, ensure inclusion of Dalits in sector programmes and improve their living conditions, many donors now invite policy recommendations.

To help inform government and stakeholder policies BDERM held a seminar discussion on the Draft UN Principles and Guidelines for the elimination of caste discrimination. These Principles and Guidelines have been translated into Bangla by BDERM, and it is recommended that the Government of Bangladesh and other key stakeholders in the country use them as the principal guiding framework to address caste-based discrimination in Bangladesh.

BDERM platform members took part in an international conference in Nepal where they made a presentation on 'Promotion and Protection of Dalit Rights in Bangladesh'. The platform also participated in the IDSN Annual Council Meeting in Geneva.

On the national level Dalit students participated in the National Youth Parliament meeting and BDERM members participated in a Citizen Rights Fair where they presented educational material on Dalit rights, with the aim of raising awareness about the activities of the platform.

Other awareness raising activities included organising human chains and rallies in connection with World Dignity Day and the International Human Rights Day, to protest against the discriminatory behaviour of school teachers, water privatisation, and to demand special provisions in the Constitution for Dalit rights and dignity. The platform also published and distributed a regular newsletter, a brochure on Dalits in Bangladesh, a summary report of the 1st National Dalit Conference in Bangladesh, and a desk calendar and greeting cards to raise awareness of the caste issue. They also produced a slideshow about Dalits in Bangladesh.

BDERM is now becoming a member based people's organisation with convening committees formed in 38 districts. In November BDERM held its annual meeting, which was also attended by influential Bangladeshi supporters of the Dalit cause, as well as Manjula Pradeep, Navsarjan Trust; Rikke Nöhrind, IDSN Coordinator and One World Action representative Bethan Cobby. The latter three took part in BDERM's strategic planning meeting for 2011.

In December, IDSN, BDERM and OWA jointly took the initiative to ensure the inclusion of data on caste issues in the upcoming Bangladesh population census.