

Pakistan

The Pakistan Dalit Solidarity Network (PDSN) has been instrumental in raising public awareness of caste discrimination in Pakistan in 2011 and creating a stir in the media. Media reports on caste discrimination have included issues such as bonded labour, untouchability, kidnapping and forced conversions of Dalits. Media have also reported widely on discrimination in flood relief work in Pakistan following new monsoon rains, causing one of recent history's worst disasters.

Dalit communities were denied access to relief camps because of their caste and were forced to live under the open sky. The President of Pakistan, Asif Ali Zardai, has spoken out against this discrimination against Dalits in the on-going flood relief work saying that any discrimination in extending rescue, relief and rehabilitation operations to anyone on the basis of caste is unacceptable. Nonetheless the discrimination continued throughout 2011. PDSN has worked to support Dalit victims of the flooding and bring their plight to the attention of authorities, International NGOs and agencies involved in relief operations.

2011 also saw an increased visibility of Dalit women in Pakistan and Kalavanti Raja joined PDSN as Coordinator of the women's wing of the network. Ms. Raja participated in several events, including the Dalit Women's conference in Kathmandu, a South Asian Dalit conference in Bangladesh, and the IDSN International Consultation on Caste-Based Discrimination and council meeting in Nepal, where PDSN Coordinators also took part. She spoke at several events and monitored Pakistani media attention to the issue of caste discrimination, with regular updates to IDSN on the situation.

Jinnah Institute, a think tank working on minority issues, released a report in 2011 highlighting caste discrimination in Pakistan. According to the report the vast majority of Dalits in Pakistan do not own lands and work on daily wages, a consequence of them not having any permanent settlement. The report said, "One day, they are with one landlord, the next day with another. And this is how they spend a life of debt, with no accountability or education." Their castes have translated into daily life. For instance, Dalits may be restricted to separate water wells in school, "from which also Muslims will not drink."

Dalits working in bonded labour continues to be a central issue in Pakistan. They are often forced to work under terrible conditions in what has been deemed 'modern slavery' with no view to ever repaying their debts. This form of slavery is particularly prevalent in the agricultural sector, construction work, mining and textile industries.

In 2011 it is estimated that there are 7 million Dalits in Pakistan, 3.5 million of which live in the flood prone Sindh province and 70% of Pakistan's Dalits work as agricultural labourers. Dalits in Pakistan may also be victims of kidnapping, forced conversions and forced marriages, which can lead to prostitution after women are abandoned.

"Dalits have been hit hard by the flooding, but because of their caste they are not allowed into relief camps or offered food or water." Kalavanti Raja, Coordinator of the Dalit Women's Wing of PDSN

Discrimination in access to education and health leads to a lack of awareness of basic rights and social mobility. According to PDSN figures, 87% of Dalit women and 63.5 % of Dalit men are illiterate, a significantly higher percentage than the national average. National primary enrollment rate for girls stands at 48% while only 10 % of Dalit girls have had access to primary schooling. Less than 1% of Dalit women have studied up to eighth grade. There is also virtually no Dalit political representation and in 2011, of the 10 Hindu minority seats in parliament none are filled by a Dalit.

Untouchability practiced against Dalits in Pakistan was also the subject of a new documentary film released in 2011 by the Interactive Resource Centre (IRC) in Pakistan. The Film depicts caste discrimination in access to water, health care, housing, work, political representation and land rights. It is furthermore stated in the film that the majority of Dalits do not even own identity cards, restricting them from taking out loans to buy property or establish a business or even buy household fan.

Due to the political tensions in Pakistan and the restrictions placed on human rights defenders, who often work in constant fear of violent reprisals, working conditions for PDSN and its partners continue to be very difficult. In May, the Asian Human Rights Commission, issued an urgent appeal when a human rights defender was booked on murder charges for raising the cases of Dalit and stories of police torture and fake charges are not uncommon. Nonetheless, organisations focussing on Dalit rights are slowly emerging, and in 2011 called for policy legislation, land reform, the implementation of the Bonded Labour Act and the practice of non-discrimination in all service delivery.