

IDSN note on caste-based discrimination in Africa, Yemen and diaspora communities

Below is an overview of UN references, UN input, briefing notes and news articles on caste-based discrimination in Africa, Yemen and the diaspora communities (UK).

Caste-based discrimination in Africa

Caste systems exist in pockets in some African countries. Although significantly different in nature and scope, there are some common features between the caste systems of Africa¹ and South Asia. Stigma is often attached to this problem, and as a consequence “low caste” communities in Africa suffer various forms of social exclusion and discrimination, particularly with regard to employment, political representation and inter-caste marriages. Several African countries have adopted legislation guaranteeing freedom from discrimination, but laws have not been enforced and discrimination based on work and descent still occurs in different forms. A key challenge to address human rights problems related to caste-based discrimination in Africa is that caste remains a hidden issue in many countries, and that few comprehensive studies have been conducted on the issue.

- [Discrimination based on descent in Africa – IDSN paper](#) (prepared by Alexander Stevens for 61st CERD session in August 2002, see also the [summary paper](#))
- [IDSN webpage on caste-based discrimination in Africa](#)

In 2000, the UN Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights took up the issue of discrimination based on work and descent for the first time. The various UN commissioned [studies](#) that have been prepared, including the [final report](#) leading up to the draft [UN Principles and Guidelines](#), have revealed that the issue is broader than caste-based discrimination in South Asia but has existed and continues to exist in parts of Africa, Latin America and the Middle East, and in some countries of Western Europe (particularly among the diaspora communities).

Mauritania: Despite legal provisions against slavery In Mauritania, caste-based slavery and discrimination is widespread. The following [treaty body reviews of Mauritania](#) addressed caste-based discrimination: CEDAW 2014, CRC 2009 and CERD 2004. And, in the [UPR review of Mauritania in 2012](#), 2 States made recommendations addressing caste-based discrimination, although none were accepted.

- [IDSN webpage on caste-based slavery in Mauritania](#)
- [The Haratin in Mauritania – Minority Rights Group briefing, April 2013](#)
- [“La blessure de l’esclavage” d’Ousmane Diagana – French-speaking video about caste-based slavery in Mauritania, 2011](#)
- [Slavery’s last stronghold – CNN Online Documentary on caste-based slavery in Mauritania \(CNN, 2012, Report\)](#)
- [OHCHR news: Mohamed El Hor Abeidy from the Haratin community in Mauritania \(OHCHR, 2012, News\)](#)
- [Forced labour in Mauritania \(Anti-Slavery International Briefing Paper 2008\)](#)
- [Slavery in Mauritania \(Antislavery International’s website\)](#)
- [Country visit by UN Special Rapporteur on racism to Mauritania, 2008 \(IDSN website\)](#)

¹Descent-based discrimination is mainly of three types in Africa. First are caste systems based on “occupational specialization of endogamous groups, in which membership is based on ascription and between which social distance is regulated by the concept of pollution”. The second is discrimination based on real or perceived descent from slaves, leaving many in “virtual” slavery, unable to leave their owner’s employ for fear of reprisals or starvation. The third is against the hunter-gatherer societies and their descendants. This marginalization may contain aspects of a purity-pollution dyad, as well as degrees of real or perceived occupation specialization. [Report of the UN Special Rapporteur on racism \(HRC17, June 2011\): Discrimination Based on Work and Descent in Africa. Full Report.](#)

Nigeria: The Nigerian Constitution guarantees the right to freedom from discrimination for every citizen of Nigeria. In addition, the 1958 Osu Abolition Law legally abolished work- and descent-based discrimination. However, members of the Osu caste are still subjected to social exclusion, segregation and mistreatment, along with discrimination in employment and marriage. The [UN CERD review of Nigeria in 2005](#) addressed caste-based discrimination.

- [Osu caste system in Igboland, Nigeria](#) (prepared by Victor E. Dike for the 61st CERD session in 2002)
- [Osu Caste in Igboland \(Vanguard, 2010, News\)](#)

Senegal: Caste systems exist within several ethnic groups in Senegal. All characteristics of caste can be found among the Wolof community, principally divided between the *geer* and the *neeno*. The Constitution of Senegal proclaims the right of all citizens to equal protection of the law regardless of one's caste background. However, the extent to which neeno castes approach the courts for legal redress on discrimination claims is negligible. The [UN CERD reviews of Senegal in 2012 and 2002](#) addressed caste-based discrimination. And, in the [UPR of Senegal in 2013](#), one State made a recommendation addressing caste-based discrimination, although it was rejected.

- [Démocratie, droits humains et castes au Sénégal](#) (Penda Mbow, 2000). See also the [English translation](#) of this article
- [The Situation of Castes in Senegal – Alternative Report, 81st CERD session, August 2012 \(RADDHO and IDSN, 2012, Publication\)](#)

Kenya: There is one caste system among Asian Hindu immigrants, and another among the Borana people in Kenya. The Constitution of Kenya prohibits discrimination but this has not ended caste-based discrimination in the country.

- [Caste in Kenya](#) (prepared by Centre for Minority Rights Development and IDSN for the 61st CERD session in 2002)

Somalia: The lowest castes in Somalia are called sab and are considered polluted. The unrecognised state of Somaliland has declared that programmes aimed at eradicating long lasting bad practices shall be a national obligation, but has not introduced specific anti-discrimination legislation.

- [No redress: Somalia's forgotten minorities](#) (Minority Rights Group International, 2010, prepared by Martin Hill)
- [Caste in Somalia](#) (prepared by SAFRAD – Somali Association and IDSN for the 61st CERD session in 2002)

Mali: The [UN CERD review of Mali in 2002](#) addressed caste-based discrimination

- [Descent-based slavery in Mali \(Anti-Slavery International's website\)](#)

Madagascar: The [UN CERD review of Madagascar in 2004](#) addressed caste-based discrimination. And, in the [UPR of Madagascar in 2011](#), one State made a recommendation addressing caste-based discrimination, that was partly accepted.

Niger: [Caste in Niger](#) (prepared in French by Association Timidria and IDSN for the 61st CERD session in 2002)

Chad: The [UN CERD review of Chad in 2013 and 2009](#) addressed caste-based discrimination.

Ethiopia: The [UN CERD reviews of Ethiopia in 2009 and 2003](#) addressed caste-based discrimination.

Ghana: The [UN CERD review of Ghana in 2003](#) addressed caste-based discrimination.

Burkina Faso: The [UN CERD reviews of Burkina Faso in 2013 and 1997](#) addressed caste-based discrimination.

Mauritius: The [UN CERD reviews of Mauritius in 2013 and 1995](#) addressed caste-based discrimination

Micronesia: The [UN CRC review of Micronesia in 1998](#) addressed caste-based discrimination

Caste-based discrimination in Yemen

The Al-Akhdam community is a minority group, which is regarded as an “untouchable” outcaste group in Yemen. For centuries, the Al-Akhdam has suffered perpetual discrimination, persecution, and social exclusion from mainstream society. They are at the bottom of the social and economic hierarchy when it comes to access to employment and conditions of work, and they are forced to live isolated from the remaining society. The total figure of this population is unknown, and there are large inconsistencies between official and unofficial numbers. The government census of 2004 stated that the number is 153.133, but other sources claim that between 500.000-3.5 mio. persons belong to this minority group. Although, they are commonly known as Al-Akhdam – the servants, they prefer to be known as Al Muhamasheen – the marginalized ones. The following [UN treaty body reviews](#) have addressed caste-based discrimination in Yemen; CERD (2011, 2006), CESCR (2011, 2003), CCPR 2005 and CRC (2014, 2012, 1999, 1996)

- [IDSN Briefing Note on Caste-Based Discrimination in Yemen 2014](#)
- [Joint UPR submission by IDSN and All Youth Network 2013](#)
- [Alternative report on Civil and Political Rights of Al-Akhdam in Yemen submitted by All Youth Network for Social Development and IDSN \(2012\)](#)
- [CESCR alternative report submitted by the All Youth Network for Social Development in association with IDSN \(2011\)](#)
- [CERD shadow report on the situation of the Al-Akhdam people prepared by Alternative World/Partnership for Equal Development in association with IDSN \(2006\)](#)
- [BBC News – In pictures: Yemen’s Lowest of the Low \(BBC, 2012\)](#)
- [Yemen’s Untouchable’s Doubtful of Change \(Al Jazeera, 2012\)](#)
- [Akhdam Community angered at Government Neglect \(Irin News, 2012\)](#)
- [YEMEN: Girls, poor and black people most discriminated against – study \(Irin News, 2009\)](#)
- [Languishing at the bottom of Yemen’s ladder \(New York Times, 2008\)](#)
- [In slums without hope, Yemen’s untouchables \(New York Times, 2008\)](#)
- [YEMEN: Akhdam people suffer history of discrimination \(Irin News, 2005\)](#)
- Visit [IDSNs YouTube Channel](#) for videos dealing with caste discrimination in Yemen

Caste-based discrimination in diaspora communities

When immigrants from South Asia settle in other countries, they often bring the caste system with them. Research has shown that caste discrimination is common in the [United Kingdom](#) , the United States, Canada and other countries with diaspora communities from South Asia.

United Kingdom: Evidence has been found that South Asians who have relocated to the United Kingdom, tend to bring the caste system, and inherent discrimination, with them when they move. Caste discrimination is therefore reproduced within South Asian communities in the UK. It has been estimated that there are at least 250.000 Dalits living in the UK. The exact figure, however, is unknown due to issues concerning identification as a ‘Dalit’, lack of detailed research and the absence of caste data in the census. While culture-specific menial occupations, such as for example [manual scavenging](#), are not undertaken by Dalits in the UK, the ‘untouchability mindset’ persists and UK based Dalits are victims of several forms of direct and indirect discrimination. Dalits and lower castes in the UK are subjected to discrimination in

[education](#) (in the form of pupil-on-pupil bullying) in the workplace and in the supply of goods and services (such as healthcare and in treatment in shops). Furthermore, caste based discrimination occurs in worship, religion and politics. The more direct forms of discrimination manifests itself in incidents of violence and public harassment. Comprehensive studies (see below) confirm the existence of caste discrimination in the UK. In April 2013, after a prolonged campaign by civil society organisations, the UK government decided to include a caste discrimination clause in the UK equality legislation. Nonetheless, the legislation has been pending enactment following an unprecedented consultation period and severe delays.

- [IDSN briefing note on Caste-Based Discrimination in the UK 2014](#)
- [Caste in Britain - A socio-legal review](#), Equality and Human Rights Commission Reports, February 2014
- [Caste in Britain - An experts and stakeholder workshop](#), Equality and Human Rights Commission Reports, February 2014
 - The two reports confirm that caste discrimination “cannot be tolerated and should be included in the protections against discrimination and harassment provided in the Equality Act 2010”.
- [UK Government-commissioned report into the prevalence of caste prejudice and discrimination](#), National Institute of Economic and Social Research (NIESR), December 2010
 - The study finds evidence of caste discrimination in work, provision of services, education, and harassment and violence as a result of caste discrimination.