

NEW INTERNATIONALIST

[May 2010](#) • [Issue 432](#)

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Durga Sob: Nepal's trailblazing Dalit feminist

Durga Sob, founder of the Feminist Dalit Organization, is fighting discrimination in Nepal.



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Durga Sob was just 10 when she realized she was from the Dalit, or 'untouchable', class of Nepal: 'I drank from a water pot that other people used, and by sharing this water, I'd made it 'unclean'. I was screamed at and chased away. I told my mother and she said: "God made us Dalit, that's just the way it is." It was then I knew the pain of being a Dalit, and had to do something to change things.' The injustices experienced during her childhood in the remote village of Silgadi in western Nepal inspired Durga to found the Feminist Dalit Organization (FEDO) to fight against caste and gender discrimination.

"I felt it was no good if I were the only one who was educated; I had to educate others"

Nepal is one of the poorest countries in Asia and Dalits represent around 20 per cent of

the population. The term 'Dalit', chosen by the community itself, means 'broken people', and although caste discrimination was outlawed in 1963, its practice remains widespread. Dalits are considered polluting and suffer an apartheid of segregation: '[We] are often denied proper housing, access to healthcare and other public services, like use of water taps and temples,' says Durga. 'Dalit women suffer a triple oppression, and are at the bottom of the pile. As women they're second-class citizens anyway, but as Dalits they're subjected to social exclusion, and as the poorest group in Nepal, they experience chronic poverty.' Indeed, more than 90 per cent of Dalit women live below the poverty line and life expectancy is just 51 years, as opposed to a national average of 59. Education is also denied to many Dalits. Around 80 per cent of Dalit women are illiterate and the first milestone Durga achieved was being admitted to school: 'My mother, a wonderful woman, encouraged me, despite everyone saying she was wasting her money.' Dalit girls traditionally work at home and are married young. Despite continual discrimination and bullying, Durga completed school by the age of 16. Realizing that she was equal to her classmates, and again breaking Dalit rank, she started teaching English to other Dalits: 'I felt it was no good if I were the only one who was educated; I had to educate others. I would bring all the girls to my home and teach them. After this, many went to school and completed their education.'

Moving to Kathmandu when she was 19 years old, Durga started working for ActionAid and it was

here that she met the US feminist Robin Morgan and told her about the situation for Dalit women. Although there were many projects which were working to empower Nepali women, none had been initiated to address Dalit women's specific issues. Morgan encouraged Durga to form FEDO in 1994. The early days were difficult: 'We needed seven Dalit women on the board before we could register FEDO and it was hard to find educated and committed Dalit women, they were so oppressed.' Moreover, women in urban areas did not wish to expose themselves as Dalit. Durga also experienced prejudice from other women activists: 'High caste women would not accept us and I was routinely excluded.'

Durga was, however, used to chronic discrimination and continued to strive for inclusion: 'Initially, FEDO was small and focused on informal education and income-generation programmes. We began our work in the Lalitpur district and held literacy classes for 50 elderly women. These were successful, so later we focused on formal education, health, sanitation, advocacy and awareness.' FEDO now works in 45 districts in Nepal and has 40,000 members. Some 3,000 Dalit children were sent to school after FEDO's school enrolment campaign. In addition, 50 Dalit health workers have been trained, 5,000 women have benefited from microfinance programmes, and 2,000 Dalit women's groups have been established.

Nepal is, however, a country in recovery after 10 years of a civil war which ended in 2007, and because of their perceived association with the Maoist guerrillas, the Dalit community bore the brunt of the violence. Dalit women are particularly vulnerable to all forms of gender violence, including domestic abuse, trafficking for prostitution and rape as a weapon of war. In response to this, FEDO began working in partnership with the British-based organization Womankind to establish healing and support units for Dalit women survivors of violence. There are now four centres and almost 1,800 women have benefited: 'The healing centres have seen an overwhelming response and for the first time, Dalit women have been able to break the taboo of talking about the violence they've experienced. Many now understand that violence doesn't have to be a part of their everyday lives.' Also crucial to empowerment is education around rights, and FEDO makes use of CEDAW, the international bill of rights for women, as legislative support: 'We provide training for women about how to file cases to police to ensure that they have equal access to justice,' explains Durga. 'Women often immediately practise what they have learnt and CEDAW is seen as a basis on which to fight back against oppression. This is a vast shift in perception for Dalit women.'

The current post-war situation in Nepal, as well as being a time of challenge, also represents an opportunity for the community. Following the 2006 Peace Agreement, political parties are currently formulating a new constitution for the country: 'Up until now, in terms of participation and representation, there have been no Dalit women in positions of power. However, this is changing: 25 Dalit women have been elected as members of the Constituent Assembly and this is one my happiest achievements. The constitution-making process is a unique opportunity to ensure that the constitution will guarantee equality and, for the first time in Nepali history, Dalit women are represented in political processes.' Durga's pride is palpable: 'It's taken 15 years, and it's still early days, but FEDO has created an environment where Dalit women have started to see themselves as respectable citizens.'

Durga Sob spoke with **Claire Colley**.



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