

**Just Politics**

**ONE WORLD  
ACTION**  
FOR A JUST AND EQUAL WORLD

# **Dalit Rights** are Human Rights

*The Dalit struggle for dignity in Bangladesh*

**BDERM** Bangladesh Dalit and  
Excluded Rights Movement  
বাংলাদেশ দলিত ও বঞ্চিত জনগোষ্ঠী অধিকার আন্দোলন

নাগরিক উদ্যোগ  
**NAGORIK UDDYOG**  
CITIZEN'S INITIATIVE

**IDSN** International Dalit Solidarity Network  
WORKING GLOBALLY AGAINST CASTE DISCRIMINATION

# Acknowledgements

One World Action is grateful to the Dalit women and men in Bangladesh who have contributed to this document and also to Nagorik Uddyog, Bangladesh Dalit and Excluded Right Movement (BDERM), Bangladesh Dalit Human Rights (BDHR), Dalit Women's Forum, International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN), Indian Institute of Dalit Studies (IIDS) and Anti Caste Discrimination Alliance (ACDA).

Photographs provided by Abir Abdullah/EPA and the Bangladesh Dalit and Excluded Right Movement (BDERM)

© One World Action 2011

Any part of this booklet may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or information storage and retrieval systems, with due credit given to One World Action

ISBN NUMBER: 978-1-898776-78-9

**Compiled by:**

**Tara Brace-John**, Governance Policy Coordinator, One World Action

**Researched by:**

**Evelin Sawall**, London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE)

# Introduction

*“If you are not considered to be human, human rights do not apply to you.”*

**Moni Rani, Director, Dalit Women’s Forum, Bangladesh**

260 million people worldwide continue to experience discrimination based on their caste. Caste discrimination remains one of the most severe and forgotten human rights abuses of the twenty-first century. It leads to extreme poverty and powerlessness which contribute to exploitation and violence against the Dalits – formerly known as untouchables.

In Bangladesh there are an estimated five million Dalits. In Dhaka, Dalit communities live in so called ‘colonies’ – deprived or excluded from adequate housing, sanitation and education. Working in the most menial jobs, they have difficulty accessing schools and hospitals. Approximately 96% are illiterate.

Dalit women face discrimination, exclusion and violence as a result of both their caste and gender. A majority of Dalit girls drop out of school at secondary level – the most crucial factor in escaping poverty. Given the vast numbers of Dalit women and men living in poverty, justice will not be achieved if Dalits continue to be excluded, and their human rights denied.



One World Action's goal is to create the opportunity for the world's poorest and most excluded women and men to transform their own lives, and to challenge the policies that make and keep them poor and powerless. Women's empowerment is central to all that we do. For over 20 years we have supported the most marginalised people in holding their local and national governments to account, enabling them to have more control over decisions that determine their ability to fight poverty. We do this by working directly with partners in Africa, Asia and Latin America. We focus on inequality and exclusion because they create poverty, hamper growth, undermine accountability, weaken governance, and cause conflict.

One World Action is supporting Bangladesh Dalit and Excluded Rights Movement (BDERM), Bangladesh Dalit Human Rights (BDHR) and the Dalit Women's Forum (DWF) in Dhaka to ensure that Dalits participate in and influence the decisions that impact their lives. The full participation of Dalit women and men in public life is the only guarantee of their human rights being protected and upheld.

This document lists all of the human rights guaranteed under the UN Declaration and how Dalit people's human rights are violated on a daily basis. We urge governments to adopt the draft UN Principles and Guidelines for the Effective Elimination of Discrimination Based on Work and Descent at the UN Human Rights Council.

*“Through One World Action, we have trained and organised Dalits in Dhaka, so for the first time in our history we are starting to live a more dignified and hopeful life. Our children now go to school, we are voting, we have lobbied for better healthcare and housing, and our existence is finally being recognised.”*

**Bothanki Solomon, Director, Bangladesh Dalit Human Rights**





1

# We are all born free and equal

*“We are lobbying the government and international donors to tackle caste discrimination and include Dalits in Bangladesh’s development plans. There is a generation of young Dalit women emerging who are now becoming role models for their communities.”*





# 2

## Do not discriminate

*“Dalit women are the poorest of the poor. We face caste discrimination from the rest of society but are also discriminated against by family members, especially the men. We don’t want a bank account or cars, but we do want honourable lives, education and dignity.”*





# 3

## The right to life

*“Bangladesh is one of the few countries on earth where men outnumber women – due to discrimination and violence which begins even before girls are born. Dalit women and girls face the double burden of gender and caste.”*





# 4

## No slavery

*“Due to their alienation from land, resources and assets, Dalits are often bonded labourers. Over generations they have been relegated and forced to do menial, degrading and subservient jobs such as cleaning, sweeping and removing human excrement.”*







# 5

## No torture

*“Violence and sexual assault are used by non-Dalits as a control mechanism for humiliating Dalit communities. Instances of rape, torture and harassment are all common atrocities against Dalit women.”*





# 6

## You have rights no matter where you go

*“Private landlords often refuse to rent to Dalit families – they tell us ‘you can’t live here, you are untouchable’. There are many cases where Dalit students have segregated dormitories and kitchens.”*





7

**We are all equal before  
the law**

*“Despite a strong Constitution, caste discrimination is still widespread and laws to protect Dalits are not implemented.”*





# 8

## Your human rights are protected by law

*“The police and other institutions ignore complaints from Dalits. They fail to protect us against abuse and discrimination. People say we are unclean and shun us.”*





# 9

## No unfair detainment

*“Dalit women are not treated equally when they lodge complaints at the police station. They often experience multiple forms of discrimination, including sexual abuse from police officers.”*





# 10

## The right to trial

*“Dalits are often afraid of the formal legal system and opt not to use it to seek justice.”*





11

**We are always innocent  
till proven guilty**

*“Recently the police seem to have targeted Dalit women activists in particular, in an attempt to try and prevent them from participating in rallies or meetings.”*





WE ARE NOT UNTOUCHABLE BDERM

জনগণী খার কাম্বহে দলিত পক্ষী লিখা

পারনিক টমকটপুয়া দলিত যুগ পালকর যখন ইংবারা দিহে হবে

দলিতের প্রতি বিদ্রোহ কল

জনগণী কাম্বহে দলিত পক্ষী লিখা

দলিত কাম্বহে দলিত পক্ষী লিখা

শান্তিযোগে অপরাধ হিমরে গণ

জনগণী কাম্বহে দলিত পক্ষী লিখা

দলিত কাম্বহে দলিত পক্ষী লিখা

দলিত কাম্বহে দলিত পক্ষী লিখা

সামাজিকভাবে বঞ্চিত জনগোষ্ঠীর  
১ম জাতীয় মানবাধিকার সম্মেলন  
**উদ্বোধন ও শোভাযাত্রা**  
১৬ জানুয়ারি, ২০০৯, সময় সকাল-১০:০০টা, রবীন্দ্র সরোবর, ধানমন্ডি, ঢাকা।  
সম্প্রদায়িক উদ্যোগ  
BDERM Bangladesh Dalit and Excluded Rights Movement  
নাগরিক উদ্যোগ  
NAGORIK UDDOOG

# 12

## The right to privacy

*“We live in cramped and crowded slums. Families of five or six people often live and sleep in one room – we have no privacy.”*







# 13

## Freedom to move

*“Many Dalit women feel insecure outside their homes, especially at night, because of intimidation and harassment by non-Dalits. This limits their opportunities to work, education and socialising.”*



# 14

## The right to seek a safe place to live

*“Dalits looking for a better life in the UK often find that caste discrimination has followed them to a new country. The 2009 Anti Discrimination Alliance Report states that 58% of Dalits who were interviewed confirmed that they had been discriminated against because of their caste.”*



# 15

## Right to a nationality

*“I don’t feel like a citizen in my own country. If categories related to discrimination based on work and descent are not included in the census, the Dalit community will remain invisible, marginalised and disempowered.”*



Dalit  
rights  
are  
human  
rights



# 16

## Marriage and family

*“Last month a man from a different caste married a Dalit girl. They were ostracised by the community and their families disowned them without giving them any support.”*





# 17

## The right to your own things

*“Dalits feel discriminated against by Bangladesh NGOs and their micro-credit programmes. Dalits are often not relied on as debtors because most of them do not have permanent jobs and land for housing, all resulting in a limited capacity to save the required amounts every week.”*



# 18

## Freedom of thought

*“Hindu Dalits are often discriminated against by other Hindus and religious leaders even though they share the same religion and beliefs.”*





# 19

## Freedom of expression

*“Political parties try to bribe us for votes but we don’t agree. They tell us that they will kill us if we don’t vote for them. We ourselves could not even think about standing for power.”*



দলিত নারীদের জন্য নেতৃত্ব উন্নয়ন প্রশিক্ষণ  
(Leadership Development Training for Dalit Women)

তারিখ : ১২-১৩ জুলাই, ২০০৮  
: প্রশিক্ষণ কক্ষ, পাওয়া





# 20

## The right to public assembly

*“Our community has been here for 15 years but we are under constant threat of eviction. We protested when they wanted to move us from our homes but the army and police came and frightened us. They said, ‘If you don’t leave we will beat you and shoot you.’”*





শ্রী মাতৃশিক্ষিতা সন্তান সুরক্ষা আইন-২০১০  
শ্রী মানবিক মর্যাদা দিবস- ২০১০

শ্রী মাতৃশিক্ষিতা সন্তান সুরক্ষা আইন-২০১০  
শ্রী মানবিক মর্যাদা দিবস- ২০১০

DIGNITY

# 21

## The right to democracy

*“Many Dalits feel they are discriminated against when participating in political activities. This leads to negligible representation of Dalits in all spheres of government. Of Dhaka city’s 90 elected Municipal Commissioners not one is a Dalit.”*



# 22

## Social security

*“The hospital is very far from the community – if there is a serious problem often people die on the way or waiting for treatment. We hide our identity when we go to hospital, if they know we are Dalits we will not get treated well.”*





# 23

## Workers' rights

*“We would like to do different jobs from our parents and grandparents but whenever we try, people tell us ‘You are a Dalit’. If I opened a tea shop no one would come. This is my fate but this fate is not from God, it is from man.”*





# 24

## The right to play

*“Child labour amongst Dalit children is a big problem in Bangladesh. Dropout rates from school are very high and children often have to support their families from a very young age.”*







25

# Food and shelter for all

*“We are very poor and only eat once a day – rice, dhal and leaves. We have no new dresses for festivals and if the children don’t get enough food then they don’t have any energy.”*



# 26

## The right to education

*“I went to the commissioner to ask for a scholarship as I did well in my exams. He said, ‘I won’t sign this. You are a Dalit girl. You are not fit for education.’ I begged him but he ripped up my form. So my mother took a loan to educate me.”*





# 27

## Cultural rights

*“The right to practice one’s own culture, religion and language is one of the key areas for discrimination. Dalits are commonly denied the right to education in our own mother tongue.”*





28

# A fair and free world

*“We work as sweepers for the City Corporation – we make the city clean but nobody cleans for us.”*





# 29

## Responsibility

*“Some national and local authorities deny that Dalits even exist – they say there is no such thing as a Dalit. We are campaigning for recognition, respect for our culture and our heritage.”*





30

**No one can take away  
your human rights**

*“Throughout my life I have faced discrimination, violence and attacks, but now women are strengthening their position within their families and communities. We are coming into the light.”*





# References

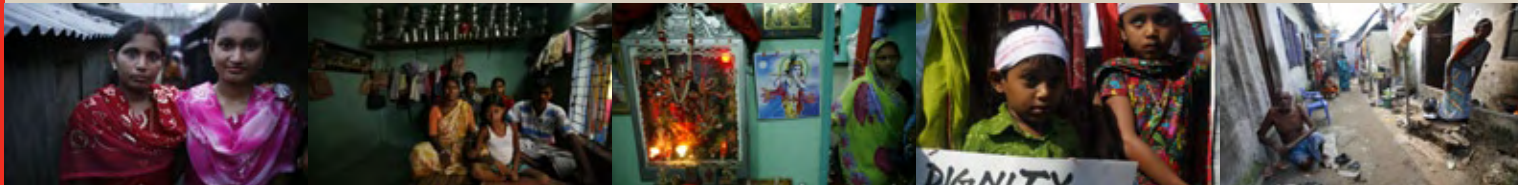
ACDA (2009): *Hidden Apartheid – Voice of Community – Caste and Caste Discrimination in the UK*. Anti Caste Discrimination Alliance Report, November 2009.

ADB (2001): *Women in Bangladesh, Country Briefing Paper*. Asia Development Bank, January 2001. [http://www.adb.org/Documents/Books/Country\\_Briefing\\_Papers/Women\\_in\\_Bangladesh/women\\_ban.pdf](http://www.adb.org/Documents/Books/Country_Briefing_Papers/Women_in_Bangladesh/women_ban.pdf)

BDERM, Nagorik Uddyog, IDSN (2009): *The human rights situation of Dalits in Bangladesh: their socio-economic problems, legal and constitutional protections, and the issues of discrimination on the basis of caste and lower status*. Joint submission by Bangladesh Dalit and Excluded Right Movement, Nagorik Uddyog and the International Dalit Solidarity Network to the 2009 Human Rights Council UPR of Bangladesh, February 2009. [http://idsn.org/fileadmin/user\\_folder/pdf/Old\\_files/un/pdf/UPR\\_Bangladesh.pdf](http://idsn.org/fileadmin/user_folder/pdf/Old_files/un/pdf/UPR_Bangladesh.pdf)

Buncombe, Andrew (2008): *Oppressed Dalits of Bangladesh fight for their future*. The Independent, 20 December 2008. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/oppressed-dalits-of-bangladesh-fight-for-their-future-1205005.html>

Dyrhagen, Gitte and Islam, Mazharul (2006): *Report of the Consultative Meeting on the Situation of Dalits in Bangladesh*. Held by the Bangladesh Dalits' Human Rights in cooperation with the International Dalit Solidarity Network on 18 October 2006 in Dhaka, Bangladesh. [http://www.idsn.org/fileadmin/user\\_folder/pdf/New\\_files/Publications\\_from\\_network/Bangladesh\\_full\\_report\\_FINAL\\_VERSION.pdf](http://www.idsn.org/fileadmin/user_folder/pdf/New_files/Publications_from_network/Bangladesh_full_report_FINAL_VERSION.pdf)



Griffin, Mary (2009): *We are not thought of as human, How the Dalit women of Bangladesh are struggling to end generations of oppression*. The Guardian, 23 Nov 2009. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/journalismcompetition/professional-we-are-not-thought-of-as-human>

IDSN (2008): *Dalits of Bangladesh: Destined to a life of humiliation*. International Dalit Solidarity Network summary report of IIDS study. [http://idsn.org/fileadmin/user\\_folder/pdf/Old\\_files/asia/pdf/FACTSHEET\\_BANGLADESH.pdf](http://idsn.org/fileadmin/user_folder/pdf/Old_files/asia/pdf/FACTSHEET_BANGLADESH.pdf)

IDSN (2009): *Caste-based discrimination in South Asia, Situational Overview, Responses and Ways Forward*. Study commissioned by the European Commission to the International Dalit Solidarity Network, June 2009. [http://idsn.org/uploads/media/EU\\_Study\\_Caste\\_Discrimination\\_merged\\_April2010.pdf](http://idsn.org/uploads/media/EU_Study_Caste_Discrimination_merged_April2010.pdf)

IDSN and BDERM (2010): *Last Chance for an Inclusive and Representative 2011 Census: Urgent Request to Include Data on Citizens Against Discriminated on the basis of Work and Descent*. International Dalit Solidarity Network and Bangladesh Dalit and Excluded Rights Movement submission to the Bangladesh government.

IIDS (2008): *Caste-based Discrimination in South-Asia: A Study of Bangladesh*. Indian Institute of Dalit Studies, New Delhi. [http://idsn.org/fileadmin/user\\_folder/pdf/Old\\_files/asia/pdf/RR\\_Bangladesh.pdf](http://idsn.org/fileadmin/user_folder/pdf/Old_files/asia/pdf/RR_Bangladesh.pdf)

One World Action, various internal documents and presentations

Abbreviated version of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights <http://www.youthforhumanrights.org/what-are-human-rights/universal-declaration-of-human-rights/simplified-version.html>



One World Action's Just Politics programme is supporting Bangladesh Dalit and Excluded Rights Movement (BDERM), Bangladesh Dalit Human Rights (BDHR) and the Dalit Women's Forum (DWF) to ensure that Dalits participate in, and influence the decisions that impact their lives. The full participation of Dalit women and men in public life is the only guarantee of their rights being protected and upheld.

One World Action and our partners believe that tackling caste discrimination should be an integral part of all multilateral and bilateral aid programmes, with clear benchmarks, disaggregated data and indicators to monitor impact.

**We urge governments to adopt the draft UN Principles and Guidelines for the Effective Elimination of Discrimination Based on Work and Descent at the UN Human Rights Council.**



Bradley's Close  
74–77 White Lion Street  
London N1 9PF

T: 00 44 (0)20 7833 4075

F: 00 44 (0)20 7833 4102

Email: [owa@oneworldaction.org](mailto:owa@oneworldaction.org)

[www.oneworldaction.org](http://www.oneworldaction.org)

Charity Registration Number: 1022298

Company Registration Number: 2822893



One World Action's Just Politics Programme is part of our Programme Partnership Agreement with the Department for International Development, UK