

Towards a Comprehensive Framework to Eliminate Caste Discrimination in the 21st Century

On the 10th November 2009, the draft UN Principles and Guidelines for the Effective Elimination of Discrimination Based on Work and Descent, were launched in the UK Houses of Parliament. The event was attended by NGO representatives, parliamentarians and human rights activists. It was chaired by Jeremy Corbyn MP and organised by One World Action and the Dalit Solidarity Network UK.

The following is a summary of the event:

Introduction - *These Guidelines are a major step forward for securing international support for action in countries where caste based discrimination continues to perpetuate exclusion, injustice and violence. They provide an historic opportunity and tool for mobilising and action. The Guidelines are inline with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which states that no citizen should be excluded from using services and privileges provided by the state. They are not only relevant to governments but also to donors, private companies, NGOs and communities. They pay particular attention to women, older and disabled people and they emphasise the collective efforts of the international community. This is the first instrument to establish guidelines for how state and non-state actors can address one of the world's greatest and systematic human rights abuses, affecting an estimated 260 million women and men around the world.*

Ruth Manorama - The President of the National Federation of Dalit Women in India gave a background to the issue of caste discrimination and its devastating impact on Dalit women in India in terms of poverty, violence and exclusion. She highlighted the international lobbying efforts of Dalit leaders and organisations across the world over the last decade that has culminated in the development of these Guidelines. She noted that India has one of the most progressive Constitutions in the world and yet these rights only exist on paper. *We need a legal and comprehensive framework to shift the debate and to renew our faith in policies.*

Durga Sob - The Director of FEDO (Feminist Dalit Organisation) in Nepal gave a background to the issues facing Dalit women in Nepal and their recent success in ensuring 24 Dalit women are members of the drafting committee of the new Constitution. *FEDO are exploring how to secure the rights of Dalits within the new federal structure and how to restructure political parties to ensure the meaningful participation of Dalits in Nepali political life.*



This was followed by an open discussion around recommendations and actions for how the Guidelines can be put into practice and taken forward within the UK:

- The need for the draft Guidelines to be adopted by the UN Human Rights Council (47 member states responsible for strengthening the promotion and protection of human rights) – and the need to secure support from members to push this forward, despite opposition from India.
- The possibility of One World Action and DSN establishing a working group to lobby the UK Foreign Office to support this adoption and to push other member states to do the same, (e.g. a postcard campaign to MPs).
- The UK have ratified the Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination and in 2004 the Committee recommended UK legislation be amended to address caste discrimination. The Equalities Bill provides a unique historic opportunity to do this. The need for documented and solid evidence of caste discrimination in the UK to convince MPs of the need to include caste within the Bill.
- Is there a tension between calling for the caste system to be eradicated and calling for affirmative action? At the moment there is an urgent need to provide Dalit specific services (e.g. water and housing) and to link Dalits up to existing government schemes. However these are temporary short term measures to address inequality and therefore the two positions do not contradict each other.
- Suggestion to co-ordinate a meeting of Dalit communities to discuss the Guidelines – Jeremy to invite the Indian High Commission to the meeting.
- The need to undertake a strategic mapping of current Human Rights Council member states position/views on the Guidelines, building on Amnesty's existing knowledge.
- Private sector – the need to give more support and publicity to companies who are adopting progressive practices and signing up to the Ambedkar Principles. The need to develop specific recommendations for UK companies who want to do more to implement the Guidelines (e.g. challenging Indian suppliers, mapping audit process).
- The possibility of Amnesty sponsoring a side event on the Guidelines at next Human Rights Council session.
- Possibility of making a submission to Commonwealth Heads of Government Summit 22nd- 23rd November. Jeremy's suggestion to co-ordinate an All Party Letter to the UK Foreign Minister on this issue before the Conference.
- Lobbying around next ASEAN meeting.
- The recent statement from the UN High Commissioner, Navi Pillay, provides a window of opportunity to adopt, implement and take these Guidelines forward. She said that 'the time has come to eradicate the shameful concept of caste' and called on the international community to come together 'as it did when it helped to put an end to apartheid.'

Participants

Name	Organisation
Aad Wielaard	One World Action
Abigail Green	Research Assistant, Stephen Crabb MP
Andy Rutherford	Head of International Partnerships, One World Action
Ashish Chaudhari	Independent Consultant
Bethan Cobley	Asia Regional Co-ordinator, One World Action
Carolina Gottardo	Head of Policy and Advocacy, One World Action
Dandi Ram Bishwakarma	FEDO, Nepal
Derek Jackson	Monsoon Accessorise Limited
Dom Wall	One World Action
Durga Sob	Feminist Dalit Organisation Nepal
Elizabeth Sceal	Oxfam
Elizabeth Sidney OBE	Chair, Women Worldwide Advancing Freedom and Equality
Giulia Girardo	Programmes Assistant, One World Action
Greg Nicholson	DSN-UK Benefactor
Ivan Nutbrown	Action Village India
Jeremy Corbyn	MP Parliament
Kate Gwynn	Christian Solidarity Worldwide
Liz St Clair	Executive Director, Women in Public Policy
Lord John Sandwich	House of Lords
Louisa Roberts	DFID Country Liaison Manager for India and Bangladesh
Madhu Malhotra	Amnesty
Rob Marris	MP Parliament
Rupal Jayaswal	One World Action
Ruth Manorama	NAWO, India
Savio Lourdu	Convenor, Association for Community Cohesion
Swapon Kumar Das	Executive Director, DALIT, Bangladesh
Tess Gill	Chair, OWA
Thérèse Mahon	Regional Programme Officer - Asia, Wateraid
Registered – unable to attend	
Annapurna Waughray	Lecturer Human Rights, Manchester Mtpltn University
Chris Cutter	Dalit Solidarity Network
David Knock	Action Village India
Ijeoma Omambala	Old Square Chambers
Joseph O'Reilly	Karuna Trust
Meena Varma	Dalit Solidarity Network
Roopa Hinton	CARE, Asia
Tim Lezard	NUJ