

Obstacles to the Effective Political Participation of Dalit Women

Madam Chair, distinguished Delegates,

Dalits in India, officially termed scheduled castes, form the largest discriminated community. Their discrimination is based, first, on their descent or birth into specific 'untouchable' castes, and secondly, on their traditional 'polluting' work. As a result, although almost one in five Indians is a Dalit, half of whom are women, their political participation as a large minority community in India remains disproportionately low. Looking specifically at Dalit women, the current Indian Lower House of Parliament has only 12 Dalit women MPs, a mere 2.2% of Parliamentarians. In its consideration of the Government of India's report in 2007, the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination noted its concern over the underrepresentation of Dalits in all levels of government. The Committee went further to state that: *"Dalit candidates, especially women, are frequently forcibly prevented from standing for election or, if elected, forced to resign from village councils or other elected bodies or not to exercise their mandate, [and] that many Dalits are not included in electoral rolls or otherwise denied the right to vote..."*

I want to just take the example of Dalit women's political participation in local governance institutions in India called the panchayats. The simple reason is that this is the largest political space open for Dalit women today to participate in public affairs. Moreover, at this level, there are separate quotas for Dalit women, aside from quotas for Dalits and women in general, meant to facilitate their inclusion in local governance.

It is true that the quota system has resulted in over 100,000 Dalit women elected representatives across the country today. Unfortunately, however, *political representation* through quotas has not led to *effective political participation* for the majority of Dalit women. The main obstacle is the multiple discrimination these women face arising from the entrenched caste hierarchy, chronic poverty and patriarchy.

In terms of accessing local governance institutions, recent research¹ shows that dominant castes often engineer elections by propping up Dalit women as proxy candidates. They exploit these women's vulnerabilities as 'low' caste illiterate women, as dependent on dominant castes for their livelihood, as lacking sufficient financial resources to meet election expenses. Another method of electoral engineering is through determining consensus

candidates under the guise of tradition or community harmony. In some States such as Gujarat, this is further legitimised by the State itself granting monetary rewards for local governments which forgo the election process in favour of adopting consensus candidates chosen inevitably by dominant caste men.

Other women face direct obstructions anywhere from the time of filing nominations right up to announcement of the election results, including: caste and sexually-based verbal abuse; disparagement of the women's political capacity; harassment, threats or physical assaults; property destruction; restrictions on freedom of movement; and illegal and fraudulent voting practices. The clear trend is to weed out potentially independent-thinking and acting Dalit women from successful nomination. This is done to ensure that local government development benefits remain in the hands of dominant castes and do not reach the Dalits.

In terms of exercising authority when successfully elected to local governments, while around one-third of women are able to freely and independently exercise their right to political participation against tremendous odds, the majority are made to effectively act as proxies for primarily dominant caste men. Most elected Dalit women feel they are treated differently from other local government representatives primarily due to being female and Dalit. Overt discriminatory practices are prevalent in local government offices, including prohibitions on Dalit women sitting on chairs alongside other elected representatives; drinking water or tea from vessels used by dominant caste elected representatives. Some Dalit women attempt to actively participate in meetings and taking decisions, but are silenced or ignored; subjected to 'no confidence' motions to remove them from office; denied information and support to undertake their duties; etc. This situation is not helped where government officials refuse to address caste and gender discrimination or proxy representation as part of their monitoring local government functioning.

All these obstacles prevent Dalit women from exercising effective political authority, which then ***compromises their ability to deliver more caste and gender responsive development outcomes***. Instead, they see development schemes and funds, even those earmarked for Dalits, being siphoned off towards dominant caste communities, further exacerbating the large development gap between them. Political participation through quotas, therefore, in the absence of other measures, has potential to lead to a situation where caste and gender hierarchies are reinforced, and Dalit women are deterred from effective political participation in future.

What then are a few of our recommendations to improve the situation?

- Focus explicitly on the political empowerment of Dalit women in national development plans;
- Make adequately funded education and development plans for Dalit women in local government mandatory;
- Implement and monitor strictly government sanctions against proxy candidature as well as gender and caste discrimination;
- Provide mandatory trainings to government officials on such issues of proxies and discrimination, and sanctions against those who allow both practices to operate;
- Monitor the election of Dalit women as well as their participation in local governments, conduct special capacitation trainings for them, take prompt action on complaints from them, and to facilitate this work, establish support offices with adequate facilities.
- UN bodies should request states for information on the political participation of Dalit women separately in all relevant reports.

Thank you for your attention.

¹ Jayshree Mangubhai, Aloysius Irudayam sj & Emma Sydenham, *Dalit Women's Right to Political Participation in Rural Panchayati Raj: A study of Gujarat and Tamil Nadu* (Madurai: Justitia et Pax, Institute of Development Education, Action and Studies & Equalinrights, 2008)