

Private Sector

A result of the 2011 adoption of the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights by the Human Rights Council was a new, authoritative global standard to prevent and address adverse impacts of business activities on human rights. The UN Working Group on the issue of human rights and transnational corporations was established to promote these principles.

IDSN made a submission to the Working Group with recommendations for addressing the issue of caste discrimination and inclusion of groups affected by this form of discrimination. This was done in response to an invitation to stakeholders to submit input in advance of a public consultation in May on themes and modalities for the first annual Forum on Business and Human Rights in December 2012. Further lobbying to promote the issue with the secretariat of the Working Group was done with an initial positive response.

The Guiding Principles emphasise non-discrimination with particular attention to the rights and needs of individuals from vulnerable and marginalised groups or populations. Important international standards and initiatives on business and human rights are increasingly converging around these principles.

The problem of bonded labour in South Asia was highlighted in several reports in 2012. In a follow-up to their 2011 report 'Captured by Cotton', The Centre for Research on Multinational Corporations (SOMO) and the India Committee of the Netherlands (ICN) published 'Maid in India' with findings on the labour conditions for the young women/ girls, mainly Dalits, working in the South Indian garment and textile industry under the so-called Sumangali scheme. Many problems remain unsolved, but the report notes that efforts to abolish the Sumangali practice – a form of bonded labour – have had some effect.

The insufficient progress was further documented in Anti-Slavery International's report 'Slavery on the High Street'.³³ Findings of this research show that while some suppliers have left the practice of withholding salaries for three years, a range of other labour rights problems still exists, including restrictions on the right to freedom of movement, as the workers are not allowed to freely leave the factory hostels.

Almost all bonded labourers in South Asia... belong to a minority ethnic group or caste... It is crucial to understand that there remains a stratum of human beings in South Asia who are deemed exploitable and expendable by society at large. Siddharth Kara, Bonded Labor, Columbia University Press 2012, p.6

IDSN members DSN-UK and DNN have been actively involved in the multi-stakeholder process involving producers, buyers, trade unions and NGOs undertaken to improve conditions for the Sumangali workers as a result of the reports mentioned above.

The link between caste and bonded labour was also highlighted by another IDSN associate, Franciscans International, in their publication 'Modern Slavery in India'. This research documents that the majority of victims of trafficking and other forms of slavery and bonded labour are Dalits and Adivasis.

This fact is furthermore demonstrated by the respected researcher Siddharth Kara in his 2012 publication 'Bonded Labour – tackling the system of slavery in South Asia', which documents abysmal conditions for workers trapped in slavery in a wide range of sectors throughout the region. He draws attention to caste as a factor that compels the 'lowest castes' to remain in forced labour conditions, and allows the 'higher castes' to exploit their labour.

The IDSN secretariat provided input to a Copenhagen Business School research project on production of garment and textile products in India and Pakistan aiming at exploring the caste dimension in the production chain. The research is in its initial phase, and IDSN has offered to be an associate partner to the research project once it materialises.