

BANGLADESH

Dalits in Bangladesh continue to exist on the margins of society. The focus of the struggle for Dalit rights in 2014 was on fighting discrimination through securing legal protection and advocating for the socio-economic development and political rights of Dalits. Dalit women's issues were also addressed on several occasions and a campaign on the International Day for the Elimination of All forms of Racial Discrimination helped create mass awareness of Dalit human rights in Bangladesh.

Demanding the enactment of the Anti-Discrimination Law

In order to strengthen legislative measures to protect Dalit rights, IDSN member the Bangladesh Dalit and Excluded Rights Movement (BDERM) submitted a draft anti-discrimination law to the Bangladesh Law Commission, which was subsequently submitted to the Ministry of Law. BDERM continued to lobby with Government and parliamentarians for the enactment of this bill and other key Dalit rights issues. This included holding a consultation with 10 parliamentarians who committed to furthering Dalit rights. BDERM also maintained strong links to the National Human Rights institutions in Bangladesh, to further push for the rights of Dalits.

Several events and marches were staged to push for the enactment of this law by BDERM, The Bangladesh Dalit Parishad (BDP) and Parritran (Dalit rights NGO), including a colourful rally and human chain in Dhaka in connection with Human Rights Day and World Dignity Day.

The need for the enactment of the new anti-discrimination law in Bangladesh, was also brought to the attention of the United Nations. Speaking at the IDSN co-organised UN Human Rights Council side-event on 'Caste-based violence against women,' Afsana Binte Amin, of BDERM, asked for international support to further this law.

"We are demanding an antidiscrimination act for Dalits in Bangladesh. Civil society organizations and the National Human Rights Commission in Bangladesh along with the Law Commission have submitted the draft law to the Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs, Bangladesh. We wish for the international communities to encourage our government to pass the law" Afsana Binte Amin, speaking at the 2014 IDSN UN side-event on 'Caste-based violence against women'

Other speakers at the side-event also highlighted the plight of Dalit women in Bangladesh and the need for action to protect Dalit women's rights.

Dalit women's issues addressed nationally and internationally

Indications of "... high levels of violence against women from religious and ethnic minority communities, with Dalits, Hindus and indigenous groups most at risk," were documented in the country visit report on Bangladesh, released in 2014, by the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, Rashida Manjoo. The report also stated that the rate of rape is higher for minority women in Bangladesh because they are considered "double infidels" for being women and also for being part of a religious minority.

In 2014, the National Human Rights Commission in Bangladesh, assisted by BDERM, organized a seminar on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) that analysed the situation of Dalit women. Members of the Bangladesh Dalit and

Excluded Women Federation (BDEWF), a national platform of Dalit women organisations, organised meetings with key Dalit leaders and Panchyats (village councils) and the federation's Annual Conference.

Dalit woman leader, Moni Rani Das, spoke at several seminars on Dalit rights throughout the year. In December, Moni Rani Das also travelled to Kathmandu to meet with other Dalit women leaders from Nepal and India and take part in several events in connection with the people's SAARC. Several of the events specifically addressed Dalit women's rights and intersectional caste and gender discrimination.

Joining forces regionally through the Asia Dalit Rights Forum and Parliamentarian's forum

Moni Rani Das, Zakir Hossein and other Dalit human rights defenders from BDERM were also in Kathmandu in connection with a meeting of the newly established Asia Dalit Rights Forum. In connection with the people's SAARC in Kathmandu, a benchmark meeting of the [Asian Parliamentarians' Forum on Dalit Concerns](#) was held, with participation of five parliamentarians from Bangladesh.ⁱ

In Kathmandu, the release of a benchmarking study on the status of Dalits in Bangladesh vis-a-vis the Draft UN Principle and Guideline on Work and Descent Based Discrimination was announced, although the digital release is still pending.

Spotlighting access to water, sanitation, housing, budgets and education for Dalits

In order to address the severe issues faced by Dalit communities in Bangladesh in relation to access to water, sanitation, housing, budgets and education, BDERM organised a number of seminars.

"We do not like this lifestyle, but there is no option. Nobody will rent us houses in other areas," Jony Das, resident in a Dalit colony

These included the seminar '[Housing and Land Rights: Accessibility and Realities of Dalits in Bangladesh](#)', where stakeholders met to discuss ways forward. Recommendations issued included ensuring permanent housing for Dalits, proper monitoring by the Government of funding meant to reach Dalits, and conducting a survey and mass awareness raising campaign on Dalit rights.ⁱⁱ

In 2014, BDERM submitted a memorandum to the Finance Ministry demanding special allocation in the national budget for Dalit communities. The Government has subsequently allocated funds to build houses for Dalit cleaners in divisional cities and funding for social safety nets in 22 districts.

BDERM also jointly organised the seminar "Water and Sanitation: Access and Reality of Dalit Community." Speakers at the seminar noted that Dalit communities were suffering from an acute crisis of safe water. They also observed that this underprivileged section of the society had very little access to sanitation.

A seminar was also organized on 'Rights to Education for Dalits' with participation of educators, civil society representatives and Dalit leaders. Throughout 2014, BDERM has been lobbying for the admission quota in higher education. In response to this work, six public universities enacted admission quotas for Dalit students in the 2014-15 academic year.

Despite Dalits having more access to education than previously, many young Dalits comment that discrimination continues to be a barrier to employment. The literacy rate is far below that of the general population, assessments go as low as 10%, underpinning Dalit representatives' call for official surveys and in-depth studies on the socio-economic conditions of Dalits in Bangladesh.

ⁱ [Press Release: Asian Parliamentarians' Forum on Dalit Concerns and Asia Dalit Rights Forum at People's SAARC in Kathmandu, 25 November 2014](#)

ⁱⁱ [Bangladesh: Dalits fight for their rights – hold anti-discrimination marches and a housing rights seminar](#)