

PAKISTAN

A defining event in the 2014 struggle for the rights of Dalits in Pakistan was the [mass protest](#) of 15,000 Hindus, the majority of them Dalits, through the streets of Karachi.ⁱ The march was organised to push for the provincial Government of Sindh in Pakistan to meet their demands for provisions to stop escalating discrimination against Hindus in the region.

The protest came following a string of attacks on non-Muslim communities in the form of murders, kidnappings, forced conversions and attacks on places of worship.

The demand paper presented by the protesters to the Government included a number of key actions to be taken to end the discrimination and attacks lodged at scheduled caste Hindus. Protesters also demanded an urgent investigation into the ongoing humanitarian crisis in the Thar desert to address the social, economic and political root-causes of the issue in order to bridge the growing discontent in the region.

The protesters furthermore urged the government to implement the landmark verdict of the Supreme Court of Pakistan, announced in May 2014, in which the apex court has asked the government to constitute a National Council for minorities' rights, to form a Special Police Force for the protection of worship places of minorities and remove hate material from the school curriculum. They demanded that measures be taken to implement all the recommendations including enforcement of the relevant policy directives regarding reservation of quota for minorities in all the government services.

This protest sums up many of the core issues that IDSN and the Pakistan Dalit Solidarity Network (PDSN) have been working on in Pakistan this year. To draw the attention of the UN Special Rapporteurs to the many serious issues faced by Dalits in Pakistan, IDSN and PDSN submitted a [briefing note](#) to them ahead of their annual meeting in September 2014.ⁱⁱ Pirbhu Lal Satyani, of the Pakistan Dalit Solidarity Network (PDSN) also formed part of the IDSN team participating in the UN Minority Forum in November, where he delivered a [statement](#) on violence against Dalits and religious minorities in Pakistan.ⁱⁱⁱ

“A combined effect of low education levels, exclusion from family decision making processes and a lack of property rights make Dalit women vulnerable to labour exploitation and bondage. Rape of female bonded labourers is widespread and violent, and there is little legal recourse.” UN minority Forum Statement of Pirbhu Lal Satyani, Pakistan Dalit Solidarity Network (PDSN)

Dalit women struggle for freedom from captivity and abuse

An upsurge in forced conversions and marriage of Dalit girls into Muslim families, kidnappings and enslavement of Dalit women has been witnessed in 2014. Captivity, enforced by the use of violence, is a key issue for Dalit women in Pakistan. The women have little or no access to justice or protection and are therefore considered easy prey.

Dalit women working in bonded labour in Pakistan's brick kilns and similar industries are often considered the property of landlords and raped and abused by them. Landlords are also often

involved in arranging marriages for Dalit girls of bonded labourers and exercise control of most aspects of the workers lives.

Breaking out of caste-based slavery remains a dream for most Dalits

It is estimated that there are several hundred thousand Dalits working in bonded labour in Pakistan. Bonded labour is particularly common in the areas of agriculture, brick-making, carpet-weaving, mining, tanning, cotton seed production, handicraft production, production of glass bangles, and domestic work.

A 2014 expert [seminar](#) on bonded labour in Pakistan heard that labourers were denied basic rights of free movement, education and health facilities and reasonable wage and that in most cases the situation was that of modern slavery.^{iv} Experts also pointed out that while brick kiln production has been declared an industry, their workers were still not given the status of industrial workers and they were not covered under the labour laws, and not receiving social security or other benefits.

The [2014 Global Slavery Index](#) released by the Walk Free Foundation also pointed out that lower caste groups in Pakistan are not seen as equal citizens and therefore are not protected through policies and other provisions and their enslavement is culturally sanctioned.^v

“A weak rule of law, widespread corruption, and poverty reinforce political, social, and economic structures of modern slavery in Pakistan. Underpinning this are culturally accepted practices that are tantamount to modern slavery... This reinforces perceptions that lower caste groups are not equal citizens and subsequently limits policy and service provisions tailored to their needs.” 2014 Global Slavery Index by the Walk Free Foundation

An [inspirational story](#) of a Dalit woman, Veeru Kohli, was reported in the media in 2014, as an example of a woman with unimaginable courage who broke free from slavery and is now fighting for others to do the same.^{vi} She told her story in a Pakistani television special on bonded labour where Zulfiqar Shah of the Pakistan Dalit Solidarity Network (PDSN) also participated.

“My husband, my children and I were kept separate from each other... My daughter was dying of starvation because the landlord whose field I was working on was not paying me anything. When I confronted them, they beat me up.” Veeru Kohli, Dalit woman and former bonded labourer, now working to help others escape.

Breaking out of slavery for Dalits in Pakistan is extremely difficult and bears a significant risk for those who try, and also there are no proper rehabilitation schemes in place for the freed slaves.

Dalit children starve to death in the Thar Desert

Starvation and hunger is a real threat to many Dalits in Pakistan, particularly those in the Thar desert, which is often hit by droughts. Network members and associates, especially PDSN and the Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) have worked for many years to highlight disaster preparedness in relation to drought in the region, but despite their efforts little has been done by the state. In 2014, PDSN raised the alarm again in March when more than [100 children starved to death](#) in the Thar desert, many of them Dalits.^{vii}

A number of NGOs pointed out that authorities were culpable over the failure to provide the Tharparkar region with adequate healthcare and infrastructure to prevent this situation recurring year after year.

PDSN demanded that the government allocate adequate funds for establishing medical care and that mobile medical units be sent to the desert areas to save human lives. They also asked that the government chalk out a long-term socio-economic development programme for the Thar desert, focusing on marginalized communities such as scheduled castes so they are less affected in the future. IDSN covered this in a [news story](#) and spread this to relevant disaster relief actors working in the region.^{viii}

Despite promises from the Government to act, little was done and later in the year [in September Dalit children were again dying](#) in the Thar desert, due to a new drought.^{ix} PDSN issued a press release calling for action and IDSN reported on this and spread the news through the IDSN network and political and media channels.

In a media report, Sono Khangarani of the Pakistan Dalit Solidarity Network (PDSN), called for coordinated efforts to replace broken promises, commenting on the need to prioritize the health and nutrition of the children, establishing systems for early warning, equitable distribution of relief for humans and livestock, and ensuring water security in the specific environmental context. He called for NGOs, Government and agencies to coordinate and work together to make sure the situation is not repeated.

“This time, we have no excuse to ignore the way forward and must re-affirm our commitment to end drought emergencies through a sustainable long-term approach that ensures every step will be taken to support the people of Thar. This will require close coordination, initiative and engagement from both the myriad of NGOs working in the area, and government departments. Unfortunately, as the people of Thar have witnessed all too often, failure to do so can result in catastrophic human and environmental tragedies.” Sono Khangarani, Pakistan Dalit Solidarity Network

Dalit human rights defenders at risk in Pakistan

Reports from PDSN throughout the year have made it clear that Pakistan is becoming increasingly difficult from the perspective of Dalits and religious minorities. Protection of the rights of vulnerable groups is not materializing on paper and the existing protections are not implemented.

Human rights defenders working on Dalit rights are threatened and intimidated and may be targets of false charges, accusations and mistreatment by the police and authorities.

PDSN is working in a very challenging and difficult environment and are looking towards international mechanisms for support. Nonetheless, they continue to undertake fact-finding missions, speak out publically on Dalit rights issues, work to end bonded labour and organise protests, seminars and press events to raise awareness and push for action.

ⁱ [Thousands of Dalits protest over attacks and discrimination in Pakistan](#)

ⁱⁱ [Religious Minorities in Pakistan: Scheduled Caste Hindus](#)

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- iii [Seventh session of Minority Rights Forum](#)
 - iv [Call for law to rid eight million people of bonded labour](#)
 - v [Caste at the root of India and Mauritania's position as top global slavery offenders](#)
 - vi [Unstoppable: Two workers risking lives to fight bonded labour in Sindh](#)
 - vii [Drought in Pakistan kills over 100 children – many are Dalits](#)
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 - ix [Dalits in Pakistan suffer from severe drought – despite promises to act](#)