

Recommendations for the 53rd Regular Session of the Human Rights Council (19 June – 14 July 2023)

In connection with their participation in the 53rd Human Rights Council session, States are encouraged to consider the ongoing and systemic practice of discrimination based on work and descent, also known as caste-based discrimination, affecting over 260 million people globally.

Caste discrimination is found in several regions of the world, including the Americas, Africa, Asia and Europe and is frequently addressed by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Special Procedures mandate holders. Nonetheless, more needs to be done to ensure that caste-based discrimination is recognised by the Council and mainstreamed into UN resolutions.

In the context of the reports presented at the 53rd Council session, IDSN recommends States to pay particular attention to caste-based discrimination to ensure it is included on par with other forms of discrimination in thematic HRC resolutions.

Interactive Dialogue with the Working Group on Discrimination against Women and Girls (21 June, 15:00 – 18:00; 22 June, 10:00 – 13:00)

The Working Group will present its report titled “Gendered inequalities of poverty: feminist and human rights-based approaches” ([A/HRC/53/39](#)). In the report, the Working Group referenced minority groups, and the intersecting discrimination that minority women living in poverty face stating that:

31. ... self-employed women, women domestic workers, and women waste pickers and street vendors, described the distinct ways in which poverty and inequalities shaped their lives. Many participants powerfully attested to the stress occasioned by the need to provide an adequate standard of living for their families, with limited resources, along with feelings of guilt due to having to leave their children to work long hours in poorly paid, informal and precarious employment.

42... The gender inequalities and poverty being exacerbated as a result of conflict, occupation, climate change and disasters have increased school dropout, sexual violence and exploitation, forced and child marriage, early and unwanted pregnancies and trafficking in women and girls.

The intersection of gender and caste discrimination in the spheres of health care, water, education, employment and social security entitlements present massive obstacles to Dalit women, severely affecting their welfare and opportunities. Dalit women are key targets of violence and are systematically denied choices and freedoms in many aspects of life. Relegated to hazardous or ‘unclean work’, Dalit women are often trapped in conditions of modern slavery and are targets for trafficking. 98% of those forced into the dehumanising work of manual scavenging, removing human waste by hand, or waste picking are Dalit women.

The indicators of success of the Sustainable Development Goals are often indicators of failure when it comes to Dalit women. When looking at health, SDG 3, in India, a Dalit woman lives *14½ years* less

than a dominant caste Indian woman.¹ Regarding education, SDG 4, in Pakistan, 90% of Dalit girls are not in school. When discussing equality, SDG 5, 125 million women are affected by intersectional caste and based discrimination worldwide.

Despite the discrimination that they face, Dalit women are creating movements to speak out against these systems of oppression. Movements in caste-affected countries are growing stronger connecting to international allies and reaching decision-makers around the world. Dalit women's movements are challenging these systems by organising marches, sit-ins, online grassroots activism, awareness-raising events, and a myriad of other ways to elevate their voices. IDSN's publication, [Caste and Gender Justice](#), gives an account of the trials and triumphs of Dalit women and girls' worldwide.

IDSN recommends that States:

- Participate in the Interactive Dialogue with the Working Group by engaging in practical and concrete measures to realise the equal rights of Dalit women, such as:

- (a) recognition of severe instances of discriminatory practices against Dalit women, their exclusion and marginalisation;**
- (b) praising and supporting the activism of Dalit women's and girls' organisations and movements;**
- (c) dialoguing about ways and means to support their activism at the United Nations and other multilateral organisations.**

Interactive Dialogue with the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression (23 June, 10:00 – 13:00, 15:00 – 18:00)

The Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, Ms. Irene Khan, will present her report "Sustainable development and freedom of expression: why voice matters". ([A/HRC/53/25](#))

Ms Khan report states that "more is needed to ensure that the voices of those most disadvantaged in society are heard. She argues that only when both access to information and the effective participation of youth, Indigenous communities, the media, human rights defenders, civil society actors and others are fulfilled will the promise to leave no one behind be realized."

The Special Rapporteur also highlighted:

29. Access to information is key to women's empowerment and agency, but structural inequalities and specific restrictions combine to undermine it. Significant barriers include low literacy levels resulting from unequal educational opportunities, a lack of access to the Internet, digital illiteracy, language problems, income poverty and time poverty, cultural and legal norms that deem it inappropriate for women to seek information from public authorities, and lack of responsive policies.

86. Online disinformation often targets scientists, journalists and human rights defenders, as well as vulnerable groups, including ethnic minorities and gender identity-based groups, and can contribute to violence, hatred and discrimination. Gendered disinformation seeks to discredit women, intimidate them from speaking freely online and prevent others from accessing the ideas and opinions they might otherwise share.

¹ <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2018/2/gender-equality-in-the-2030-agenda-for-sustainable-development-2018#view>

92. Almost 97 per cent of the world's population today is estimated to be living in countries where civic space is either closed, severely repressed, obstructed or has narrowed. Shrinking civic space means that marginalized communities, such as Indigenous Peoples, women living in poverty and individuals with disabilities, are less able to organize and voice their concerns. Those whom the 2030 Agenda pledged not to leave behind remain the least heard in decision-making, the most excluded from access to information, and the most exposed to harassment, discrimination and violence.

Numerous Dalit women activists and movements have embraced social media as an avenue to fight for justice. Initiatives such as #DalitWomenFight and #DalitHistoryMonth have exposed the issues that Dalit women face and serve as a rallying point to unite women facing these issues around the world. Unfortunately, as referenced by the Special Rapporteur, an online presence also brings significant challenges as well as opportunities.

Although individuals are often able to find or form communities online, IDSN's [Caste-Hate Speech](#) publication relays multiple examples of abuse of Dalit women who speak openly on Dalit issues on social media. Dalit women with a presence online often face the same discrimination and abuse that they face offline, with threats of doxxing, rape and murder. Hate speech that targets an individual's caste and gender discourages Dalit women bloggers, activists and communicators from speaking freely about the discrimination they face.

Although social media can be a place to bring people together, it has exposed Dalits, especially Dalit women, and other oppressed castes to an entire internet worth of trolls and abusers. "We are suddenly faced with an army of caste-speech abusers from nowhere. We realised physical distance is no longer a barrier to these abusers; this has put all our Dalit activists in a very vulnerable place" said Beena who was interviewed for the publication. "Alongside opportunities, digital spaces have also created an atmosphere of fear and intolerance, as there is more often than not outburst of obnoxious caste-hate speech".

IDSN recommends that States:

- **Participate in the interactive dialogue, supporting the report and emphasizing the need to protect the freedom of expression of minorities, particularly online, in order to create an enabling environment for minorities, especially minority women, to freely exchange their views online.**
- **Encourage countries where caste and gender hate speech are prevalent to increase efforts to combat such hate speech online and offline.**
- **Recognise that caste-hate speech is also a barrier to all aspects of social and economic development and the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals.**
- **Recognise caste as a protected characteristic with intersectional links with hate crimes, equality and labour legislation in particular and to ensure proper enforcement of these legislations.**

Interactive Dialogue with the Special Rapporteur on climate change (27 June, 15:00 - 18:00)

The Special Rapporteur on climate change, Mr. Ian Fry, will present his report on his visit to Bangladesh ([A/HRC/53/34/Add.1](#)). His visit report highlighted climate issues that affect Indigenous People's groups. While the Special Rapporteur did not engage directly with Dalit groups, the same issues that

affect Indigenous Peoples often affect Dalit communities, who are forced to the fringes of Bangladeshi society.

67. The Special Rapporteur met with representatives from a number of Indigenous Peoples' groups. Climate change is affecting their livelihoods, making it difficult to carry out their traditional practices. Indigenous Peoples from the Chittagong Hill Tracts, for example, have experienced landslides from excessive rain and then a lack of access to fresh water due to droughts...

The Special Rapporteur also notes that the affected groups had not been consulted on the climate change reduction scheme, Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation in Developing Countries (UN-REDD). Dalits in Bangladesh also suffer from a lack of consultation, as well as being poorly represented in politics and have even faced violence when trying to cast their vote. Due to the discrimination they face, the vast majority of Dalits are not involved with political parties.

The Special Rapporteur's report also stated that "Local water supplies have dried up, which means that women are required to walk for more than six hours a day to the lowlands to seek fresh water." (p80). IDSN's submission to the fourth cycle of the [UPR of Bangladesh](#) highlights the issues Dalits face when accessing water. In urban areas, Dalits are forced to live in 'colonies' without adequate water, electricity or sanitation. These colonies are usually situated around unclean locations on the periphery of society, with overflowing or choked drains, open sewers, lack of latrines and bathrooms and near garbage dumping sites. Here, Dalits largely depend on reservoirs which are not cleaned regularly, making the water unsafe for consumption.

IDSN's report on [Caste and Gender Justice](#) shows that in rural areas there are insufficient water sources accessible to Dalits. "When accessing water sources, they may be prevented from drawing water from local wells or taps through threats or violence. As Dalit women are the main collectors of water in most Dalit households, this puts them at risk of violence and also adversely impacts water provisions for their families" (p13). Though numerous, commendable measures by the Government of Bangladesh have been made to improve water and sanitation services for the general population, in urban and rural areas, it has had little effect on Dalit communities.

IDSN recommends that States:

- Participate in the interactive dialogue with the Special Rapporteur on climate change to develop concrete measures to address climate change affecting Dalits, in particular Dalit women. With specific reference to:

- (a) supporting the visit report and encourage Bangladesh to implement the relevant recommendations;**
- (b) expressing its concern about the situation of Indigenous people and Dalit communities, who are disproportionately affected by climate change and are often landless, forced to live in abandoned fields or on government owned land;**
- (c) strengthening its efforts to address discrimination against Dalits, a main cause of their vulnerability to climate change, through policies about de facto equality for Dalits and communities affected by caste discrimination, in consultation with these communities.**

Interactive Dialogue with the Special Rapporteur Report of the Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons, especially women and children (28 June, 10:00 – 13:00)

The Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons, Ms. Siobhán Mullally, will present her report on her visit to Bangladesh ([A/HRC/53/28/Add.1](https://www.ohchr.org/en/hrbodies/special/special-rapporteur-on-trafficking-in-persons/visits/visits-to-bangladesh)). Her visit report highlighted the vulnerabilities of Dalit children.

15. ... The Special Rapporteur highlights concerns raised in relation to children belonging to minority or indigenous groups, in particular Dalit children and indigenous children, who face discrimination and violence and may be at heightened risk of child trafficking, in particular those living in street situations.

As recognised by the Special Rapporteur, Dalit children are even more vulnerable than their adult counterparts. They face discrimination in education and are particularly vulnerable to child labour. Caste discrimination is a significant cause of low school admission and retention of Dalit children. In a survey conducted in 2021, 14% of Dalit respondents stated that they could not access education at all.² Dalit children are often mistreated in schools, subject to abuse from both students and teachers which, in concert with inadequate support and pressure to provide for the family, leads to high dropout rates. Many of these children then fall victim to prostitution and bonded labour trafficking.³

Dalit girls suffer multiple forms of discrimination at the intersection of caste and gender. Facing sexual and psychological harassment in educational institutions, further discourages them from attending schools or colleges. The 2021 study shows that only 5.9% of Dalit girls complete a secondary level education and a limited number of Dalit girls have completed a Higher Secondary Certificate. Other Special Rapporteurs have noted the same as Ms Mullally, stating that “The reality of Dalit women and girls is one of exclusion and marginalisation ... They are often victims of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights violations, including sexual abuse and violence. They are often displaced; pushed into forced and/or bonded labour, prostitution and trafficking”.⁴

IDSN recommends that States:

- Participate in the interactive dialogue with the Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons, especially women and children, to develop concrete measures to address trafficking affecting Dalits, in particular Dalit women. Particularly through:

(a) supporting the visit report and encouraging Bangladesh to implement the relevant recommendations;

(b) urging the Government of Bangladesh to develop and implement a national action plan to eliminate caste-based discrimination, with a particular emphasis on Dalit women and children;

(c) urging the Government of Bangladesh to take immediate action to end discrimination and ‘untouchability’ practices in schools and establish a special cell at the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs to prevent and monitor violations against Dalit women and children.

Further recommendations can be found in IDSN’s submission to the fourth cycle of the UPR of Bangladesh [here](#).

² <https://idsn.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Baseline-Study-Empowering-left-behind-minority-communities-to-effectively-participate-in-the-development-process-of-Bangladesh-project-June-2021.pdf>

³ <https://idsn.org/key-issues/dalit-women/dalit-women-in-bangladesh/>

⁴ Special Rapporteur on the Right to Adequate Housing (A/HRC/47/37)

Please note that some HRC53 reports have yet to be published but could prove relevant. An overview of all reports for this session can be found [here](#).

For more recommendations on caste discrimination within the UN framework see the [draft United Nations Principles and Guidelines for the Effective Elimination of Discrimination Based on Work and Descent](#) (2009)

For a full compilation of references to caste-based discrimination in UN human rights bodies see: [IDSN compilation of UN reference to caste discrimination](#).

Launched in March 2017, by the OHCHR, [Guidance tool on descent-based discrimination: key challenges and strategic approaches to combat caste-based and analogous forms of discrimination](#) offers concrete suggestions for actions to address caste-based discrimination in caste affected countries.

Published in November 2017, [IDSN Roadmap](#) to the OHCHR Guidance tool on Descent-based discrimination offers a simplified overview of the above Guidance tool.