

## Statement by Laxme Das at the UN Forum on Minority Issues 2023

### Dalit Women, girls' challenges: Aspect Bangladesh

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak today. My name is Laxme Das. Today I will be speaking to you about the situation of Dalit women and girls in Bangladesh.

Caste discrimination affects more than 260 million people worldwide, mostly living in South Asia. It involves huge violations of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights. Caste systems divide people into unequal social groups. Those at the bottom are considered 'impure'. This community calls themselves Dalits.

Bangladesh has a population of 170 million people, and it is one of the least developed countries in the world. The Department of Social Welfare shows there are around 6.8 million Dalits living in Bangladesh, however, according to Dalit NGOs, this number is likely much higher. Dalit communities have the lowest position.

Caught between the caste and patriarchy, Dalit women face multiple forms of discrimination and violence due to caste, and gender. These forms of discrimination make them particularly vulnerable. Dalit communities themselves often place severe restrictions on women's rights, mobility and freedom, particularly in relation to marriage.

Caste-based discrimination includes practices of untouchability, which comes from the idea that different caste groups have different standards of purity and pollution. These untouchability practices are imposed by the dominant castes of both the Hindu and Muslims communities and can include refusal of entry to public spaces. At tea shops, Dalits are forced to bring a cup along with them because the cup they use is considered polluted. If Dalits challenge these practices, they often face violence.

Historically, Dalits have been excluded from education so most Dalit women are illiterate and have no formal education. In school, Dalit children cannot sit together with other children, are forced to clean

the toilets, and face abuse from both students and teachers. A 2019 survey shows that very few Dalit girls go to school. Of the girls that finish primary education, 95.8% of girls do **not** complete secondary level and very few achieve higher education. So, Dalit women are trapped in their caste professions, doing cleaning or street sweeping. They face regular abuse from both employers and the public. Dalit women can also be forced into situations of bonded labour or slavery like conditions. If a Dalit woman can find other work, she will often face sexual harassment by dominant caste people in the workplace.

Bangladesh is highly vulnerable to climate change and natural disasters. Dalits are not included in any specific national policies on risk reduction programmes. This affects Dalits and especially Dalit women as they are often excluded from receiving information regarding the available services to cope with disaster risk, so they have no preparedness knowledge about climate adaptation. During disasters, Dalits face caste-based discrimination when trying to access shelter or relief and rehabilitation programs. If Dalits are allowed into shelters the dominant caste peoples force them to sit in dirty places or tell them, “You are Dalit and you are untouchable so you should isolate yourself to make the shelter pure”. Many Dalit women are at risk of sexual exploitation in these disaster shelters.

Women in Dalit communities are often victims of rape, gang rape, sexual harassment, forced conversion and forced marriage. They are also victims of trafficking and forced labour but Dalit women rarely see justice. People who commit these crimes often get away with it, as Dalit women are unaware of their rights or do not have money for lawyers.

There is a shortage of safe drinking water and healthy sanitation in the places where Dalits live. In sweeper colonies, there are 3 or 4 toilets for every 40 to 50 households. Women in Dalit communities often have limited access to local services like maternal health, family planning, or other health services. Pregnant mothers and children suffer from malnutrition due to lack of information, these are the main causes of maternal death. Local doctors will not touch a Dalit patient and will stand away at a distance without properly examining them.

Recommendations for the Government of Bangladesh: We ask all stakeholders, member states and treaty bodies to take the following up with the country whenever they can:

- The Government of Bangladesh should ensure the census includes Dalits
- They should enact and implement the Anti-Discrimination Act
- GoB should address Dalit women and girls health services
- A special cell should be set up in Ministry of Women and Children to take action against Dalit women violence
- Actions should be taken to encourage the political inclusion of Dalit women
- GoB should allocate a quota for Dalits in public and private jobs

At the national level: A Parliamentary caucus should be formed for Dalit Rights.

In addition, we ask CSOs to come together to build a Joint advocacy platform for Dalit women's empowerment.

Thank you for listening.