International Dalit Solidarity Network

WORKING GLOBALLY AGAINST CASTE DISCRIMINATION

**IDSN submission - Call for input – 2026 HRC Report on minority issues**

*Submission by the International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN), February 2025.*

**Civil Society input on the question of 'What are minority issues?"**

1. **Which country (or countries) does your civil society organization operate in or from?**

The International Dalit Solidarity Network is registered in Copenhagen, Denmark. IDSN is an International Secretariat that works to coordinate the network's membership and raise awareness internationally.

IDSN has 22 member and affiliate Dalit-rights NGOs that operate and are registered in India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bangladesh.

IDSN's network also consists of 4 Dalit Solidarity Networks (DSNs), which are national networks that raise awareness of Dalit issues in country. The 4 DSNs operate in the UK, Norway, Finland and Germany.

2. **Is the country where you are based the country you are working on/with?**

No - IDSN's work is not done on the issues of the country it is based in. The purpose of IDSN is to work on caste-based discrimination and Dalit issues at the international level. This is undertaken at the UN, EU and other international fora, focusing on the human rights of Dalits in India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bangladesh. IDSN takes its strategy and direction from its South Asian Dalit members and Board.

The DSNs work to contribute towards the work of IDSN within their country. In this case, their work may be with other actors in this country.

3. **What is the main focus of your organization regarding minority issues?**

The primary focus of the organisation is the rights of Dalits, and others subjected to caste-based discrimination.

Previous Special Rapporteurs on Minority Issues have taken Dalit issues (descent-based discrimination) under the purview of minority rights either by a specific report as in 2016 or by reports to the UN General Assembly.

The Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues' January 2016 report to the Human Rights Council[1] outlines the utility of applying a minority rights approach to Dalit issues. The report highlights the complexity of addressing caste-based discrimination within a minority rights framework due to the belief that 'lower caste'[2] groups do not strictly fall under the category of being a minority. However, the report stated that caste-affected groups do "share minority-like characteristics, particularly their non-dominant and often marginalized position, stigma, and the historic use of the minority rights framework to claim their rights"[3]. Accordingly, the Special Rapporteur argues "that a minority rights approach can provide a valuable platform for the protection of the rights of caste-affected communities and that minority rights standards, including equality, non-discrimination, consultation, participation and special measures, should be applied to combat discrimination based on caste and analogous systems"[4].

The Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues' reports of July 2020[5] and August 2023[6] to the UN General Assembly further cement the application of a minority rights framework to caste-affected communities. The 2020 report to the General Assembly goes further than the 2016 report, explicitly defining Dalits as being in the category of 'ethnic minorities'[7]. The 2023 report to the General Assembly further strengthens and clarifies this notion, stating that "descent-based…groups can constitute ethnic minorities under international law…including such groups as Dalits"[8]. The report outlines the necessity of providing certainty and guidance on who constitutes a minority to prevent the exclusion, or denial of the human rights, of persons belonging to minority groups.

**4. What is your role within the organization?**

IDSN has a small Secretariat and works for the promotion and protection of Dalit human rights through the UN human rights mechanisms, the European Union, ILO etc. IDSN's UN advocacy works to support the recognition of caste discrimination as a serious human rights problem and encourage states to ensure the promotion and protection of the human rights of Dalits and other caste-affected groups.

**5. What are minority issues as perceived by your organization?**

IDSN perceives minority issues as the systemic discrimination and exclusion faced by Dalits and caste-affected communities, impacting their civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights.

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[1] A/HRC/31/56.
[2] The term 'lower caste', whilst used in A/HRC/31/56, implies, and thus tacitly reinforces the discriminatory hierarchy imposed by the caste system. IDSN strongly urges the use of 'oppressed caste' (rather than lower caste) and 'dominant caste' (rather than upper or higher caste).
[3] A/HRC/31/56, paragraph 21.
[4] A/HRC/31/56.
[5] A/75/211.
[6] A/78/195.
[7] A/75/211, paragraph 70(d).
[8] A/78/195, paragraph 55.

6. **Which groups (and if relevant, in which country) does your organization identify as facing minority issues?**

The caste system in South Asia stratifies society into hierarchical groups and is part of the social fabric of many South Asian countries and diaspora communities. Dalits, previously referred to as 'Untouchables', fall outside this system as an 'oppressed' caste, and are subjected to severe discrimination and exclusion.

Caste-based discrimination affects over 260 million Dalits worldwide. However, this number is estimated to be much higher due to caste discrimination not being recorded against Dalit Christian and Muslim minorities as well as it having become a global issue, including Dalit diaspora populations in, for example, the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia and Canada.

The Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues' January 2016 report to the Human Rights Council[9] outlined the proportion of Dalits across South Asia, but highlights the unrepresentative nature of much of these statistics:

*" 33. In India, according to official data,[10] Dalits (referred to as "scheduled castes") constitute more than 201 million people. This figure does not include Dalits who have converted or are born and raised within non-Hindu religious communities, such as the Dalit Muslim and Christian communities; unofficial statistics estimate that the actual number of Dalits in India is much higher.[11]*

*34. In Nepal, official data indicate that the Dalit population comprises approximately 3.6 million people,[12] although civil society organizations estimate that number at 5 million. In Bangladesh and Pakistan, where most Dalits belong to the Hindu minority, the figures are also contested. In Bangladesh, unofficial data estimate the Dalit population to range between 3.5 and 5.5 million people.[13] In Pakistan, the most recent official data, from 1998, estimate the Dalit population to be 330,000,[14] but researchers calculate that the actual number could be at least two million.[15]*

*35. In Sri Lanka, three parallel caste systems (Sinhala, Sri Lanka Tamil and Indian Tamil groups) coexist; caste discrimination is found in each one".[16]*

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[9] A/HRC/31/56.
[10] www.censusindia.gov.in/2011census/PCA/PCA_Highlights/pca_highlights_file/India/ Chapter-2.pdf, as cited in A/HRC/31/56.
[11] http://idsn.org/countries/india, as cited in A/HRC/31/56.
[12] Central Bureau of Statistics of Nepal, "National population and housing census 2011 (national report)" (November 2012), as cited in A/HRC/31/56.
[13] Iftekhar Uddin Chowdhury, "Caste-based discrimination in South Asia: a study of Bangladesh", working paper series, vol. III, No. 07 (Indian Institute of Dalit Studies, 2009), p. 2, as cited in A/HRC/31/56.
[14] www.pbs.gov.pk/population-tables, as cited in A/HRC/31/56.
[15] "Caste-based discrimination in Pakistan" , International Dalit Solidarity Network briefing note (May 2014), as cited in A/HRC/31/56.
[16] Sasikumar Balasundaram and others, "Caste discrimination among Indian Tamil plantation workers in Sri Lanka" in Tudor Silva and others, *Casteless or Caste-blind?*, pp. 78-96, as cited in A/HRC/31/56.

Dalits are not a homogenous group. Across Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh there are numerous sub-castes with distinct social roles, occupations (often assigned and forced), and regional identities. As implied in A/HRC/31/56, caste-based discrimination is not restricted to Hindu societies, having spread into Christian, Buddhist, Muslim and Sikh communities.

IDSN's work encompasses and expresses solidarity with other minority groups facing caste- and descent-based discrimination, such as the Burakumin in Japan.

**7. What are the main challenges these groups encounter in their country?**

Caste discrimination affects every facet of life and involves significant violations of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights. Caste-affected communities are denied a life with dignity and equality.

Although constitutional and legislative measures to protect the rights of Dalits have been enacted in some affected countries, the implementation of these laws remain weak and insufficient.

A central facet of caste-based discrimination is the practice of "untouchability". Untouchability stems from the notion that different caste groups have varying degrees of purity and pollution, with Dalits and other caste-affected groups deemed to be so impure that they can pollute other groups. Paradoxically, due to the worthlessness assigned to Dalits, Dalit women are frequently sexually abused by dominant castes. The effect of untouchability practices enforces Dalit powerlessness, separation and compounds inequality.

Impunity for the perpetrators of crimes against caste-affected groups and non-implementation of legislation permeates justice and law enforcement systems. Dalit cases are often not reported, investigated or prosecuted properly. Police-officers, lawyers and judges often belong to dominant castes, and are frequently unwilling to register, investigate, prosecute and hear cases of crimes against Dalits. Very few crimes against Dalits are reported and of those that are, even fewer lead to conviction.

Key issues:

- **Discrimination of Dalit women**, who face multiple and intersecting discrimination are a key target of violence, including sexual violence, and are systematically denied choice, services and freedoms in all spheres of life. They are also susceptible to forced marriage and forced conversions.
- **Discrimination of Dalit children**, who are discriminated in education, health, and labour, notably through school segregation, violence, lack of access to resources, and vulnerability to trafficking and bonded labour.
- **Caste-based slavery**: Forced and bonded labour is often interlinked with the caste system. Dalits are also more vulnerable to bonded labour due to socio-economic vulnerability.

- **Business and human rights**: Business operations in caste-affected countries are at a high risk of being based on the economic exploitation or seclusion and enslavement of caste-affected communities and others at the oppressed end of the caste hierarchy.
- **Education**: Discrimination against Dalits in the educational system is widespread at all levels, leading to illiteracy, drop-outs and further marginalisation.
- **Manual scavenging**, the removing of human excreta from dry latrines, railroad tracks and sewers by hand, is a caste-based and hereditary occupation form of slavery reserved exclusively for Dalits.
- **Political participation and representation**, is limited and unequal due to the persistence of discriminatory practices and their weak economic, social and political position.
- **Climate change**: Dalits face disproportionate climate impacts due to socio-economic exclusion, lack of resources, displacement and discrimination in disaster relief, worsening their vulnerability to environmental crises and extreme weather events.

In 2016, the Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues Dalits argued that Dalits are understood to "represent the victims of the gravest forms of caste discrimination"[17], being "regarded as 'inferior' and 'non-human'"[18] and "disproportionately affected by poverty"[19].

8. **How effective do you think current policies are in addressing these minority issues? Please choose between the following options and explain your choice:**
    1. **Very effective;**
    2. **Somewhat effective; or**
    3. **Not effective.**

Current polices are judged as "3. Not effective".

Current policies across all 5 South Asian countries are not effective at addressing minority issues, specifically caste-based discrimination, despite mentions in the country's constitution, legislation and some examples of good practice at local levels.

Many caste-affected countries have constitutional protections and anti-discrimination laws, but enforcement remains weak. Laws criminalising caste-based discrimination, such as India's Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, and Nepal's Caste-Based Discrimination and Untouchability (Offence and Punishment) Act, 2011, are not fully implemented.

Dalits continue to face socio-economic marginalisation, due to high poverty rates, lack of land ownership, and restricted access to decent employment. Despite legal prohibitions, caste-based bonded labour persists in many parts of South Asia, trapping Dalits in cycles of exploitation. Discrimination also extends to essential services such as education, healthcare, and humanitarian aid, further reinforcing systemic inequalities.

[17] A/HRC/31/56, paragraph 32.
[18] *Ibid*.
[19] *Ibid*.

Dalit women and children experience intersectional discrimination, facing even greater vulnerabilities due to their caste and gender, age or socioeconomic status. Dalit women are particularly at risk of gender-based violence and forced labour. Similarly, Dalit children are subjected to segregation in schools, a denial of educational resources and a heightened exposure to trafficking, preventing them from accessing equal opportunities and reinforcing oppression.

Impunity for caste-based crimes remains pervasive, with high rates of violence, including sexual violence, against Dalits going unpunished. Perpetrators, frequently from dominant castes, rarely face consequences, enabling a culture of fear, systemic injustice and discouraging Dalits from seeking justice.

The political representation and participation of Dalits remains severely limited, as dominant caste interests continue to overshadow Dalit rights in policymaking. The lack of representation prevents the enacting of policies that could improve the social and economic standing of Dalits.

9. **Do you consider that the perceptions of minority issues are shared by persons belonging to minority groups and by persons belonging to majority groups? Please elaborate.**

The human rights issues faced by Dalits exist because of the structural, systematic and systemic nature of caste-based discrimination. It cannot be tackled by the creation of legislation alone because the majority group (dominant castes) do not acknowledge the discrimination that Dalits are subjected to. Rather, they perpetuate and sustain the oppression of Dalits.

Entrenched biases and stereotypes about Dalits continue to shape societal attitudes and behaviours. These stereotypes are reinforced by the exclusion and marginalization of Dalits by dominant castes, leading to extreme poverty and limiting social mobility. Considered "untouchable", Dalits are often forcibly assigned degrading, menial, and hazardous jobs, such as cleaning human waste. This type of work adds to the stigmatisation they face, reinforcing their social exclusion. Additionally, dominant castes frequently deny or downplay the existence and severity of caste-based discrimination, making it harder to challenge systemic inequalities.

Social and physical segregation between dominant and oppressed castes reinforces misunderstandings and prejudices. The lack of dialogue between caste groups limits opportunities for challenging discriminatory beliefs. Furthermore, the spreading of harmful stereotypes and hate speech against Dalits is increasing, due to social media. These narratives disseminate ideas of caste superiority and inferiority or attempt to justify violence and discrimination against descent-based communities.

10. **Is there sufficient understanding of minority issues among the general public? If so, please elaborate. If not, what are the main reasons or the explanatory factors for this insufficient understanding of minority issues amongst the general public?**

In South Asia, there exists a significant perception gap between the majority (dominant castes) and the minority (oppressed castes). Societal and cultural inertia, along with vested interests, hinder efforts to recognise and address caste-based discrimination. Dalit voices remain underrepresented in media, politics, and various spheres of cultural, social, and economic life. Combined with misinformation and the absence of State action or education on Dalit issues, this contributes to widespread ignorance or indifference.

From an international perspective, there is also a lack of recognition, understanding, and acknowledgment of caste-based discrimination at institutions like the United Nations and the European Union. This issue is further compounded by the frequent turnover of UN and EU experts, Members of the European Parliament, and policymakers, which leads to a constant loss of institutional knowledge. As a result, the advocacy efforts and knowledge-building initiatives undertaken by NGOs are often rendered ineffective, as new officials must repeatedly be educated on the issue.

**11. Does your organization work to improve the understanding and recognition of minority issues? If so, how?**

The International Dalit Solidarity Network is dedicated to improving the understanding, recognition, and awareness of caste-based discrimination, with the ultimate goal of working towards its elimination.

Through its advocacy and awareness efforts, IDSN engages with international bodies, including the United Nations, to highlight caste-based discrimination and its impact on Dalit communities. The organisation also collaborates with member and affiliate NGOs, as well as national networks, to raise awareness and promote Dalit rights on a global scale.

Regarding research and documentation, IDSN conducts and publishes studies on issues related to Dalits, such as gender justice, business and human rights, and political participation. These publications offer evidence-based insights that inform policymaking and advocacy efforts.

Capacity building is another key focus, with IDSN supporting training programmes for Dalit activists and leaders to strengthen their ability to advocate effectively for their rights, with a focus on the next generation leadership. The network also facilitates workshops and seminars that develop skills in legal literacy and human rights monitoring.

Strategic partnerships play a significant role in IDSN's mission, as the organisation collaborates with international organisations, civil society groups, and academic institutions to amplify Dalit voices and issues. These partnerships help integrate Dalit concerns into broader human rights and development agendas.

IDSN actively engages in policy discussions at both national and international levels, advocating for the inclusion of Dalit perspectives and monitoring the implementation of laws.

**12. Do you consider that the perception of minority issues in your country is influenced by cultural, political, economic, historical or other factors?**

The perception of Dalit issues in South Asia is profoundly influenced by a combination of cultural, political, economic, and historical factors. Please refer to non-exhaustive list in Question 7.

13. **In your opinion, would improving the conditions for minority groups benefit society as a whole? If so, how?**

IDSN is unique as a global solidarity organisation focused on bringing the shameful practice of caste-based discrimination to an end. It is a hidden apartheid and just as that system has fallen, so must this one.

We believe in the equal status of all human beings, not only those deemed worthy, talented, meritorious, intelligent, creative or valuable. We are mindful of the extent to which different groups have often been deemed less worthy and 'lesser' humans. Improving the conditions for these minority groups creates a more equal and just society for all.

14. **Is there any additional information you wish to share about minority issues, including how minority issues in your country can be better addressed and/or successful initiatives in this regard.**

IDSN through its members has had a significant impact on the internationalisation of caste discrimination as a critical human rights issue. Through engagement with UN, EU and other multilateral institutions, IDSN has successfully lobbied for action-oriented approaches to address 'untouchability' and other human rights abuses against Dalits and similar communities that suffer discrimination on the basis of work and descent. The network produces crucial input in the form of documentation, strategic interventions and lobby action and supports national level lobbying. Interaction between members adds to the dynamics of the network.