

guardian.co.uk

First person

theguardianweekly

## Dalit women's aspirations brought home impact of 'double discrimination'

Emily Esplen visited a community in Dhaka where inspiring community organisers are showing change is possible

---

Guardian Weekly, Tuesday 11 January 2011 17:50 GMT

---

[A larger](#) | [smaller](#)



Two Dalit women of

the Telegu Coloney at Gabtoli, Dhaka. Photograph: Abir Abdullah/EPA

When I met members of the Dalit Women's Forum in Dhaka last month, they told me about the changes they want to see in their lives and communities. They want their daughters to go to school and stay in school. They want privacy and security when bathing in communal areas. They want health care and clean water. They want to earn their own money and not be dependent on their husbands and fathers.

These aspirations brought home to me the true meaning of "double discrimination". Dalit women find themselves on the lowest rung of the ladder in a rigid social hierarchy in which Dalits are classed as 'untouchables'.

Over 260 million people worldwide continue to suffer from caste discrimination, one of the most severe and forgotten human rights abuses that still persists in several countries. In [Bangladesh](#), there are around 5 million Dalits living in extreme poverty, deprived of adequate housing, healthcare, education, sanitation and transport.

Dalits are literally separated from the rest of the population. They are confined to living in so-called "colonies" that are perennially flooded. They are restricted to working in jobs such as sweeping streets and collecting rubbish and human waste.

Staggering as these realities are, we cannot talk about the human rights of Dalit people without bringing up women's rights that are also denied to Dalit women. Multiple layers of disadvantage have left more than 96% of Dalit women in Dhaka illiterate - a majority of Dalit girls drop out of school due to harassment and economic pressures.

Most are unemployed, as the limited jobs available to Dalits go to the men. Cases of rape and violent crimes committed against Dalit women are often ignored by police.

Inspiring community organisers such as Moni Rani Das, coordinator and founder of the Dalit Women's Forum, remind us that change is possible. Moni was the first Dalit girl to go to school in her community due to support from her father, who later insisted that she marry when she was 12. "After years of being a housewife, I realised I could not stay

home any longer and ignore the problems that Dalit women like myself faced," she told me.

After organising within initially resistant communities and lobbying dismissive public authorities, Moni says that the lives of Dalit women are now changing, and the Bangladeshi government is beginning to listen. The first step is empowering the very community one wishes to transform. "We now go outside our houses and it is an incredible precedent for Dalit women to earn their own money. This is the first time that we have understood that the lives we lived before were not human lives. "

Last month Moni received the One World Action/Sternberg Award in recognition of her work promoting human rights and her success in tackling the extreme poverty facing Dalit women. She is among the many incredible Dalit women who have struggled against discrimination and violence, but won't give up until their government and society take action.

They are also calling on the international community to play their part, and while in London, Moni met with UK parliamentarians and policymakers to raise awareness of the issue of caste discrimination and to endorse the [United Nations Draft Guidelines and Principles to Eliminate Discrimination Based on Work and Descent](#).

The extreme poverty of Dalits stems directly from their exclusion and discrimination within political, economic and civic life. International donors that support development initiatives need to recognise that the poorest citizens in the developing world are also the most excluded. Their empowerment will enable them to demand and access jobs, education and public services, to be active agents of their own development and to live a life of dignity.

*Emily Esplen is the Women's Rights Co-ordinator for [One World Action](#). One World Action supports over 40 partner organisations in Asia, Latin America and Africa, including the Bangladesh Dalit Rights Movement and the Dalit Women's Forum.*

guardian.co.uk © Guardian News and Media Limited 2011