

IDSN Annual report 2009: Executive summary



Two remarkable women made very important statements on caste discrimination in 2009. Moni Rani (left), a Dalit woman from the slums of Dhaka, told the Guardian newspaper: “If you are not considered to be human, human rights do not apply to you.” The UN High Commissioner, Navi Pillay, told the world that “the time has come to eradicate the shameful concept of caste”. (Photos: MARY GRIFFIN/GITTE DYRHAGEN)

“Tearing down the Wall of Caste”

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, made history in 2009. In an unprecedented recognition of the struggle for Dalit rights, she stated that the time has come to eradicate the shameful concept of caste, and called on the international community to come together to support such efforts. Comparing the campaign against caste discrimination to the ones that helped put an end to transatlantic slavery and apartheid, she argued that “we can and must tear down the barriers of caste too”.

The High Commissioner’s powerful thoughts are expressed in the opinion article “[Tearing down the Wall of Caste](#)”, published in October. She speaks from the depths of her own experience as a former anti-apartheid activist with a family background in India, and her words represent one of the greatest achievements of the Dalit cause till date. This achievement is an outcome of decades of commitment, struggle and determination of Dalits in local communities, enforced by national level advocacy, and, over the last decade, supported by a growing sense of responsibility among international actors to end this form of discrimination.

Ms Pillay's call for action is greatly encouraging for Dalits and similarly discriminated communities all over the world. The year 2009 offered other important benchmarks in countries with caste systems as well as internationally, demonstrating a broadening acceptance of the struggle against caste discrimination as a key theme in the human rights, development and security discourse of our time.

Several governments officially voiced their support for the draft UN Principles and Guidelines to eliminate caste discrimination, the first comprehensive UN framework to prevent and address this serious human rights issue and a cornerstone of IDSN's work for several years. At a UN Human Rights Council side event in September, Nepal became the first caste-affected country to endorse this international framework. The Government of Pakistan has also expressed its support for the UN guidelines.

The Government of India, on the contrary, habitually refusing to recognise caste discrimination as an international human rights problem, was challenged on several occasions, internationally and at home, to change its stance and support the efforts of the international community. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights appealed to all states to endorse the norms, which could lead to the establishment of a much needed UN monitoring mechanism, and also called for a Convention on caste.

Lobbying efforts intensified

In 2009, IDSN intensified its lobbying efforts directed at international and intergovernmental institutions, parliaments, national governments, civil society actors and international media. Sustained input and advocacy was underpinned by a series of interventions at the UN and the EU. In the course of the year, a cross section of Dalit leaders from affected countries have met with parliamentarians, diplomats, officials, and UN mandate holders at events and meetings organised by IDSN and contributed their expertise or policy advice to relevant forums, briefings and seminars. This included UN side events, an EU briefing on caste discrimination hosted by the Swedish Presidency, and a regional seminar in Dhaka on "Indigenous People, Minorities and Dalits" organised by the European Commission. At the Durban Review Conference, a large group of Dalits manifested their discontent at the continued neglect of the review mechanism to cater for a discriminated group of 260 million people.

UN Special Procedures increasingly voiced their concerns about caste discrimination based on enhanced engagement with Dalit organisations - often with IDSN as the interlocutor. The Special Rapporteur on Racism recommended states to engage in substantive discussions on caste discrimination and called on them to take action on the draft UN principles and guidelines. Other Special Rapporteurs and Independent Experts reported on the issue, including the Independent Experts on water and sanitation and on human rights and extreme poverty, expressing serious concern about the human rights situation of Dalits in Bangladesh after a country visit.

IDSN members and associates in affected countries were also deeply involved in political and legislative processes. In Nepal, Dalits and supporting organisations lobbied hard for constitutional and legal frameworks which engrain Dalit rights and address historical injustices. In India, Dalit organisations initiated a review process of the special legislation for “scheduled castes”, calling for political will at all levels of government to end caste discrimination. They demanded that laws be turned into reality and advocated special policies and budgets for Dalits.

Whilst the EU continued its political support in the UN for the Dalit cause, the European Commission commissioned IDSN to carry out a study that included operational advice on the integration of Dalit issues into EC development cooperation. As the draft UN Principles and Guidelines make clear, development actors, such as governments, NGOs, and multinational and bilateral institutions, have a particular responsibility to ensure that caste discrimination is addressed fully in development and humanitarian programmes.

More media focus

The year saw a welcome increase in media focus on the issue of caste discrimination, in caste affected countries as well as internationally. UN related events and in particular the High Commissioner’s statements received considerable international coverage, and the debate also took place on blogs and media websites. In May, IDSN launched an e-newsletter that - together with an upgraded website - has become an important source of information on the issue of caste discrimination to policy makers, activists and the media.

Finally, church leaders and human rights advocates further internationalised the struggle to end caste discrimination. A historic global conference on Justice for Dalits organised by the World Council of Churches and the Lutheran World Federation in March secured a firm basis for a global ecumenical movement against caste discrimination.

IDSN is indebted to its group of funding partners, who not only financially but also in many other ways engage in the struggle for Dalit human rights. We wish to express our gratitude to these organisations and many others - individuals, diplomats and institutions – who have given their support in so many ways. It is our hope that the group of ‘ambassadors for Dalit human rights’ will grow across the world in the coming years.

The year has been truly productive and encouraging for IDSN and the Dalit movement as a whole; but while there are very positive signs, Dalits continue to suffer appalling human rights violations in many countries. Women are particularly vulnerable, as they are subjected to discrimination because of their caste as well as their gender.

Navi Pillay’s extraordinary statement was a wake-up call to the international community as well as affected governments. Now words must be turned into action; 260 million victims of caste discrimination are waiting.