

One World Action's Sternberg Award 2010

Moni Rani Das, on behalf of the Dalit Women's Forum, Dhaka

The Sternberg is awarded every year by One World Action to an individual or organisation in recognition of their outstanding contribution to development and human rights. This year the award ceremony will take place at 6.30pm on December 14th at the Residence of the Swedish Ambassador in London at an event called, 'Celebrating Action for Women.'

One World Action is awarding the 2010 Sternberg Award to the Dalit Women's Forum in recognition of their work, vision and success in tackling caste discrimination and poverty in Dalit communities in Bangladesh.

Despite extreme discrimination, limited resources and a very challenging working environment the Dalit Women's Forum continue to make real progress in securing human rights and dignity for Dalit Women in Dhaka. Their success, in a relatively short space of time, is testament to their commitment and bravery. They have also made a powerful contribution to the national, regional and international movement against caste discrimination - supporting international lobbying for justice and change.

Background

We want our children to have the opportunities of education - to be teachers, doctors and engineers - the chances we could never dream of.

If you are not considered to be human, human rights do not apply.

Moni Rani Das, Co-ordinator Dalit Women's Forum

More than 260 million people worldwide continue to experience discrimination based on their caste and practices linked to untouchability. This hidden apartheid of segregation leads to extreme forms of poverty, exploitation, and violence. One third of the world's poor people are Dalit and caste discrimination is one of the most severe and forgotten human rights problems in the world - it is a major threat to achieving the Millennium Development Goals.

There are an estimated 5.5 million Dalits living in Bangladesh. Many are descendents of people brought from India by the former British colonial powers to do menial work. Though they have played a significant role in Bangladesh's development, Dalits are incredibly poor. In Dhaka, Dalits live in chronic poverty in so called 'colonies' and are deprived or excluded from adequate housing, health care, sanitation, transport and from participating in public spaces or places of worship. Dalits often have difficulty enrolling or accessing schools and hospitals, and approximately 96% are illiterate. Dalit communities experience daily insecurity and violence with usually no recourse to justice. In a country where 84% of its 137 million people live on less than

\$2 a day, Dalit women, excluded both by caste and gender, are the poorest of the poor.

In the face of this entrenched oppression and extreme poverty a small but powerful group of Dalit women have found the courage and strength to organise their communities and to demand change.

Moni Rani Das

The leader who has inspired them is Moni Rani Das, Co-ordinator and founding member of the Dalit Women's Forum. From a tiny room she is educating her community and raising awareness about the existence, culture and problems of Dalits in Bangladesh. An eloquent and powerful speaker she lobbies the Government and international donors for the equal treatment of Dalits, for their inclusion in development and to tackle caste discrimination. Very few Dalit children go to school and as a child Moni Rani was the first Dalit girl to be allowed in her community due to support from her father. Throughout her life she has faced discrimination, violence and attacks - she has also faced criticism from her own community.

Women are strengthening their position within their families and communities. When we work with women and provide them with work, community leaders get angry because they feel threatened - they don't want women to come into the light because they want to keep things as they are.

Dalit women have problems understanding their own situation but they are now more aware, there is more consensus and they have become more demanding due to our meetings, trainings and campaigns. They now go outside their houses and it is an incredible precedent for Dalit women to earn their own money. This is the first time that they have understood the lives they lived before were not human lives.

Moni Rani Das, Co-ordinator Dalit Women's Forum

Dalit Women's Forum

Women have always suffered discrimination in male dominated society. These women of Dalit communities suffer the most in this male dominated society. These women are suffering discrimination in three ways: firstly, being a woman, secondly, being a Dalit and Excluded, and thirdly, being a poor.

Moni Rani Das, Co-ordinator Dalit Women's Forum

The Dalit Women's Forum was formed in 2006. Their aim is to establish and preserve the social dignity of women and to provide support to make women financially independent.

The Forum have set up income generation and health projects that are already making tangible improvements and reducing the poverty of Dalit women. They provide human rights and literacy training, legal and health advice, support with

family mediation and are setting up simple financial services so for the first time women can access credit, save or take out insurance.

Their aims are:

- To raise awareness about issues facing Dalit women.
- To create equal opportunities for Dalit women in education, health and permanent housing.
- To arrange trainings and workshops in order to improve the working skills and employment opportunities of Dalit women.
- To carry out research on Dalit women and train Dalit women about their rights
- To create a quota system in the government and private educational institutions to facilitate Dalit women's education.
- To work towards creating national policies in favour of the women of Dalit and excluded communities.
- - To develop the Dalit Women's Forum as a stronger organisation in establishing rights of Dalit women.

Income security will always be a priority for informal sector women however we realised that without increasing the level of social consciousness and building the capacities of our organisations, any income generating schemes would not be sustainable. So we place equal weight on human rights training, organisational development, income generation and advocacy.

Moni Rani Das, Co-ordinator Dalit Women's Forum

Partnership of Women in Action was established in 2006 by Nagorik Uddyog and One World Action and continues to be supported by One World Action through its Programme Partnership Agreement with DFID. PaWA brought together five existing but fragile grassroots women's organisations working with informal women workers and Dalit women. PaWA supports informal women workers in Dhaka who share a common experience of low pay, dangerous, unregulated and unprotected working conditions, sexual harassment, inadequate shelter and health care, and the constant threat of eviction from homes and workplaces. PaWA has developed these organisations capacity, knowledge and ability to take collective action and all member organisations now have several thousand members, secure rented rooms and full time staff.

The Dalit Women's Federation, part of PaWA, is based in one of the Dalit colonies in central Dhaka.



Juli Rani Das, Mani Rani Das (centre) and Nipa Rani Das, Ganaktuli City Colony, members of Dalit Women Forum