

## **The Learning Environment and School Governance: a Discussion on the Draft Recommendation of the UN Forum on Minority Issues, Geneva, 15-16 December**

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*Madam Chair, Distinguished Colleagues and Participants*

Thank you for giving me this opportunity to discuss the draft recommendations on Minorities and the Right to Education with specific reference to the section on the Learning Environment and School Governance. Let me say that on behalf of approximately 4,600 000 Dalits or untouchable people residing in Bangladesh and their organizations as well as the International Dalit Solidarity Network, the perspective through which I shall be looking at this draft would be through the lens of discrimination based on work and descent, in other words caste discrimination.

Although with more than 150 million people Bangladesh is a Muslim majority nation, it still has a Hindu population of 10%, among whom a large portion are Dalits unofficially estimated (since no official census has taken place in current Bangladesh) to be about 4,600 000 according to a recent study (Kamal: 2008). It is interesting to note that although the caste system is originally derived from Hindu rituals and practice, it is also practiced by Muslim elites in some rural areas of Bangladesh. The caste occupations vary ranging from sweepers who were brought in from North and South India by the British in colonial times, traditional pig-rearers called *Kawras*, leather workers variously called *Rishis* or *Robidas* according to their locations and professions etc. There are also caste occupations among Muslims like the *Beheras* (palanquin carriers), or *Choudhalis* (fishermen) or the nomadic river gypsies, the *Bedays* or *Mantas*. My own institution, Research Initiatives, Bangladesh has undertaken to support several action researches with these communities, and generally it has been found that they lack access to basic services like health and education to the extent that they have often been termed “the missing communities”; missing that is in the development agendas of both governmental and non-governmental agencies. However, recently many Dalit groups are networking and organizing themselves (for example, the Bangladesh Dalit and Excluded Rights Movement or the Horjon Oikyo Parishad) to make their voices heard and undertaking advocacy campaigns with the Government, political parties and civil society

One of their crucial agenda is of course education, which as the draft recommendation accurately states is a strategic human right which enables the realization of other human rights and also constitutes a primary means by which individuals and communities can lift themselves out of poverty. Dalit groups in Bangladesh, whatever their occupation or their location may be, unanimously complain that their children face a hostile environment at school. They are often not enrolled, and once enrolled, are made to sit at the back, given punishment that are considered befitting for them like cleaning the toilets,

and generally discouraged to envisage a future that is free from the fetters of their immediate surroundings or social position. It from these perspectives that I make the following comments of the draft recommendations specifically related to the learning environment.

1. In the first recommendation in this section I would suggest that the word caste be also added to the last part of the sentence thus reading “whatever their ethnic, religious, cultural or **caste** background.
2. The second recommendation maybe further qualified to make specific reference to minority rights, since this is a draft recommendation for the minorities’ right to education.
3. Moreover it is particularly relevant to mention caste-specific discrimination in relation to vocational training, since the discrimination based on work and descent often leads to prejudices against certain vocational training. For example many refuse to take up training as a barber since in some areas it is considered to be a “lower caste” job notwithstanding the fact that in modern day market economics it can be quite a lucrative one.
4. In advocating that states should strive to ensure a proper learning environment for members of minority communities, mention should be made of different stages for example in enrollment of minority students, or in case of drop outs. Again it has been experienced among the nomadic river gypsies in Bangladesh that their children are often not enrolled not only because of social stigma but because they are mobile, and since they do not remain in the same area say after three months, the school has to show a higher rate of drop out to the authorities. Hence states should separately acknowledge the rights of nomadic people to education.

Finally forums such as these should look into some of the best practices that some of these communities have come up with and provide a mechanism, regional and international whereby one can learn from the other.

#### **Reference:**

Mesbah Kamal and Shereen Khan, (2008) Poverty Profile of Dalits in Bangladesh, Manusher Jonno Foundation, Dhaka.

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