

Dalit Children in Bangladesh

Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC)
70th Session, (14 September-2 October 2015)

Alternative NGO report by the International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN) (info@idsn.org)

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Introduction

The alternative report on Dalit children in Bangladesh is written by the International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN) and submitted to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child for the 70th Working Group session (14 September – 2 October 2015). The report examines the current situation of Dalit children and provides information about the implementation gaps in the enforcement of the International Convention on the Rights of the Child, and makes recommendations for the Committee’s examination. The observations are based on independent studies and reports, case documentation, and recommendations by other UN human rights bodies.

The *International Dalit Solidarity Network* is an international network that works on a global level for the elimination of caste discrimination and similar forms of discrimination based on work and descent. Members include national Dalit platforms in caste-affected countries; Dalit Solidarity Networks in seven European countries; and international associates, among others (www.idsn.org). Contact information: Email: info@idsn.org, phone: +45 6043 3432.

The report mainly addresses the CRC special protection measures cluster and specifically article 30 on children belonging to a minority or an indigenous group. However, it also covers Education, leisure and cultural activities, article 32 on economic exploitation, including child labour, with specific reference to applicable minimum ages (special protection measures), General principles, Violence against children and Civil rights and freedoms and basic health and welfare.

Background

Dalit Children in Bangladesh

Special protection measures: children belonging to a minority or an indigenous group (art. 30)

Caste discrimination affects both the Hindu and the Muslim populations in Bangladesh, and perpetuates the poverty trap the country is caught in. Dalits exist far below the poverty line with extremely limited access to health services, education and employment. They live in 'colonies' with very poor housing and work almost exclusively in 'the service sector', doing unclean jobs in urban areas such as street sweeping, manual scavenging and burying the dead.

The lives of Dalits are particularly harsh due to the practice of caste discrimination. They are frequently prevented from entering the homes of non-Dalits and are often met with discrimination when trying to bury members of their family at public graveyards. A large number of child labourers in Bangladesh are Dalits. Members of minorities, most of whom are Dalits, hold almost no official positions.

The estimates of the number of Dalits in Bangladesh vary from 3.5-5.5 million. They have been much overlooked in the development and rights discourse and have only recently been able to raise their voices. Having started to engage with government and international donors, they have now managed to place the issue of caste discrimination on the agenda. Girls and women from Dalit communities in Bangladesh often fall victim to prostitution and trafficking of bonded labour. They are deprived control, not only over property, but also over their own bodies. They are excluded from political participation, community development and employment, and have faced violent attacks when trying to vote.

Dalit children are even more vulnerable than their adult counterparts and face discrimination in education and are particularly vulnerable to child labour. Moreover, Dalit girls suffer multiple discrimination at the intersection of caste and gender discrimination.

➤ For more information [Download the IDSN briefing note on Bangladesh \(2015\)](#)

CRC observations on caste-based discrimination in Bangladesh

Though, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has yet to specifically address the situation of Dalit children in Bangladesh. The Committee has repeatedly voiced concern that children from vulnerable groups face discrimination and recommended for the State party to take necessary measures to address this persistent discrimination.

- The Committee is concerned that children face discrimination on the basis of social origin, or other status of their parents (CRC 2009)
- The Committee remains deeply concerned about persistent discriminatory attitudes towards girls, which are deeply rooted in traditional stereotypes and limit access to resources and services (CRC 2003)
- The Committee is also concerned about discrimination tribal children and other vulnerable groups (CRC 2003)
- The Committee is deeply concerned about the poor situation of children of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, and other religious, national and ethnic minorities, tribal groups or similar marginalized groups and the lack of respect for their rights, including the rights to food, to health care, to education and to survival and development, to enjoy their own culture and to be protected from discrimination (CRC 2003)

Recommendations

- The Committee recommends that the State party strengthen its proactive and comprehensive efforts to eliminate discrimination on any grounds and against all vulnerable groups (CRC 2003)

- The Committee recommends that the State party take the necessary measures to ensure that efforts to address persistent discrimination and reduce disparities are adequate and effective in the family, schools and other settings, and in particular among marginalized and excluded children, including girls, children of ethnic minorities and refugee children (CRC 2009)

Further resources

- Please see the [IDSN overview of UN references to caste in Bangladesh](#), January 2015
- [IDSN Compilation of UN references to caste](#)

Education, leisure and cultural activities: Dalit children in Education

Education, leisure and cultural activities: right to education, including vocational training and guidance (art. 28), aims of education with reference also to quality of education (art. 29), cultural rights of children belonging to indigenous and minority groups (art. 30), rest, play, leisure, recreation and cultural and artistic activities (art. 31)

Despite the Government's efforts to promote the right to education, most Dalit children do not complete formal education, with the majority attending for only one or two years. Poverty and caste discrimination within schools from both teachers and students are key reasons why Dalit families choose for their children to work rather than attend school. According to one study, 64% of Hindu Dalits and 61% of Muslim Dalits have no education at all. School enrolment rates are as low as 10%, with dropout rates of those that did attend school at around 95% compared to national enrolment rates of 85%. Over 80% of Dalits surveyed experienced discrimination in admission to schools, with some Dalit parents being actively discouraged by teachers from enrolling their children. Further, 82% of Hindu Dalits and 84% of Muslim Dalits had experienced discrimination by the time they had started school and many experience discrimination in schools, for example being forced to sit on the floor or to clean toilets.¹ Despite the Government's recent education policy which committed them to educate children in their mother tongue, this is still not being implemented. Further, there is no provision made for Dalit children to learn Bangla which is also a major barrier to them attending schools. In 2009, the CRC Committee strongly recommended that "the principle of non-discrimination, as provided for under article 2 of the Convention, be fully and vigorously applied by the State party and integrated into the implementation of all other articles to guarantee, without discrimination, the rights set out in the Convention. The Committee further recommended that the State party take the necessary measures to ensure that efforts to address persistent discrimination and reduce disparities are adequate and effective in the family, schools and other settings, and in particular among marginalized and excluded children, including girls, children of ethnic minorities and refugee children.

None of the government initiatives to achieve 'universal' access to primary education have had a specific focus on improving the literacy and educational levels of Dalits or countering the caste-based discrimination they face in schools. The implementation of even general educational measures to the benefit of Dalit students is not known in the absence of educational data that is disaggregated by social group.

Recommendations

¹ 'Bangladesh Report - Benchmarking the Draft UN Principles and Guidelines on the Elimination of (Caste) Discrimination based on Work and Descent', Bangladesh Dalit and Excluded Rights Movement (BDERM) 2014 <http://idsn.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/2014-Benchmark-Study-Bangladesh.pdf>

- National and local governments should take effective measures to reduce dropout rates and increase enrolment rates among children of caste-affected communities at all levels of public and private schooling, by providing scholarships or other financial subsidies, combating classroom segregation, harassment and discrimination against pupils of caste-affected communities and ensuring non-discriminatory access to such schemes, including through provision of adequate equipment, staffing and quality of teaching in public schools, as well as adequate means of physical access to schools for children living in dominant caste neighbourhoods and armed conflict areas.
- Governments should take all necessary measures to remove obstacles, including child labour, which keep children from regular full time education.
- Governments should also pay particular attention to the need of providing adequate education to children and adults who are unable to read and write because of lack of formal education.
- The government should constitute an 'Equity Working Group' within the Education Ministry to continually devise and monitor targeted education schemes for Dalits. These schemes should be devised in consultation with Dalit communities and CSOs. Schemes would include scholarships allocated for Dalit children in order to encourage their schooling and higher education.

Economic exploitation: Child labour and Dalit Children

Special protection measures cluster: Economic exploitation, including child labour, with specific reference to applicable minimum ages (art. 32)

Bonded labour and child labour represent a significant human rights problem in Bangladesh among Dalit communities. According to one study, 26% of Hindu Dalits and 35% of Muslim Dalits are, to a larger or smaller degree, bound by loans from employers. The Constitution prohibits forced or compulsory labour. However, implementation is lacking.² Also, laws, policies and programmes on forced, bonded or child labour currently being implemented by the Bangladesh government do not make reference to caste vulnerabilities to these forms of prohibited labour.

As per the national child labour survey 2002-2003 conducted by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) the estimated number of working children in Bangladesh is 7.4 million. Out of these, 3.2 million children are considered as child labour, of which 1.3 million children are engaged in hazardous labour.³ Again, many are likely to be Dalit children, given their poorer socio-economic conditions.

There are no specific measures and no disaggregated data available on the representation of Dalits among the country's populations engaged in bonded, forced and child labour. Without official tracking of the Dalit involvement in these forms of prohibited labour, the possibility to comment on the status of implementation vis-à-vis Dalits is very limited.

Recommendations

- The government should review its programmes to eliminate prohibited forms of labour - bonded, forced and child labour, including trafficking - and report on both how many Dalits are victims of these forms of labour as well as how many Dalits become beneficiaries of the various government efforts in this regard.

² Chowdhury, Iftekhar Uddin. (2009). Caste Based Discrimination in South Asia: A study of Bangladesh, *Indian Institute of Dalit Studies*, Working Paper Series, Vol III, No.7, New Delhi

³ National Child Labour Survey (2002-2003), Retrieved July, 2014 from: http://www.unicef.org/bangladesh/2002-2003_National_child_Labour_survey_2003_bd_report_en.pdf

Disability, basic health and welfare: Dalit children and health

Survival and development (art. 6, para. 2); Health and health services, in particular primary health care (art. 24); Social security and childcare services and facilities (arts. 26 and 18, para. 3);

Health surveys and research programmes undertaken with respect to the 'public health situation' in the country do not pay special attention to the child and maternal health conditions in the colonies and settlements where Dalit communities live. Because of this lack of attention, the health situation of Dalit children and mothers and the specific requirements in place to access non-discriminatory and affordable health care remain unreported and unaddressed.

Recommendations

- Special attention should be paid to ensuring adequate healthcare for Dalit women during and after pregnancy and to improving the nutritional status of Dalit children.
- Specific programmes for raising awareness about different aspects of child nutrition and maternal mortality should be set up.
- The National Children Policy should be applicable to all children - without any discrimination. In order to ensure the child's right to safe birth and life, steps shall be taken to ensure safe child birth through nutrition, health care of the expectant and post-natal mothers and the growth of the child and necessary prenatal, natal and post-natal care.

Violence against children, Civil Rights and freedoms: Dalit girls

Violence against children: abuse and neglect, including physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration (arts. 19 and 39), right not to be subjected to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, including corporal punishment (arts. 37(a) and 28(2))

Civil rights and freedoms: freedom of thought, conscience and religion (art. 14)

General principles: non-discrimination (art. 2)

The worst affected are the Dalit women and girls who suffer from multiple forms of discrimination. In the 2014 report of the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women on her visit to Bangladesh in 2013, Ms. Manjoo, found indications of "... high levels of violence against women from religious and ethnic minority communities, with Dalits, Hindus and indigenous groups most at risk." Further, Dalit women and girls are yet to be empowered to take an active part in the socio-cultural, economic and political arena in the community and the country.

Recommendations

- Discrimination against Dalit women and children should be prevented and measures should be taken to empower them through national initiatives, such as income generating schemes.
- Government action to promote Dalit women's rights should include consultations with Dalit women and girls on the need for enactment of special measures for their enhanced protection.
- The government should pay adequate attention to the human rights situation of marginalised groups, including Dalit women and children, in all assessments, including in the planning, and implementation of any human rights, development and humanitarian programmes.
- The government should establish a special cell at the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs to prevent and monitor violations against Dalit women and children;

Further resources

- IDSN briefing note on Bangladesh (2015), <http://idsn.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/IDSN-briefing-note-Bangladesh-2015.pdf>
- IDSN overview of UN references to caste in Bangladesh (January 2015), <http://idsn.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/IDSN-overview-UN-on-caste-in-Bangladesh-January-2015.pdf>
- 'Bangladesh Report - Benchmarking the Draft UN Principles and Guidelines on the Elimination of (Caste) Discrimination based on Work and Descent', Bangladesh Dalit and Excluded Rights Movement (BDERM) 2014 <http://idsn.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/2014-Benchmark-Study-Bangladesh.pdf>
- The human rights situation of Dalits in Bangladesh, Joint NGO Submission related to Bangladesh for the 16th Universal Periodic Review session (22 April - 3 May 2013), Bangladesh Dalit and Excluded Rights Movement (BDERM), Bangladesh Dalit and Excluded Women Federation (BDEWF), Nagorik Uddyog (Citizen's Initiative) In association with the International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN), http://idsn.org/wp-content/uploads/user_folder/pdf/New_files/Bangladesh/UPR-Bangladesh_Dalits_Situation_-_Web_Version.pdf
- IDSN webpage on Dalit children, <http://idsn.org/key-issues/dalit-children/>
- IDSN webpage on Bangladesh, <http://idsn.org/countries/bangladesh/>
- IDSN Compilation of UN references to caste, <http://idsn.org/caste-discrimination-and-human-rights/>