



Dalit Women In Bangladesh: Multiple Exclusions

BDERM

Bangladesh Dalit and
Excluded Rights Movement

বাংলাদেশ দলিত ও বন্ধিত জনগোষ্ঠী অধিকার আন্দোলন

নাগরিক উদ্যোগ
NAGORIK UDDYOG

Acknowledgements

**The author is grateful to One World Action, Nagorik Uddyog (NU),
Bangladesh Dalit and Excluded Right Movement (BDERM), Bangladesh
Dalit Human Rights (BDHR) and Dalit Women's Forum (DWF) for all
their support with this study.**

Photographs kindly provided by Abir Abdullah/EPA

Layout and design by Derek Cobley, Arts Collaborations

Copyright © Nagorik Uddyog, March 2011

Any part of this booklet may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or information storage and retrieval systems, with due credit given to Nagorik Uddyog

ISBN NUMBER: 978-1-898776-79-6

Written by: Farzana Islam

Nagorik Uddyog

Edited by: Tara Brace-John

Governance Policy Coordinator

One World Action



Dalit Women In Bangladesh: Multiple Exclusions

Contents

7	Introduction
9	Socio-economic Conditions of the Dalit Community in Bangladesh
13	An Identity of Extreme Segregation and Violence
20	Dalit Women's Situation
32	Conclusion



1

Introduction

260 million people worldwide continue to experience discrimination based on their caste. Caste discrimination remains one of the most severe and forgotten human rights abuses of the twenty-first century. It leads to extreme poverty and powerlessness which contribute to exploitation and violence against Dalits – formerly known as untouchables.

In Bangladesh there are an estimated 5.5 million Dalits. In Dhaka, Dalit communities live in so called ‘colonies’ - deprived and excluded from adequate housing, sanitation and employment. Working in the most menial jobs, they have difficulty accessing schools and hospitals. Approximately 96% are illiterate.

Dalit women face discrimination, exclusion and violence as a result of both their caste and gender. The majority of Dalit girls drop out of school and miss one of the most crucial opportunities in escaping poverty. Given the vast numbers of Dalit women and men living in poverty, justice will not be achieved if Dalits continue to be excluded, and their human rights denied.

The status of Dalit women is dictated by the socio-cultural, economic and political situation of Dalit people in Bangladesh today and the extreme levels of exclusion and marginality they experience. This study explores Dalit women’s participation in the political sphere – at national level as well as at local and community level. The study found that Dalit women in Bangladesh lack political representation and are subject to continuous and systematic deprivation, exclusion and neglect.



Their marginality originates from the caste-based discrimination which determines the lives and aspirations of women, men and children in the community. Dalit people's jobs, houses, access to services and facilities including water, health and education, their social mobility, rights and obligations as well as identity and status are determined by their social status which is a direct result of their position in the caste hierarchy. State policies endorse and uphold discrimination cultivated by society and handed down from generation to generation.

Dalit women experience gender disparities within their household and community, with patriarchal values and practices being pervasive and persistent amongst Dalit communities. This is compounded by the exclusion and deprivation from non-Dalits. Dalit women themselves have often been unwilling or unable to highlight or recognise the gendered inequalities that exist within their own community. This has far reaching implications in determining the values and attitudes as well as behaviour and action of Dalit women in relation to politics. Dalit women and men are caught up in their day to day struggle to overcome economic and social difficulties that they find it challenging to engage with anything that is not directly linked to their every day survival.

The majority of the 52 Dalit women from Dhaka city's Dalit colonies who participated in this study, looked at political participation as something that was 'beyond' them. It would of course be too simplistic to assume that Dalit women are not interested in politics or in being involved in political actions. To understand their status, it is imperative that both caste disparities as well as gendered realities are taken into consideration. State, society and community enforce these disparities along with patriarchal values and practices. What women do or do not do is dictated and shaped by this complex reality.

As one Dalit woman who was interviewed says:

"We live in the mouth of the serpent."



2

Socio-economic Conditions of the Dalit Community in Bangladesh

The Dalit community in Bangladesh is a heterogeneous group with different professions, language and culture. There is a lack of national data on the number of Dalits and their different professions. In the cities they are mostly employed to perform tasks such as cleaning, removing human waste and sweeping. In non-urban settings Dalits work in different areas e.g. tea plantation, fishery, leather processing and shoe making. The levels of deprivation vary depending on the professions they have.

Dalits also have different languages and religions. Besides Bengali they speak Telugu, Hindi and other languages from the sub-continent. They can be Hindu, Christian or Muslim. Dalits in Bangladesh have around 16 sub-caste groups. These differences in language, profession and religion can sometimes be contentious and makes it difficult for Dalits to organise themselves and have a collective voice.

Housing

In Dhaka city, the ‘colonies’ in which Dalits live define their identity in significant ways. These segregated settlements are a symbol of their overall exclusion from society. Due to the mistrust from non-Dalit Bangladeshi society, Dalits often prefer to stay within their community and with their ‘own’ people.

Poor economic conditions do not allow Dalit people to live outside their colonies. Even if some families can afford it they are denied accommodation, as non-Dalits are unwilling to rent a house to a Dalit individual or family.

The majority of Dalits live in houses that are no more than a room. They have been living in these small spaces for many generations. The size of the families have increased manifold but they have been forced to accommodate themselves in the same small housing. If a Dalit family was provided with housing 40 years ago, they have continued to live in the same small house despite two new generations being added to the family. Consequently 12 to 14 family members are sometime squashed into a tiny space.

Often these tiny spaces are used for income generation activities. When family members are out during the day it is converted into a 'factory' to make or process food products for the market such as pickles, candles, pappads, or incense sticks.

Sanitation and Hygiene

Dalit colonies are often unclean and unhygienic with open sewers, lack of toilets and bathrooms and uncollected garbage blocking water ways. Along with cramped living spaces, the lack of water and electricity compound to make their lives yet more miserable. Sometimes Dalits have to wait for water until late morning. A significant part of a Dalit woman's life is spent in collecting water. This is not only time consuming, it is often the cause of conflict with other households.

Private toilets are non existent and public ones are very few, overused and filthy. This encourages many to use common open spaces to defecate, adding to public health threats.

Dalit people's meagre livestock such as pigs, goats and chickens, cohabit with them in these unhygienic surroundings, further increasing the public health risk.

Education

Illiteracy is widespread among Dalit people. Again it is difficult to provide corroborating evidence as the census so far has not addressed the issue of caste. Exact numbers of Dalits who are illiterate remain unclear but sample studies indicate this is around 96%. The educational prospects for the next generation of Dalits are not looking promising. Dalit parents who were interviewed believe strongly that their girls and boys are not interested in going to school. Very few Dalit boys and girls have completed their A-levels and even fewer still have actually completed college or a professional course.

Financial hardships have been identified as the main reason for children failing to pursue their education. In many cases young boys and girls have to give priority to earning a living rather than attending school. Parents want their children to go to school but are often unable to earn enough, and are therefore forced to ask their children to supplement the household income.

A Dalit mother from the Bede (water gypsies) community explains the situation:

“My children don’t go to school. What can I do? They exhibit their skills with serpents so that they can earn a few Takas. When will they get the time to learn how to read and write? Only a few Dalit boys and girls are going to school – but they will not get a good job. A boy from our neighbourhood is now studying in a college. If he doesn’t get a good job, other boys will lose interest in education. Education is not for us – especially not for our daughters.”

Education being a particularly expensive commodity for Dalit families, it is important for them to be assured that it will result in employment. With no assurances from the state it is unlikely that Dalit communities will choose education over trying to make a living. This is especially true for Dalit girls who will be married at an early age and for whom parents think education is not a necessity.



3 An Identity of Extreme Segregation and Violence

Dalits in Bangladesh today are mainly sweepers or cleaners. Due to their low social status, Dalit have been relegated to the most menial tasks even by the state. City Corporations often hire Dalits to carry out cleaning jobs. With the job market not being a level playing field, it is no wonder that Dalits often find that the only jobs open to them are the most menial cleaning jobs, although even non-Dalits are beginning to take on these jobs if it is a government post, further reducing the opportunities for Dalit employment. Over a long time this professional identity has contributed to their lower and neglected social status. Dalits want to move beyond this professional identity but find it almost impossible due to social and economic reasons. With no state support in this endeavour it is difficult to envisage how the Dalit community will be able to escape its low social image.

As one Dalit woman who was interviewed says:

“We were not sweepers in the past. We were peasants. We became sweepers after we migrated here. Everyone calls us “methor.” It is a bad word – it has a bad connotation. We know that we are members of a forgotten community. People measure us by the job that we do – they don’t take us for human beings of the same status. This is not just!”

(The word methor generally means sweeper or cleaner; however it particularly refers to a cleaner who cleans sewage and human excreta. The word is used in a derogative manner meaning ‘You methor – you clean my shit!).

Some Dalit men are engaged in professions like ‘sweeper’, ‘barber’, ‘bede (water gypsy)’, ‘medicine seller’, ‘hawker’ etc. A few Dalit women are also engaged in similar traditional income generating activities. A small number of Dalit women are becoming active in politics and taking up non governmental organisation (NGO) jobs.

Dalit women believe that improved economic status will contribute to rising social status both within the family and within the community. For this reason they are open to income generation activities of any sort. But most Dalit women want a City Corporation or government job which will secure their future and status at home. Due to their lack of education and training they end up working as sweepers for the City Corporation. Although they often hate this profession, they have no way out of this vicious cycle.

As a Dalit woman says:

“A person dependent on others can do nothing. A woman with no autonomy cannot protest even when her husband leaves her behind or throws her out of the house. Their suffering is mostly due to their inability to earn a living. We have to educate our daughters so that they can become self-reliant.”

Dress Style Defines Identity

Dalit women have a traditional style of wearing their saris which is different from other women in Bangladesh. This distinction immediately identifies them as Dalit and means they are often treated with contempt. There is a growing realisation laced with resentment among Dalit women that they might need to change their style in an effort to escape their identity.

As a Dalit woman explains:

“We have a traditional style of wearing a sari. Anyone can identify us as Dalit. It would be good for us if we could change this style. When I go out with my mother, many people ask me if I am from the colony over there.”

Everyday Exclusion

Dalit women and men often believe that their Dalit identity has a lesser status compared to non-Dalit people, in some ways internalising their caste oppression. The non-Dalit community, while always aware of their supposed higher status, do not necessarily openly exhibit their perceived superiority. The reiteration of their superiority and higher status comes to the forefront when it involves marriage or other social interactions.

As a Dalit woman explains:

“If it happens that a Dalit falls in love with a non-Dalit, the non-Dalit family will inevitably say, ‘You are a Methor – you are a descendant of Methors. How dare you dream of being our relative?’”

Strong Alienation

Dalit people live with a strong sense of alienation. They are continuously told that Bangladesh is not their country. Dalits are haunted by a feeling of ‘homelessness’. Given these circumstances Dalits often wish to send their children to India. A few Dalit families have already managed to send their sons and daughters to India by way of marriage. Many Dalit families have sold their meagre property in Bangladesh and bought property in India, in the hope of migrating there some day.

Administrators and government officials frequently ask Dalit people to leave Bangladesh and go to India.

As a Dalit woman explains:

“One day we went to the Ward Commissioner seeking a fair judgment regarding a misdeed by one of his officials. His reply was to tell us not to be a burden on Bangladesh and to go back to India which was our country”.

Instead of protecting the legal rights of Dalits, national, local and city council officials often go out of their way to violate the basic rights of Dalits. They are ignored in planning processes and find it a challenge to access even basic services. When they do find the strength to question this discrimination, they are further abused and led to believe that Bangladesh is not their country and that the state is not responsible for them. This systemic oppression sanctioned by the state, contributes to reinforcing a strong feeling of alienation.

Violence Against Dalits

Dalit women and men suffer from different forms of violence and insecurity instigated by the non-Dalit Bangladeshi community. Dalits feel helpless either to take action or to complain to the police.

Some victims of violence reflect:

“We always feel insecure because we can be subject anytime to random or planned acts of violence. Non-Dalits might throw bricks on the tin roofs of our huts, grab our meagre property, invade our privacy by peeping through the windows etc. They enter our homes by force and beat us. We can’t even protest.”

“When a Dalit enters a non-Dalit area, they are subject to rude comments, foul language and abuse, especially if they are female.”

“We can’t live in peace and often are forced to get into quarrels with non-Dalits.”

Access to Justice

The Salish (*Informal community level arbitration sessions*)

The study shows that Dalits are unfairly treated within informal justice systems such as salish. Almost all the respondents confirmed that they are not treated fairly. Bicharoks or the people who ‘give justice’ and who chair the arbitration session, are almost always male and from the non-Dalit community. They preside over the session in a biased fashion, especially regarding an allegation by a Dalit against a non-Dalit. Bicharoks also are open to taking bribes from non-Dalits to give verdicts against Dalits. With the formal justice system being completely out of the reach of Dalit people due to expense and corruption, the informal system is almost always the only access to justice that is open to Dalits. Sadly, Dalit people are of the opinion that accessible informal justice systems will never serve their interests either. Dalits instead choose not to seek justice and instead remain silent about atrocities against them.

One of the incidents that was shared:

“A non-Dalit heroin addict died of an overdose in a Dalit colony. The non-Dalits blamed the Dalits and accused the Dalit colony of engineering his death. A salish session followed the incident. The verdict was that the Dalit colony must pay a compensation of four hundred thousand taka. Although this was a very big amount, every member of the colony contributed to paying the compensation amount. As the non-Dalits were their landlords, the Dalit colony was threatened with eviction and this forced their hand. They ended up paying the penalty even though they were not responsible for the addict’s death. On the other hand accusations of abuse, robbery, physical violence, rape and even death which Dalits have brought to the salish, have gone unpunished.”



Dalit Panchayat

Dalits have a system of arbitration and governance system of their own called the panchayat. The basic aim of the panchayat system is to resolve internal disputes among members of the Dalit community. The panchayat system is of no use when the dispute is between a Dalit and a non-Dalit.

The panchayat solely deals with resolving disputes among Dalits and remains a very male dominated system. Dalit women are not expected to participate in the panchayat, except if they have a direct involvement to the case being resolved.

As a Dalit woman describes:

"Dalit women do not use the panchayat to get justice. They are too scared. They feel that their community will criticise them if they go public with complaints against their men. Dalit women are not allowed to express their opinions or concerns in the panchayat. A woman's husband, father or brother will talk on her behalf."

However, when the verdict through the informal justice systems are deemed 'too unjust', there are instances of Dalit men and women going to the police, the ward commissioner or the local government institution as a last resort, to try and get some form of justice. This is very rare and happens only in extreme cases such as in rape or unlawful death.



4

Dalit Women's Situation

Family

In most Dalit families the men are deemed to be the main wage earners. Dalit women often have to depend on their husbands' income to run the family. Unfortunately Dalit women are also often abandoned by their husbands. These women then find it almost impossible to find a job. An added social burden is that generally the Dalit community does not sanction remarriage.

However, the situation is different in the Bede community which permits women to remarry as many times as they want. Women in the Bede community are also expected to be financially independent.

As a Bede woman says:

"In our community husbands often abandon their wives. When a husband leaves his wife for a year, it is considered a divorce. We don't care if our husbands leave us. In our community we are allowed to get married as many times as we want. Here we all earn our own living. A woman can marry any man once she is divorced or widowed."

On the other hand, women from the Telugu speaking Dalit community do not have the freedom to remarry nor to look for employment outside of their home. This community of Dalits are sweepers by profession and live by the principle of 'husband is God'. It is only when they are abandoned, widowed and cannot rely on anybody to look after them, are they forced to seek employment, often as sweepers.

Despite the differences in social norms among the different Dalit communities, Dalit women in general experience similar forms of marginality and oppression in their everyday lives. The fact remains that in a large number of Dalit families, the man is the main wage earner and that Dalit women are dependent on them. Of the 52 women who were interviewed, 27 were completely reliant on their husband's income, and 13 were employed as government sweepers and earning 3-4000 taka per month. 12 women tried to earn a living by being irregular petty traders or non-governmental organisation employees. With job prospects remaining low for Dalit women, marriage continues to be a strong option.

Domestic Violence

For a Dalit woman, her home can be the most dangerous place. The levels of violence and insecurity that she experiences in her home are rarely matched outside. Even if she manages to protect herself from outside harassment, she cannot escape the violence within her home. Women feel that it is not their right to question their husbands, especially as their religion forbids it. A key factor to their silence and acceptance of their situation is often their socio-economic dependence on their husbands. Gender discrimination and violence at home also affects them professionally and economically.

A Dalit woman who experienced domestic violence explains:

"I could not go to work today because he beat me so much last night when he was drunk and my whole body was aching. I lost my job because of this. I am unable to stop him. My parents are poor, and I will not be able to stay with them even for a few days.

"Even our community organiser used to face a similar situation at home, but not anymore. You give me a job, any job, and I will be able join politics and achieve a lot."

Public Roles

This study reveals that Dalit women rarely have public roles, within their own community or beyond. Lack of education and confidence compounded by economic dependency, forces them to stick to socially assigned roles of remaining within their homes and not participating in any public activities.

This situation seems unlikely to change in the near future as Dalits find it very difficult to send their children to school due to financial constraints. This forced backwardness in education prevents younger generations of Dalits, from taking up new professions or moving away from traditional caste defined professions. It is particularly challenging in the case of Dalit girls. Recently a few Dalit girls started attending school, but many dropped out early due to numerous factors such as household work, the need to supplement household income, early marriage, verbal abuse at school etc..

It is rare for Dalit women to have non-caste determined professions. A number of respondents talked about the ways in which caste discrimination impacts on their job prospects.

As some Dalit women say:

“It’s highly unlikely that we can get the job that we want. We don’t get a good job even if we do our best. We are Dalit people, of a lower caste, class and status. When employers come to know our caste, they are not willing to give us anything more than menial jobs.”

“We want to be well educated. But we need money for this. We will be able to change our profession if we can get educated. Then we will not need to take up this disgraceful job of sweeping. Nobody will call us a ‘sweeper’ in the usual derogatory way.”

“Nowadays Dalit girls refuse to take up the job of sweeping even if it is for the City Corporation, which is a steady government job. I had an offer from the City Corporation but turned it down. I would rather work for less pay and security in any other profession than work as a sweeper.”

“Girls from our community don’t want to go out looking for work. The situation outside has become more hostile nowadays. Men behave aggressively when they see a good-looking Dalit girl. Our girls are scared to go out. We also don’t want to send them outside as we cannot protect them.”

Dalit women are not only restricted from public engagement due to their socio-economic status, but also by the way Dalit men treat them and by their lack of confidence. It is also largely due to how they are treated by the non-Dalit community. Non-Dalit men, particularly boys, mistreat Dalit girls in different ways whenever they are seen in public, on the streets or in the narrow passageways of the colony. Dalit girls feel insecure as non-Dalit boys feel that it is almost their ‘right’ or ‘privilege’ to touch or push against a Dalit girl when they see her on the street. It is common practice for non-Dalit boys to get together and tease, poke fun and bully a Dalit girl. The insecurity arising from this constant abuse discourages Dalit girls from venturing too far from their homes. This is a strong factor in girls dropping out of school. Dalit parents use this as reason to keep young Dalit girls house-bound, thus preventing them from getting educated or looking for employment.

A young Dalit woman explains:

“I got a job offer which would have paid me well but would have taken me far from my home. My husband did not allow me to take up the offer. He preferred that I stayed home for my own safety and did not mind that we would lose an income.”

Dalit Women and the Panchayat

The panchayat system is a space where Dalit women could play a role beyond the household. However, the study shows that Dalit women's participation in these arbitration sessions is almost nonexistent.

As a Dalit woman explains:

“Women are not allowed to take part in the panchayat. We have no role. I've hardly ever seen a Dalit woman participating in a panchayat session. On the rare occasion when this has happened, the woman has been vilified and has been accused of violating societal norms. There was even talk of her being thrown out of the community.”

Another Dalit woman reflects:

“I work with the Dalit Women's Forum which is a NGO. Yet, I have not been able to participate in the panchayat. My husband does not want me to attend. I wish that I could go there and speak on behalf of Dalit women. I hope someday I will take part in the panchayat along with my team of Dalit women.”

Dalit Women and NGOs

One of the few routes to a different type of employment is the non-governmental sector. A few Dalits, especially women and girls are finding employment within NGOs. However, many Dalit women have also expressed their unwillingness to participate in the shamity. ('Shamity' is a Bengali word for 'cooperative society.' It refers to micro-credit savings schemes managed by different NGOs.)

As a Dalit woman explains:

"I don't always like attending the shamity. The meetings always clash with my housework and I find it difficult to find the time to attend. I try my best to respond when there is a meeting but often I cannot."

The study shows that a few Dalit women are actively involved with different NGOs. These NGOs offer different vocational trainings, income generating activities and awareness building programmes. Many Dalit women are members of Bangladesh Dalit and Excluded Rights Movement (BDERM), which offers a platform to fight for Dalit rights. A number of women have been involved with different organisations such as Nagorik Uddyog (NU), Bangladesh Dalit Human Rights (BDHR) and Dalit Women's Forum (DWF) and have been given the opportunity to travel to other countries, such as India, Nepal, Switzerland, Belgium and the UK, to put forward the Dalit point of view and to share their experiences.

Most Dalit women still feel that they do not have the freedom or confidence to go wherever they want. They realise that if they organise and come together, there is nothing restraining them from accessing public institutions and demanding their rights. There have been recent instances of Dalit women coming together in front of the Bangladesh Supreme Court and the National Press Club to protest against violations of their rights.

Political Participation of Dalit Women

Perceptions of hostility regarding the outside environment reinforce structural exclusion and create an environment in which both women and men feel discouraged to get engaged in public spaces. This discouragement lays the foundations for Dalit women and men not taking an interest or being involved in politics.

The study suggests that the involvement in politics of Dalit people, especially Dalit women, is yet to reach any significant level. Only a small number of women have become active in political activities through Dalit rights organisations which offer them a platform for participating in meetings, protest marches or rallies to demand their rights or to protest any violation. A few Dalit women also participate in political activities through the programmes conducted by other NGOs. In most cases, Dalit women have been encouraged by the organisations they work with or surprisingly by other male members of their family.

A 60 year old Dalit woman describes how her son inspired her involvement in politics:

“I did not like to like to participate in any kind of political activity. In politics, one is always at risk of being harmed by the opponents. However, since my son started working for the local political party, I have been encouraged by him to also get involved in politics.

“A woman willing to take part in politics should be willing to listen to the problems of the poor. She should be caring about other people’s problems. I have no problem if my daughter in-law wants to get involved in politics.”

This is a rarity in the Dalit community. There is a general unwillingness amongst Dalit women to take part in politics. One major cause is that strong caste discrimination overshadows gender discrimination.

Although Dalit women's participation in politics is very low, the study shows that to a great extent they are aware of their political rights and responsibilities. Dalit women have voted regularly in elections, although often their choice depends on the advice they received from their male family members. Often Dalit women have given the impression that they voted for the person their husbands wanted, when in reality they actually voted for the party and person they themselves chose.

As a Dalit women leader says:

"My husband told me to cast my vote for a candidate of his choice. I did not listen to his advice and instead voted for the person whom I thought was the most eligible. My husband will never know this. How will he know for whom I have cast my vote?"

Dalit women leaders agree that education is the key to building Dalit women's leadership. They agree that the Dalit community needs more role models who can inspire the younger generation to take their studies seriously and strive to change their lives and living conditions. They hope that emerging Dalit women leaders will not only transform their own lives but also that of the whole community.

They are of the opinion that often internal disputes among Dalits regarding various issues, hold them back from advancing and changing the status of women in particular. Women's leadership has failed to flourish largely due to this. When the community does not encourage and support a Dalit woman leader, it is extremely difficult for her to rise above this and try and contribute her best.

Most women who were part of the study believe that women's wider participation in politics and the emergence of Dalit women's leadership is possible only if the root causes of their exclusion are removed, such as poverty, caste and gender discrimination. Education and awareness about their situation is slowly increasing among the Dalit community. Both government and non-governmental organisations are finally beginning to take an interest in the problems of Dalits in general but especially that of Dalit women. Many initiatives are being launched to better understand the problems that Dalit people face in an effort to develop initiatives that can contribute to improving the lives of Dalits, especially the women.

Most respondents believe that the extreme poverty that Dalit people struggle with needs to first and foremost be tackled. Education, skill training and new job opportunities need to be made accessible to Dalits, particularly to Dalit women and girls. If this is done in a systematic way, women and girls will be quite capable of demanding and protecting their rights and in engaging with politics. The empowerment of Dalit women and girls is the only way out of their poverty and oppression.

As a Dalit woman reflects:

"We too have to change our outlook. We have to realise that change will happen if we get involved in politics. If we can realise the benefits from this involvement, we will surely make time to participate in politics alongside our everyday work. Instead, if we are always neglected and insulted for being a Dalit, it will be difficult to be involved in political activities."

A number of Dalit women who took part in this study have identified themselves as members of the local wing of the two major political parties, Awami League and Bangladesh Nationalist Party. These women have participated in various meetings and rallies organised on a regular basis by both political parties.

In the recent past Dalit women and men have seen the success they have achieved in participating in large collective movements and pressing the government to meet their demands. One such movement was for the recognition of the Telugu language as a medium of education. Dalit women were in the forefront of this movement. The Telugu language was not taught in the schools which Dalit children attended. Dalits started the collective movement to demand that Telugu is the medium of education in schools populated with Dalit children. The government responded positively and agreed to their demand. This has given the collective a confidence in their identity and a realisation of collective bargaining power.

Older Dalit women who have stayed away from politics until recently, are beginning to believe that it is important for younger women to become involved in politics at both the national and local level.

As an older Dalit woman says:

“I am not so young to be in politics anymore. Nevertheless, my daughter and my daughter in-law are young, they should think seriously about engaging. They must participate in meetings and gatherings. They are capable of becoming politically active.”

Many Dalit women are still reluctant to venture into any sort of political activity. Many have expressed the view that they do not like getting involved in politics whether it is at the local or national level, or even in meetings and rallies that are organised by NGOs.

As a younger Dalit woman says:

“My husband is a political activist, but I am not. I just hate the atmosphere at political gatherings. I do not let my children get involved either. I am only concerned about how to earn a living so that I can feed my children. I do not want to get beaten up by political opponents. I am happy to stay within my own community.”

Although Dalit women have been part of successful collective activities for change, the resistance to political activities is more prevalent. Political awareness and openness to participate in politics is still a rather new concept, although one that is beginning to catch the imagination of Dalit people, especially that of Dalit women. Many Dalit, human rights, development and campaigning organisations have understood this rising political awareness and have mandated their engagement with the Dalit community.

Increased training and awareness raising among Dalit women and men has led to growing numbers becoming supporters of national campaigning platforms and organisations such as Bangladesh Dalit and Excluded Rights Movement (BDERM), Bangladesh Dalit Human Rights Organisation (BDHR), Dalit Women’s Forum (DWF) and Nagorik Uddyog (NU). This involvement of Dalit women and men is still small, but extremely significant and important. Despite the social criticisms and obstruction from the Dalit and non-Dalit community, Dalit women and men have shown that they are willing and able to engage in politics. There is increasing hope that these individuals will be able to articulate the issues and demands of Dalit people to politicians, political parties, policy makers and government officials. This way the plight of Dalit people will be given the prominence it deserves within planning processes.



The extreme exclusion and deprivation that feature in the everyday lives of Dalit people in general and Dalit women in particular, fully impacts the way they interact and engage with society. Dalits live a harsh life, marginalised and stigmatised. Attempts at improving their lives would have to first address the various discriminations based on caste, class and gender that Dalit women and men experience on a daily basis. The double burden of caste and gender that all Dalit women face puts them in a particularly vulnerable position and has to be understood within the overall plight of Dalit people in Bangladesh. Any policy or plan of merit would need to address the structural and systemic discriminations that Dalits have faced for many generations now in a country that has even forgotten their existence.

Despite the caste, class and gender oppression faced by Dalit women and men, many of them are rising above their circumstances to challenge the hostility of the state and the ignorance of the non-Dalit community. This spark of interest and response from the Dalit community needs to be capitalised on by the various organisations that are now actively involved in improving the lives of Dalit people. Donors need to understand the need for intensive training, leadership and general capacity building among the Dalit community. They would need to earmark funds to contribute to Dalit people's development and encourage their Bangladeshi partners to focus on the most marginalised community, inevitably being the Dalits.

The situation of the Dalits in Bangladesh can only be addressed effectively if the government, NGOs and donor community work together. New laws, policies, systems and programmes would have to be put in place to effectively and systematically address the wrongs that have been inflicted on a forgotten community for many generations.

Dalit women would have to be particularly targeted by any new programmes that might emerge. The multiple exclusions and the double discrimination they face of caste and gender has kept them in the margins of their own community. The government, NGOs and donor community need to understand and address this situation right from the start. Crucial aspects to the development of Dalit women's potential is training and other empowerment activities that lead to Dalit women being financially independent. The more confidence and self-worth that Dalit women can gather, the more they will be empowered to engage with political processes and be involved in collective action.

Ways Forward

- ▷ **Asset creation:** Dalits should be given housing and land with legal rights. It is preferable that the legal documents are in the women's name, ensuring her security in the future and increasing her importance within the household.
- ▷ **Education and skill:** Educational and professional training should be increased and improved so that Dalit girls and boys will be able to move to other professions of their choice.
- ▷ **Decent jobs:** Training and new job opportunities are a certain way out of caste-based discrimination that Dalit women face. Gainful employment without exploitation will contribute to strengthening Dalit people's confidence and ensure good living standards.
- ▷ **Language:** While Dalits have demanded schools in Telugu, this might lead to further alienation. Instead, Bangla and English medium education offering skills for the developing labour market would be the more strategic route for future generations of Dalit people to escape caste discrimination.
- ▷ **Social security:** State sponsored social security schemes can ensure that poor Dalit households can maintain their income, thus encouraging children, especially girls, to not drop out of school and attempt to supplement the household income.

- ▷ **Awareness-raising:** Socio-political and economic awareness-raising among the Dalit community to address feelings of alienation and exclusion are required. Awareness-raising among the non-Dalit community is also crucial to challenge perceptions of Dalits and to build understanding and tolerance between the various groups.
- ▷ **Challenging discrimination:** Through training and empowerment, discrimination between the different Dalit communities and between Dalits and non-Dalits need to be challenged and stopped.
- ▷ **Addressing gender discrimination:** Women should be empowered and supported to challenge gender discrimination within the household, community and society at large.
- ▷ **Women's political participation:** Starting with the Dalit panchayat, to engagement with NGOs, local government institutions or local political parties, women need to be empowered to participate and be able to make their own choices.
- ▷ **Protecting Dalit women:** Neighbourhoods should be made safer for Dalit women by taking action against those who create insecurity. Give Dalit women the confidence to make complaints against those who harass them.
- ▷ **Dalit women's leadership:** Existing leadership should be encouraged and supported. Extensive training and confidence building exercises should be carried out by the state and NGOs to create new and wider Dalit women's leadership.
- ▷ **National census:** It is critical that the Bangladesh government includes caste related questions to the national census questionnaires. This is the only way to make sure that Dalits will be counted as citizens and to ensure that all policy and programming will address the needs of Dalit people.

Nagorik Uddyog (NU) and Bangladesh Dalit and Excluded Rights Movement (BDERM) urge governments to adopt the draft UN Principles and Guidelines for the Effective Elimination of Discrimination Based on Work and Descent at the UN Human Rights Council.

Nagorik Uddyog (Citizen's Initiative)

**House # 8/14, Block-B, Lalmatia
Dhaka-1207
Bangladesh**

Telephone: 00 88 02 8115868

Fax: 00 88 02 9141511

Website: www.nuhr.org

BDERM

can be contacted at the same address

BDERM

**Bangladesh Dalit and
Excluded Rights Movement**

বাংলাদেশ দলিত ও বক্ষিত জনগোষ্ঠী অধিকার আন্দোলন

