

Questions and Answers on Caste Discrimination & the EU

- 1. What is caste discrimination?** Caste discrimination is caused by the caste system. Those born into the 'lowest castes', known across South Asia as Dalits, are treated as subhuman and 'untouchable', and members of other castes consider them impure and polluted. They are often forced to live, eat and work in segregation from the rest of society, and their basic human rights are severely restricted. Caste discrimination affects an estimated 260 million people worldwide, particularly in South Asia, but also in diaspora communities, Japan, Yemen and a number of African countries.
- 2. Which types of human rights violations are associated with caste discrimination?** A very broad range of human rights are violated as a consequence of the caste system. They include the right to life, health, education, access to justice and the right to be free from violence and cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment. Victims of caste discrimination suffer violence, rape, public humiliation and murder, without being able to gain justice through the police and courts. They are subjected to bonded labour, forced prostitution and other forms of exploitation, such as the inhuman and illegal practice of manual scavenging. As a result of their social exclusion, Dalits also suffer from limited access to basic services and resources, education, and political participation. The combination of caste and gender discrimination makes Dalit women particularly vulnerable to human rights abuses.
- 3. Why should EU citizens care about caste discrimination?** Caste discrimination is one of the world's most serious and widespread human rights issues. There is now evidence that it even affects immigrant communities within the EU. If the EU and its citizens wish to live up to their own human rights standards, e.g. on ending inequality and discrimination, they should give priority to eliminating caste discrimination. The EU enjoys relations with caste-affected countries in a number of areas – including trade, aid and security – and can thus influence them at a bilateral level. It can also bring up the issue in multilateral forums such as the UN.
- 4. In some caste-affected countries, such as India, there is excellent legislation against caste-related human rights violations, why is this not sufficient?** Countries such as India have indeed introduced laws against caste discrimination, but those that are supposed to implement them are not doing so effectively, and atrocities against Dalits continue to be committed with impunity. Dalits are often barred from filing complaints at police stations, or such complaints are not taken seriously. In some cases, Dalits who approach the authorities are even tortured. Thus, the police and the courts themselves participate in the discrimination against Dalits. It is therefore essential that governments in caste-affected countries ensure that existing laws against caste discrimination as well as specific policies and special measures are implemented.
- 5. What are the Dalits, the main victims of caste discrimination, doing to improve their situation?** Dalits in caste-affected countries are becoming more aware of their rights and are standing up for them in different ways. Dalit human rights defenders have formed organisations that work against caste discrimination and promote the rights of Dalits. Some work at a national, political level, others focus on grass roots activism and development issues. Dalit organisations also lobby at the international level alongside the International Dalit Solidarity Network. The more assertive Dalits become, especially in their local communities, the more violence and abuse they face.
- 6. Why do the Dalits need your support and why should the Members of the European Parliament get involved in the issue of caste discrimination?** Dalit groups work hard in their own countries, but the support of the international community will strengthen their struggle to end caste

discrimination. The EU is an important player in the international arena, e.g. at the United Nations, and has bilateral relations with several caste-affected countries. In a recent opinion survey in seven EU countries (plus Norway), more than two thirds of the respondents stated that European governments, politicians and the EU should act to eliminate caste discrimination. More than three fourths believe that the United Nations should take action on the issue.

- 7. What can I do as an MEP to support the struggle to end caste discrimination?** The European Parliament has repeatedly expressed concern about the issue and should address it consistently in legislation, reports and resolutions. It should influence EU institutions and governments to give the issue priority and the same level of recognition as other forms of discrimination addressed in EU policies. (MEPs can also put pressure on parliamentarians in caste-affected countries to take effective measures to end caste discrimination.) As an individual MEP, you can pledge your support to end caste discrimination on endcaste.com/mep. You can address the issue in legislation, human rights policies, development cooperation, humanitarian assistance, trade and business and country situations. You can also work to include concerns about caste discrimination in thematic reviews, exchange of views, decisions and resolutions of the European Parliament. If you are a member of the Foreign Affairs Committee (AFET), the Committee on Development (DEVE), the Sub-Committee on Human Rights (DROI), the Delegations for relations with South Asia and the Delegation for relations with India, you can address the issue in the respective committees and delegations in parliament as well as during interactions with colleagues from caste-affected countries.
- 8. Is there a set of recommendations available on how the EU can do more to address caste discrimination?** The International Dalit Solidarity Network has issued an [Appeal to the EU](#) that includes general recommendations to EU institutions and member states as well as specific recommendations for MEPs, EU Delegations, the Commission, the EEAS and the Council.
- 9. What key action has the EU previously taken to work towards ending caste discrimination?** The parliament has adopted several resolution texts, including a specific resolution on the human rights situation of Dalits in India and a resolution dealing with caste discrimination globally. The EP has also included text in the EP reports on several Annual Human Rights reports, calling for the elimination of caste discrimination. The study '[A human rights and poverty review: EU action in addressing caste-based discrimination](#)' was published and debated by DEVE in 2013, recommending a stronger EU role in the fight against caste discrimination. Hearings on caste discrimination have also been held in the EP in 2011 and 2008 and in COHOM. The European Commission has provided funding for Dalit human rights defenders through EU instruments. Read the two page summary of [EU initiatives on caste-based discrimination](#) for more details of what the EU has done.
- 10. What has the United Nations done or said about caste discrimination?** The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights has done extensive work on caste discrimination and increasingly prioritises the issue in its work with caste-affected countries, and on human rights in general. The High Commissioner, Ms Navi Pillay, has made numerous strong statements on the issue. Her [opinion piece from 2009](#), in which she likened caste discrimination to South Africa's apartheid system, was a massive boost for the struggle for Dalit human rights. In [June 2013 she reiterated her commitment to ending caste discrimination and 'untouchability'](#). She has also called on UN member states to address this form of discrimination and endorse the draft [UN Principles and Guidelines on the Effective Elimination of Discrimination Based on Work and Descent](#). Numerous UN bodies and states have expressed serious concerns about the persistence of caste discrimination in reviews of country

situations and as a thematic human rights concern. A detailed overview is available in [the IDSN compilation of UN observations and recommendations on caste discrimination by UN human rights bodies](#) (Treaty Bodies, Universal Periodic Review, and Special Procedures). Numerous thematic issues addressed by the Human Rights Council and the Special Procedures are affected by caste discrimination and IDSN have compiled a [list of mandate holders that have addressed the issue](#). In May 2013, seven of these [UN human rights experts joined together to urge governments to strengthen protection](#) of the hundreds of millions of people who are subjected to caste discrimination.