

**Making a Difference**  
**Citizen's and their organisations and networks contributing to change**  
**OWA PPA 2008-9: Case study 25**

<b>Title of Case Study:</b>	<b>Ending Untouchability and Caste Discrimination in Bangladesh</b> <b>Bangladesh Dalit Human Rights, Bangladesh</b>
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<b>1. PPA partner name</b>	<b>One World Action</b>
<b>2. Countries highlighted in case study</b>	<b>Bangladesh</b>

**Ending Untouchability and Caste Discrimination in Bangladesh**  
**Bangladesh Dalit Human Rights, Bangladesh**



*The first thing we need is our dignity - I am a lawyer but I have to take my own plate and glass to the canteen. We are untouchable, excluded and marginalised.*  
 Advocate, Rajshahi

Caste discrimination is usually associated with India but there are an estimated 3.5-5.5 million Dalits, formerly known as untouchables, living in Bangladesh (2.5-4% of the total population). The majority are landless, and live in chronic poverty in rural areas or urban slums. They are deprived or actively excluded from adequate housing, health care, education, employment and participation in public life. Approximately 96% are illiterate. Dalit communities experience daily insecurity and violence with usually no recourse to justice. Dalit women, excluded both by caste and gender, face multiple forms of discrimination, untouchability and violence.



Surprisingly, despite the chronic need, the issue of caste discrimination has until recently been ignored or denied by the Government of Bangladesh, donors and mainstream civil society. However despite the entrenched patterns of discrimination, extreme poverty and many challenges, a new generation of courageous Dalit leaders and activists are starting to organise their communities and demand change.

One World Action is one of the few international agencies focussing on Dalits and caste discrimination in Bangladesh and in 2007, with support from One World Action through its Programme Partnership Agreement with DFID, started working with Bangladesh Dalit Human Rights (BDHR) - a people's organisation led by Dalit activists with strong relationships with Dalit organisations across Bangladesh. The project was developed by Dalits to respond directly to their needs and to support existing campaigns.

Over the past year the project has helped:

- Strengthen the capacity of BDHR to provide support to Dalit communities and develop a strong, influential and broad based national Dalit campaign. Staff attended numerous trainings including a regional training course for Dalit Defenders in Thailand.
- Raise awareness of Dalits in Bangladesh, of their existence, their culture and the problems they face - through media work, photo exhibitions, theatre, publication of research and campaigns.
- Lobby for the equal treatment of Dalits, for their inclusion in development policies and programmes and for commitment from policy makers and institutions to tackle caste discrimination. Focussing on election manifestos during the national parliamentary elections in December 2008 which resulted in commitment from 8 high profile political parties to take positive action to support Dalit communities. As a result of BDHR's lobbying, Dalit issues are now included in Bangladesh's national Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper which sets out the national development plans.
- Form the 'Bangladesh Dalit and Excluded Community Rights Movement' a joint platform of activists and leaders representing excluded communities.
- Launch pilot projects that aim to reduce the poverty of Dalit communities in specific slums in Dhaka (focusing on access to basic services - jobs, housing, health and education) that will provide lessons for future programmes.
- Register almost all eligible Dalit citizens on the voter list and issue national ID cards so for the first time women and men from Dhaka's Dalit communities were able to vote without any intimidation or obstacles.

The project has also supported a series of divisional workshops across the county that have enabled Dalit women and men to share their experiences of untouchability, to strategise and network. The first national Dalit Conference was held in Dhaka in January 2009. Around 250 Dalits came together for 2 days of discussions, cultural celebrations, press conferences, marches and planning. For many participants these were the first opportunity they have ever had to talk and share their experiences of untouchability. The meetings also provided a platform to develop recommendations to inform future lobbying and campaigning.

*Previously I thought I was untouchable but then I went to university and still experienced discrimination. This caused frustration and a slow poisoning. How can educated people practice untouchability? I thought that if no one else will speak out then I will fight and die for this issue - this campaign is a miracle for me.*

*I am from the shoemaker's caste. I passed my second grade certificate but I had no chance to continue as it is too expensive. There are free places available and so I went to the Commissioner to ask for one of the places - all I needed was his signature on the form but he threw the paper at my face and told me 'I cannot do this for untouchable people.'*

Through BDHR's work with, and support from, Nagorik Uddyog, the International Dalit Solidarity Network and One World Action the issue of caste in Bangladesh is starting to appear on the international agenda. BDHR have been highlighted in various policy interventions and events at the UN, EU and in the UK parliament. BDHR were also part of the Bangladesh delegation to the country's Universal Periodic Review, in Geneva in March 2009. The project has also supported exchange visits between BDHR and the National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights in India that have provided essential learning and advice.

It has been a challenge to find qualified Dalit leaders and the project continues to strengthen the capacity of BDHR's organisation and leadership. There have also been some tensions between other Dalit organisations that have not wanted to take such a political and rights based approach - building trust and a unified common platform has been a critical first step. As echoed in the project's vision the time has come for a Bangladesh free from caste based discrimination.

*We want our children to have the opportunities of education - to be teachers, doctors and engineers - the chances we didn't have. Dalit women are often confined to rooms, not allowed or able to leave their houses. With the support of my father I was the first girl from my community to go to school. With the encouragement of my family I set up a group for Dalits. There is now a more favourable attitude to women in the community.*

Moni Rani, Founder of Dalit Women's Forum

*We are firstly telling people about their rights - if we are not organised then we will have no power and achieve no change. Every day we go to the colonies. We are also involved in policy and communications – before this project other NGOs used to discriminate against us – we are changing mindsets. Without being organised we can't fight back. Everyone wants to keep their high positions and so we need common and collective positions. We are the spark and we need to raise our voices to demand our rights.*

Staff member, BDHR

### **Background facts**

- Bangladesh is an extremely poor country and 84% of its 137 million people live on less than \$2 a day.
- More than 270 million people worldwide continue to experience discrimination based on their caste and practices linked to untouchability.
- Dalits in Dhaka are typically descendants of Hindus imported from present-day India by the former British colonial powers to do menial work. Many are employed as sweepers. The close correlation between employment, housing and identity often prevents Dalits from improving their status. In Bangladesh, one of the most densely populated countries in the world, even the cholera infested Sweeper Colony is seen as a valuable foothold in the capital. The shack comes with the job, and sweepers therefore find it difficult to imagine or establish any other career for themselves and their children. As “untouchables”, Dalits are in any case rarely allowed to rent or build houses in the “pure” areas elsewhere.
- For further information about Dalits in Bangladesh please see: [www.idsn.org/country-profiles/](http://www.idsn.org/country-profiles/)
- One World Action has been working in Bangladesh since 1989 - it also works with Nagorik Uddyog, Partnership of Women in Action and Gonoshasthaya Kendra.