

Dalit Women Ask U.N. For Justice

Statement by the Women's Voice and the National Federation of Dalit Women
at the ESCAP High-Level Meeting for Beijing+5, 28 October 1999

Dear Chairperson, distinguished participants and sisters,

While we reaffirm our hopes in the Beijing Platform for Action and (commit ourselves) to concrete actions that help us move from injustice and inequality, we are bringing one of the vital concerns of women's human rights from our sub-continent, namely that of Dalit women—the "Untouchables"—to your attention.

Dalits constitute about 250 million people and half of them are women. The Dalits are the most marginalised in the caste hierarchy of (Indian) society. Among the large-scale violations of human rights perpetrated on Dalit people are the burning of their homes and fields, murder, torture of and assault on women, molestation and rape, and deaths in custody. These occur in spite of constitutional guarantees abolishing untouchability and ensuring protection of the human rights of all Indian citizens. Victims of bonded labour, child labour, prostitution and of the Devadasi system (sexual slaves dedicated to temples) are drawn largely from Dalit communities. Dalits live in separate colonies, cut off and distanced from other communities and localities. Even today, inter-caste marriages lead to large-scale violence. Dalits do not have access to public wells or to public eating places. They have to use separate glasses for drinking tea or coffee at village restaurants in some states in India. Atrocities and violence against Dalits basically arise from the context of "keeping Dalits" in their place, within the social hierarchy mediated by caste and untouchability. These forms of violence amount to racial discrimination.

The growing self-awareness and self-reliance of Dalits promoted by the government's policy of reservation, renaissance ideologies within the Dalit community, the participation of Dalits in struggles for recognition have threatened the vested interests and privileges of the dominant non-Dalit castes. Raising the consciousness of Dalits and (fostering) their resistance on a wide range of issues such as distribution of surplus state land, minimum wages, dignity and justice have led to brutal caste-based violence and massacres against Dalits and Dalit women in particular.

Oppressed Dalit people confront barbaric atrocities and violence, the denial of their basic needs and land rights, the infringement of their civil liberties and, most important of all, the denial of

their status as human beings. They live in dehumanising living and working conditions, impoverishment, malnutrition and poor health conditions, a high level of illiteracy and continuing social ostracism. Despite the existence of constitutional rights and other protective laws that are meant to address their problems, Dalit communities continue to live in extreme poverty, perform menial and low-paid jobs such as scavenging and suffer from the lack of access to basic amenities and resources. We strongly feel that denial of these rights is a gross violation of the social and economic rights of the Dalit people.

Dalit women are threatened three-times over (because they are) alienated on the basis of their class, caste and gender. Dalit women have to grapple with discrimination due to caste hierarchy and untouchability on the one hand, and extreme deprivation and poverty on the other. (They also have to endure) political, legal, and religious and cultural discrimination.

We therefore urge this august Assembly to:

- ♦ recognise the concerns and aspirations of the most marginalised women of the region, such as the Dalit women, and to evolve effective policies and programmes to uphold the human rights of these marginalised groups in a holistic manner
- ♦ recognise "Dalit rights as human rights," and give equal status to the 250 million individuals who represent this section of humanity in Indian society
- ♦ take steps to explicitly and constitutionally guarantee equal rights to the Dalit people in all the countries of the Asian region where they presently reside
- ♦ act with greater force and with political will to bring to the book state and non-state actors who perpetrate acts of violence against the Dalit people, and to deal stringently with all incidents of caste-based violence

Ensuring that justice is done to the Dalit people, and especially to the Dalit women should, we urge, be a primary concern of this meeting, in keeping with the commitments of equality and human dignity set out in the Beijing Platform for Action.

Thank you.

Ruth Manorama
Voice of Women
National Federation of Dalit Women
Asian Women's Human Rights Council (AWHRC)