**International Dalit Solidarity Network**

**Input on the role of workers’ organisations in preventing and addressing contemporary forms of slavery**

To inform the report of the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, including its causes and consequences, to the 79th session of the General Assembly

Caste is one of the greatest sources of prejudice and discrimination in the world today, depriving people of access to decent work and human dignity and used to justify slavery and child labour for millions across the globe. Yet many ethical trade stakeholders, including businesses, trade unions and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) alike, are not aware of the subject and how it may relate to them. With a lack of knowledge of the realities of caste and its consequences, even progressive, responsible businesses may undermine their own efforts to protect workers’ rights and implement international labour standards.

Discrimination also affects tribal people, referred to as “Adivasi”, and religious minorities, for example Muslims in India, or Hindus and Christians in Pakistan. In India, Dalits are legally known as “Scheduled Castes” and Adivasis as “Scheduled Tribes”.

Research has shown that the majority of those trapped in modern slavery, including child labourers, forced labourers and those engaged in hazardous work, are from the lowest castes or indigenous communities in caste-affected countries.

The caste a person is born into in these nations often has a direct impact on his or her opportunities in relation to hiring, promotion, training, wages and benefits received in the workplace.

Reliable data on the extent of caste-based forced and bonded labour in industries connected to multi-national supply chains is generally lacking, as the private sector does not typically collect data differentiated by caste. However, there have been several sector-specific reports and extensive studies over the years that have highlighted the grave problems faced by some of these industries.

**Freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining**

Freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining remains a challenge for most low-caste workers. Even when workers are permitted to join unions and such unions are present, these may be divided along caste lines, with those from the most disadvantaged castes having the least bargaining power. If unions do offer equal voice and bargaining power to different castes, the lack of low-caste representation among trade union leaders can lead to their issues being overlooked.

Dalit women, who face intersectional discrimination, are even more likely to be unsupported by trade union initiatives. There is a general lack of awareness of the benefits of trade unions among Dalit women. For example, reports on the Sumangali scheme in the garment industry have documented violations of the right to freedom of association in spinning mills, where workers commented that they did not think unions were open to them.[[1]](#footnote-1) Similarly, in the leather industry, Dalit workers report that they are frightened to join unions.

Anti-Slavery International’s extensive research on low-caste workers exploited in India’s brick kiln revealed that due to caste discrimination, workers can be excluded from or receive limited assistance from unions and are unable to negotiate for even the minimum wage.[[2]](#footnote-2)

**Living wages**

Workers from the lowest caste are rarely paid a living wage and usually earn less than members of dominant castes for similar work. The monthly income of 85% of Dalit workers ranges between Rs. 500 to Rs. 3,000 per month, according to a 2008 study on the plight of Dalits in Pakistan supported by the Indian Institute of Dalit Studies. However, even at the maximum level of Rs. 3,000, this is 35% less than the official national minimum wage of an unskilled worker.[[3]](#footnote-3) Low caste workers in Pakistan typically work in agriculture, sugar, sports goods production, leather, brick-making and other industries linked to global supply chains.

A study of tea workers in Bangladesh, 90% of whom are Dalits, found that Dalit workers received wages below the legal minimum. Labourers saw no option other than to have their children work alongside them and toil for extremely long hours with very few days off, in order to pluck the required volume of leaves and feed their families.[[4]](#footnote-4)

**Recommendations**

Develop a policy on anti-discrimination and equal opportunities specifically addressing caste discrimination in business operations

* This should include implementation steps and responsibility for implementing the policy. Ensure the policy is communicated to all suppliers in caste-affected countries.

Encourage suppliers to develop a policy prohibiting all forms of harassment and degrading treatment in the workplace

* The policy should specifically mention the prohibition of caste-based harassment. Support suppliers in communicating these policies to all employees.

Demand zero tolerance for caste-bias and caste-related abuse

* Be clear that your business will not tolerate caste-based abuse or caste-bias, whether it takes place on factory floors or in HR departments, in procurement or anywhere else in your operations or those of suppliers.

Ensure suppliers understand the value of worker representation and the inclusion of all workers, regardless of caste

* Where no formal trade unions exist, work with suppliers to ensure lower-caste workers have access to democratically elected representatives who can represent their interests effectively.

Invest in education and awareness-raising on workplace equality

* This could take place through recognised unions, federations, workers associations or labour rights NGOs, particularly those with a focus on addressing caste discrimination.

Include commitments to combat caste-based discrimination within Global Framework Agreements (GFAs)

* Where GFAs exist between international and national trade unions and multi-national corporations, include practical measures, in line with the guidance above, to advance commitments to preventing caste discrimination.

Ensure that there are grievance mechanisms in place that support socially excluded groups in bringing their concerns and cases of discrimination

These mechanisms should be widely publicised, so that all groups are aware of them and able to use them. They should meet the following core criteria: legitimacy; accessibility; predictability; equality; compatibility with internationally acceptable rights; transparency.

Collaborate with other companies, NGOs and trade unions to combat caste discrimination at a systemic level

* Given the complexities of caste-discrimination, there are significant benefits to be derived from collaborating with other stakeholders to achieve scale, impact and lasting change.

Involve Dalits and other socially excluded caste groups in improving company policies

* Promote an inclusive approach to assessing, establishing and monitoring company policies on caste discrimination, making sure to involve all castes, and ask suppliers to do the same.

This information was gathered from IDSN’s [Base code guidance: Caste in Global Supply Chains](https://www.ethicaltrade.org/sites/default/files/shared_resources/ETI%20Base%20Code%20guidance%2C%20caste%20in%20global%20supply%20chains.pdf), please see the document for any further information.

1. International Dalit Solidarity Network (2014) Report: Dalit girls in modern slavery in India’s textile industry. IDSN. Available on <https://idsn.org/report-dalitgirls-in-modern-slavery-in-indiastextile-industry/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Anti-Slavery International (2017) Slavery in India’s Brick Kilns and the Payment System. Available on <http://www.antislavery.org/wpcontent/uploads/2017/09/Slavery-In-Indias-Brick-Kilns-The-Payment-System.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Indian Institute of Dalit Studies (2008) Long Behind Schedule: A Study on the plight of Scheduled Caste Hindus in Pakistan. Indian Institute of Dalit Studies. Available on <http://idsn.org/wp-content/uploads/user_folder/pdf/Old_files/asia/pdf/RR_Pakistan.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. BDERM Bangladesh Dalit and Excluded Rights Movement (2018) Social, Economic and Cultural Status of Dalit Community in Bangladesh. BDERM. Available on <https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/1425816/1930_1519916873_int-cescr-css-bgd-30309-e.doc> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)