

UN Forum on Minority Issues

AGENDA ITEM # 4: Minority women and effective political participation

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak.

My name is Lee Macqueen. I represent National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR), an NGO based in New Delhi, India.

I would like to focus my intervention on Dalit women’s political participation in local governance, in relation to Draft Recommendation nos. 19 & 20:

Firstly, we urge the UN Forum on Minority Issues to adopt Draft Recommendation no. 19 with modification as follows:

Recommendation 19: “Obstacles preventing *minority women elected representatives*’ participation in decision-making, *including at the local governance levels* should be identified and addressed by prioritizing the development of a systematic and consistent approach to identifying, evaluating, monitoring and eliminating existing forms of discrimination against minority women and girls”.

In India, under the Panchayati Raj institutions (self/local level governance) *one-third of the seats* are reserved for women in all Panchayat councils, including *Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes*, in the form of representation proportional to each minority’s population share in each district.

With respect to implementation, the untouchability practices are manifested within the local government (panchayat) offices. Nominal presence of Dalit women among the Dalit members in local governance deprives them of any effective decision-making power, where panchayats are dominated by male members of other castes. Dalit women often act as representatives for their male husbands or male relatives. Studies have shown that reservations for Dalit women are dominated mostly by women representatives from general castes. High level of economic deprivation has forced most Dalit women to work outside the home to sustain the family, giving them less time to perform their political mandate as Dalit Women Elected Representatives (*DWERs*). Due to ‘low’ social status and poor education levels, many Dalit women representatives lack information, negotiating skills and self-confidence as compared with other elected representatives, especially dominant caste men.

Therefore, we urge the UN Forum to:

1. Take up the issue of Dalit women’s effective participation in governance as a focus policy area by commissioning studies through the Special Procedure on Violence against Women, on the effectiveness of and problems faced by Dalit women in local governance and foster dialogue and debate on this issue in the United Nations.
2. To recommend that all Special Procedures work with local Indian organisations to take up issues of Dalit women including violence against Dalit women in local governance.

3. Recommend that the Human Rights Council create Special Procedure on Discrimination on the Basis of Work and Descent

We urge the Government of India to:

1. Launch a widespread social education campaign on promoting inclusive democracy through the free and independent participation of Dalits, Tribal and women in the local governance.
2. Independently monitor the situation of local reserved panchayats in order to ensure discriminatory and obstructive practices against Dalit, Tribal and other women elected representatives are prevented, and bring such cases to the Election Commission at national and state levels with rigorous follow up procedures.
3. Report on the implementation of the local governance (Panchayati Raj Act) with disaggregated data on presence of Dalit Women Elected Representatives in the local / self governance institution in their treaty reports.