

I would like to say thank you to the UN for giving me the opportunity to come to Geneva, and to speak about the issues facing Dalit women in my country.

My name is Sonu Rani Das and I am from Tanbazan Poulou Colony, Ng, Bangladesh. I am going to talk about the political participation of women in Bangladesh.

The situation for Bangladeshi Dalits is not good: Dalits face lots of problems, both inside their communities as well as outside their communities.

Inside the community, traditional religious beliefs are held very highly – a lot of these discriminate against women in the community. There is also general discrimination against women; for example, in a lot of families the boys are given better food than girls. The boys will eat first and the girls have to make do with left-overs. This is because people believe that boys work harder than girls and so need better food or treatment, but the girls have been in the house all day preparing the food, washing clothes and doing the cleaning; but they do not get recognition for this.

● Outside the community, Dalits are discriminated against in school, facing bad behavior from other students and sometimes teachers, who move them to the back of the class. Dalits also face problems when they visit Temples outside of their community. Other Hindus, who identify them from their different dress, will discriminate against them.

For Dalit women, they face two problems: firstly, as Dalits and secondly, as women.

Ninety-nine percent of Dalit women are not educated. They are not aware of their rights, so how can they speak out about them?

It is very hard for Dalit women to afford education as they are very poor and have financial problems. For example, in my community we have one hundred houses, with about seven people in each house, and only three girls have gone to university.

I would like to now give my ideas on how we can improve the political participation of women in Bangladesh. Because very few women go outside their community, they are not involved in any political levels. So I think that the government should take some steps to engage Dalit women on a political level:

1. Increased empowerment, mobility of Dalit women and their access to justice;
2. Increase admission of Dalit girls into schools and universities, and make efforts to help them stay in schooling;
3. More opportunities for employment and access to finance;
4. Legally protect Dalit rights in the constitution;
5. Include quotas (for Dalit women) in public offices, schools and universities;
6. Recognise caste discrimination as a priority in human rights issues and make discrimination against Dalits a criminal offence.