

Forum on Minority Issues

FIFTH SESSION

Implementing the Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities: Identifying positive practices and opportunities

Distinguished Chair, fellow delegates, ladies and gentlemen, I am honoured to be here today, to speak on Dalit and Dalit women's issues in Nepal, in relation to some of the challenges encountered when trying to implement many of the provisions outlined in the Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities.

As you may know, Dalits are the lowest caste in Nepal, the 'untouchables'. The term 'Dalit' means 'broken people' in Sanskrit. Officially, Dalits make up 13% of the population, unofficial estimates put the figure between 20 to 25%, with 23 sub-castes of Dalits. Dalits, and Dalit women like myself, are discriminated against in every aspect of society.

How are Dalits discriminated against? We are denied access to public water sources, to the temples we worship in, to jobs, to schools and hospitals. People from other castes say we are dirty, that we might 'pollute' their food, their temples, even taint their children, by association with us. It is very difficult for us to own land, to own businesses and improve our economic situations. We live in poverty, Dalit women often have seven or eight children due to lack of awareness about family planning, and it is Dalit women who are the most vulnerable to gender-based violence. We are denied a voice by the upper castes of Nepali society, by those with power.

So, the main question is, how can awareness and implementation of the Declaration be improved, in order to raise the profile and end discrimination against Dalits and Dalit women, in Nepal and South Asia?

In order to ensure effective implementation, stronger political will and commitment are important; both in amending out-dated and discriminatory laws, and implementing agreed provisions for Dalits. Civil society, UN agencies, and member states must help to pressure and influence the government to ensure the effective implementation of

provisions and measures. Other ways to implement provisions of the Declaration in Nepal include:

1. When Nepal's new Constitution is finally agreed upon, that a clear definition of minorities be defined in the new Constitution. Conditions and basis of defining minorities at the federal, regional and local level should also be defined.
2. Ensure there is proportional representation for Dalits, especially Dalit women, in the public and private sectors.
3. Any illegal and non-constitutional action against persons belonging to minorities should be prohibited and such offence should be taken as serious crime. Those held accountable for such action should be deprived of public opportunities.
4. Identify Dalit women's issues specifically as different to Dalit men, and ensure women's representation is ensured by identifying these differences based on caste, geography, education, religion and social, economic, cultural and political sectors.
5. Campaign to eliminate all discriminatory laws, regulations, directives, policies and norms based on caste, traditional professions, ethnicity and descent.
6. Adopt the administrative, legal and institutional measures for effective implementation of all international and national obligations, policies, programs and agreements to promote and protect the rights of Dalits.
7. At the international level, that there is the appointment of a UN Special Rapporteur on caste-based discrimination.

I thank you for your attention and through such recommendations as I just described, I hope we can continue, together, to strive to make the provisions outlined within the Declaration a reality in Nepal and throughout the world.

Thank you.