

Untouchable and Excluded

Over 250 million people around the world are victims of discrimination based on their social origin and their traditional occupation, according to the International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN), of which the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) is a founding member. The Dalits of south Asia are by far the most numerous group affected by this form of discrimination, by similar discrimination is experienced by the Burakumin in Japan, the 'Sab' (lower caste) communities of Somalia, and members of the 'occupational castes' of West Africa.

The members of all these groups are victims of discrimination which, according to a statement made by the LWF at the UN Commission on Human Rights, frequently manifests the following characteristics:

- They are seen as “dirty,” and contact with them is perceived as polluting.
- By tradition, they fulfil occupational roles that generally consist of the most demeaning or hazardous tasks in their society.
- Social conventions preclude them from marrying outside the caste they belong to.

In India, the caste system is responsible for the social exclusion of an estimated one-fifth of the entire population. The Dalits, who are strongly represented in the membership of the Lutheran churches in India, are placed at the bottom of the social hierarchy and are largely excluded from social and economic life. Caste imposes enormous obstacles to the universal enjoyment of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, which are guaranteed in the Indian Constitution. Still today, many Dalits--especially in rural areas--have no access to education, employment opportunities, temples, hotels, or shops. In tea stalls, they are often not allowed to drink from the same cups as the members of other castes. The Dalits have to carry out the work which according to general opinion is polluting and are themselves perceived as impure. They are forced to carry out demeaning tasks such as 'manual scavenging' (the collection and removal of human feces from dry latrines by hand). Many Dalits find themselves in the vicious cycle of 'debt bondage,' indentured servitude to pay off the loans of family members.

The LFW and other members of the IDSN network have committed themselves to making the international community aware of the problems faced by the Dalits, and to draw the attention of the UN human rights mechanisms to this issue.

In a [resolution](#) (E/CN.4/Sub2/Res2000/4) passed in 2000 at its 52nd session, the UN Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights acknowledged that 'discrimination based on work and descent' is prohibited by international human rights law, a significant step forward.

The UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination has also expressly condemned any form of discrimination based on caste as a violation of human rights. In a ['general recommendation'](#) on descent-based discrimination, the Committee proposed a number of practical measures to prevent such discrimination. The measures included the following list:

- The consideration of an explicit prohibition on descent-based discrimination within the national constitutions of affected countries.
- Encouragement of dialogue and the continuation of affirmative action programs to address the problems.
- Take into account to existence of multiple discrimination against women who are also member of caste-discriminatory groups.

The 2001 United Nations World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance held in Durban, South Africa, did not seize the opportunity to take up the issue – in spite of strong lobbying by over 200 activists. After the World Conference, LWF General Secretary

Rev. Dr. Ishmael Noko regretfully pointed out in a [statement](#) that 250,000 people, who still suffer under caste and other similar systems, had been ignored. However, Noko confirmed that the remarkable contribution of the Dalits at the conference and the attention received by their cause was in itself a victory.

In September 2002, the LWF Council reaffirmed that discrimination based on caste and similar forms of social hierarchy was equivalent to denying the dignity of humankind granted by God and constitutes a breach of human rights. The Council expressed its regrets regarding the fact that the international community had omitted taking up the issue during the UN World Conference against Racism, and strongly welcomed the national initiative of the United Evangelical Lutheran Church in India to include the liberation of the Dalits among its objectives.

The LWF is continuing its efforts to increase international awareness of the problem within the context of the IDSN network, and has, among other things, participated in various events regarding this issue in the context of the [fourth World Social Forum](#) which took place in Mumbai, India, in January 2004.