



Contents

# **Bringing Dalit Women to the Forefront: Realities and Challenges**

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&  
Bangladesh Dalit and Excluded Rights Movement

# **Bringing Dalit Women to the Forefront: Realities and Challenges**

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Research Team



# ACRONYMS

ALRD	Association for Land Reform and Development
BD	Bangladesh
BDERM	Bangladesh Dalit and Excluded Rights Movement
BDEWF	Bangladesh Dalit and Excluded Women's Federation
CA	Christian Aid
CEDAW	Convention for Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
DHRD	Dalit Human Rights Defenders
NGO	Non-Government Organisation
NHRI	National Human Rights Institutions.
NSSS	National Social Security
NU	Nagorik Uddyog
SHED	Society for Health Extension and Development
SSNP	Social Safety Net Programme
UN	United Nations
UNO	Upazila Nirbahi Officer
UP	Union Parishad



# Executive Summary

There are approximately 160 million people in Bangladesh. Although more than 80 percent of the population are Bengali Muslims, there is still significant diversity in terms of ethnicity, religion, language, etc. The Dalits are one category among these diverse groups who have received special attention in recent years, both internationally and nationally. Development agencies and activists are working on Dalit issues, while the literature on the Dalits continues to evolve, conceptually and empirically.

The Dalit are one of the most marginalized groups in Bangladesh and are often subject to discriminatory treatment. Historically, they have been oppressed by dominant groups in mainstream society. The majority of Dalits are very poor, underprivileged, and possess limited job opportunities. Moreover, they are politically underrepresented and many are forced to live in inhumane conditions. They are socially excluded, stigmatized, and isolated from mainstream society.

Among the Dalit as a social group, women are the most marginalized of the marginalized. They face a kind of double marginality: First, they are marginalized as Dalits, and second, they are marginalized as women.

Sadly, until very recently, Dalit issues have been ignored or denied by the Government of Bangladesh, donors, and civil society. Dalit women's issues have received scant national or international attention, and little empirical research has been undertaken to define and understand them. With this situation in mind, this research has been undertaken to understand the nature of the cultural, social, economic, and political vulnerabilities of Dalit women in Bangladesh, and the factors that define them.

This report also aims to provide a strategic direction for future development interventions to empower Dalit women.

Different studies have found that Dalit women in Bangladesh, who occupy the bottom of both caste and gender hierarchies, face multiple forms of violence and discrimination (as Dalits; as members of an impoverished underclass; as women), and are particularly vulnerable. The endemic gender and caste discrimination and violence faced by Dalit women is the outcome of severely imbalanced social, economic, and political power equalities. Dalit communities are patriarchal with deeply conservative values about gender roles, which lead to severe restrictions of women's rights, mobility, and freedoms.

In contemporary market-based societies, three forms of capital are necessary for any individual to make a decent living: economic, social, and cultural. Dalit women lack all three. Unfortunately, they have little guarantee of accessing these forms of capitals while dwelling in bounded and patriarchal Dalit communities. They have limited access to land, credits, and loans from formal institutions, and cannot access other economic resources. Their social capital is limited to kinship networks within their communities. They are not allowed to gain other forms of social capital through cultural institutions such as schools, clubs, associations, alumni networks, etc.

The study on Dalit women has been conducted using a mixed method approach to the collection of primary data. The study team conducted a quantitative survey through a closed-ended questionnaire with 500 respondents distributed in eight locations across eight administrative divisions of the country. The respondents were Dalit women from eight different Dalit

## Executive Summary

communities: Bashfor, Telagu, Domee, Robidas, Rishi, Kawra, Malo/Barmon/Jele/Jaladas, and tea labourer communities.

To collect qualitative data, the research team conducted a total of 32 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) around the country. In each of the eight locations, four FGDs were held. The FGDS included four types of participants: a) women of the Dalit community; b) men of the Dalit community; c) girls of the Dalit community, and d) boys of Dalit community. A total of 32 Key Informant Interviews (KII) were conducted as part of this research study. KII respondents were chosen from upazila administration representatives tasked with delivering services to Dalit communities. Here, officials included upazila social welfare officers, upazila women's affairs officers, and upazila youth officers.

The different chapters of the study describe the socio-economic conditions and cultural dynamism, marginalization and vulnerability, gender identity, political participation and empowerment of Dalit woman in Bangladesh, based on findings from both quantitative and qualitative approaches.

Of the 500 Dalit women interviewed by the study, only 44.4 percent had attended school. Among them, 63.1 percent had completed the primary school level; 5.9 percent completed the secondary school level, and none of the respondents had completed the HSC level. Dalit girls' educational aspirations are shadowed by the extreme poverty of their communities, compounded by factors such as lack of educational awareness, early marriage, etc.

Livelihood options for Dalit women are very limited. This section of the report highlights the major sources of income for Dalit women in the chosen study areas. The field data shows that, out of 500 respondents, 47 percent work at home and not involved in any economic activities. The rate of unemployment among Dalit women is thus quite high. For those who do work, the major

income earning activities are cleaning (17.2 percent), tea plantation labour (15.4 percent), pig rearing (5 percent), and agricultural labour (4 percent). Sweeping/cleaning has been the main source of earned income for Dalit women for generations.

The monthly incomes of Dalit households in this study ranged from under Taka 2,000 to over Taka 10,000. Of the 500 households surveyed, 28 percent have monthly incomes of Taka 10,000 or above; 20 percent are in the Taka 4,000-Taka 6,000 range; 17.8 percent are in the Taka 6,001-Taka 8,000 range; 17.6 percent in the Taka 8,000-Taka 10,000 range; 8.6 percent in the Taka 2,001-Taka 4,000 range, and 8 percent households have monthly incomes of less than Taka 2,000. The pattern of expenditure varied across households, depending on the number of household members and the nature of their occupations. Dalit women complained that male household members spent less on household needs and more on their personal needs, i.e. alcohol and smoking. Alcohol-related expenditures made by husbands was found to be higher in some households.

The general health awareness of respondents was satisfactory. They reported that NGOs and government community clinics run health awareness Programmes on different primary health issues in areas where they live. In discussion, Dalit women said that their children are immunized. They also reported visiting health complexes for antenatal and postnatal services during and after pregnancy. But the overall unhygienic conditions in their community leaves them vulnerable to health risks and diseases. Scarcity of safe water, inadequate sanitation and drainage systems, lack of hygiene, lack of knowledge of proper menstrual hygiene management, lack of solid waste disposal management systems, and congested and unhygienic living spaces are some of the severe problems and health hazards faced by Dalit women and children in this study.

Early marriage is a problem hindering the development of Dalit girls. 38.6 percent of Dalit girls are married off between the ages of 16-18. According to respondents, poverty and social insecurity are two major reasons that parents arrange marriages for their under-18 daughters. The practice of dowry is very common.

Dalit communities are male-dominated. Dalit women's political influence in the clan or caste — namely, the panchayat structure — is so low that they are excluded from any decision-making process at the local level and, due to patriarchal cultural norms and ideologies, are not allowed to represent their communities at the national level. This lack of political and social power leaves them unable to challenge their marginalization and exclusion. All these factors feed into each other, perpetuating the low economic and social status of Dalit women and reproducing it over generations. Therefore, the marginalization of the Dalit woman is multidimensional.

With rare exceptions, Harijan (sweeper) women and men are not allowed to enter local restaurants where their occupation is known. They are required to stay outside, and restaurant staff hand food to them there. They are not allowed to use any utensils belonging to the restaurant, and must carry their own plates and glasses to eat/drink. Sweepers belong at the bottom of the bottom among the Dalit, and they face extreme exclusion—specifically in restaurants within their localities. However, sweeper women of different castes said that hiding their identities may allow them to enter restaurants far from their localities. They added that Dalit men, especially younger ones, can sometimes enter restaurants, but that the Dalit woman's distinctive style of wearing the sari (which is considered an identity marker) prevents them from doing so. This is the key reason that women of younger generations do not wear saris in their traditional distinctive style. According to the study findings, around 5 percent of Bashfor women, less than 5 percent of Rishi

women, and around 2 percent of Kawra and Jaladas women reported problems moving within the larger community and accessing different public spaces.

In general, Dalit people own very little land and reside mainly in government colonies and, in rural areas, on government lands. Dalit women rarely own land unless it has been donated by others or inherited from their parents or their husbands. Nevertheless, a few women in this study had access to land, which is considered the most important economic resource in create positive change in life.

As citizens of the state, Dalit women are entitled to government services in Bangladesh. Moreover, they most often work for local government bodies such as municipalities that deliver such services to citizens. Yet their access to these services ties is limited. When interviewed for this study, local government officials claimed concern for the wellbeing of Dalit communities. In reality, however, Dalits receive very little access to social services.

Historically, Dalit communities are patriarchal, and women and girls live at the edge of society. Families are run by strong patriarchal values, which often limit Dalit women's freedom of choice or self-expression in household decision-making. The data shows that women accept their subordinate position within the household and do not believe they have a right to participate in family decision-making, or to freely express themselves.

Dalit women's mobility and their public role is defined by male family members and the rules of the clan. Their mobility is limited within their own communities and requires the permission of male family members i.e. father, brother or husband. The family will determine how far a girl or woman can go alone, depending on her age and marital status.

## Executive Summary

As members of a patriarchal community, Dalit women from all eight castes reported being victimized by violence. They are physically and mentally tortured by family members.

The Bangladesh Government has taken several steps to ensure the well-being of Dalit men and women. It has introduced special Dalit, Harijan and Bede allowances, but these allowances are inadequate to address their practical conditions and needs. This study offers a number of recommendations to promote the well-being and empowerment of Dalit women who are the most marginalized of the marginalized in Bangladesh society.

### Recommendations:

- Positive, effective, and meaningful interaction between Dalit women and Dalit men should be organized and encouraged through different advocacy programmes to reduce domestic violence.
- Government and NGOs programmes should target young Dalit men and boys to positively change their attitudes towards women and violence against women.
- Focus should be given to promoting positive interaction between Dalit and non-Dalit children at school, and raising non-Dalit children's awareness of the dignity and rights of the Dalit.
- Further advocacy and lobbying efforts are needed to pressure line ministries to ensure Dalit women's access social safety net programmes.
- The active participation of Dalit women in life beyond the family, including local community power structures, should be promoted and encouraged.
- In addition to government efforts, NGOs and other institutions should provide skill-training to Dalit women to help them find alternative means of income.
- Development interventions for Dalit women should be long-term and should focus on future generations and youth. Ensuring proper education and facilitating decent income-earning opportunities could be the most effective way to empower future generations of Dalit women.

# Bringing Dalit Women to the Forefront: Realities and Challenges

## 1.1 Introduction

There are approximately 160 million people in Bangladesh. Although more than 80 percent of the population are Bengali Muslims, there is still significant diversity in terms of ethnicity, religion, language, etc. The Dalits are one category among these diverse groups who have received special attention in recent years, both internationally and nationally. Development agencies and activists are working on Dalit issues, while the literature on the Dalits continues to evolve, conceptually and empirically.

There is disagreement about the size of the Dalit population in the country. Some sources estimate a population of half a million Dalits (Parvez & Islam, 2014:24), while others estimate the number to range between 3.5 to 5.5 million, to even 1 percent of the total population (Chowdhury, 2009:1-2). The Department of Social Welfare survey claims the number of Dalit in the country to be around 4.35 million (Fair: 2015). Similar to the dispute regarding the number of Dalits in the Bangladesh, there is a debate regarding who should be identified as Dalit. The ancestors of many of the current population of Dalits were brought to what is now Bangladesh mainly from the current Indian states of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, and Madhya Pradesh by the British colonial administration during the first half of the 19th century. The Dalit are one of the most marginalized groups in Bangladesh and are often subject to discriminatory treatment. The majority of Dalits are very poor, underprivileged, and possess limited job opportunities. Moreover, they are politically underrepresented and many are forced to live in inhumane conditions. Socially excluded, they are stigmatized and isolated from mainstream society.

The term 'Dalit' was first used by the oppressed communities of Maharashtra in the 19th century (Syam Sunder, 2015). Mahatma Gandhi introduced the term 'Harijan', meaning the 'Child of Hari (God)', to refer to the same groups of people. So, to some extent, the terms 'Dalit' and 'Harijan' are used interchangeably. The Dalit are exposed to and destined to undertake 'inferior' types of professions such as leather-working, butchering, cobbling, sweeping, etc. The term 'Dalit' has come into general usage in Bangladesh via different development organizations, activists, and academics mainly from the last decade. Although 'Dalit', as an identity, has been popular in India and Nepal since the 1960s, the term 'Scheduled Caste' is still used for official purposes instead of 'Dalit'.

Among the Dalit as a social group, Dalit women are the most marginalized of the marginalized. They face a kind of double marginality: First, they are marginalized as Dalits; second, they are marginalized as women. Dalit women face discrimination in every sphere of their lives. High rates of illiteracy, child marriage, and early motherhood characterize today's Dalit women. Though Bangladesh has achieved commendable progress in education, especially in primary education, the status of education of Dalit communities — and, more specifically, of Dalit women — is not compatible with the national average. The dropout rate of Dalit girl children is high. Enrolment of Dalit girls in secondary, higher secondary, and higher education appears to be rare. Families are run by strong patriarchal values, which tend to limit Dalit women's freedom of choice or self-expression in household decision-making.

Livelihood options for Dalit women are very limited. Forty-seven percent Dalit women work at home and not involved in any economic activities. The rate of unemployment among Dalit women is quite high. As Dalit men are the bread winners, Dalit women are economically dependent on them.

The Government does not provide regular and adequate utility services to Dalit communities. In addition, the overall unhygienic conditions in their communities leave them vulnerable to health risks and diseases. Scarcity of safe water, inadequate sanitation and drainage systems, lack of hygiene, lack of knowledge of proper menstrual hygiene management, lack of solid waste disposal management systems, and congested and unhygienic living spaces are some of the severe problems and health hazards faced by Dalit women.

Early marriage is a problem hindering the development of Dalit girls. 38.6 percent of Dalit girls are married off between the ages of 16-18. According to respondents, poverty and social insecurity are two major reasons that parents arrange marriages for their under-18 daughters. The practice of dowry is very common.

Dalit communities are deeply male-dominated. Dalit women's political influence in the clan or caste — namely, the panchayat structure — is so low that they are excluded from any decision-making process at the local level and, due to patriarchal cultural norms and ideologies, Dalit women are not allowed to represent their communities at national levels. This lack of political and social power leaves them unable to challenge their marginalization and exclusion. If a Dalit woman is widowed or abandoned by her husband, she finds it very difficult to survive. In some sub-castes, a widow is not allowed to remarry. Incidences of domestic violence are common. Women are often yelled at and beaten by their husbands, especially when husbands are drunk or run out of money.

The constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, the supreme law of the land, Sections 27, 28 and 29 declare equal rights for all disadvantaged groups of citizens and the ratification of numerous international and UN conventions (e.g. Civil and Political Rights, Rights of the Child, Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and all forms of Racial Discrimination) allowing Dalit women to pressure the Government of Bangladesh to materialize its national and international obligations and commitment. Sadly, until very recently, Dalit issues have been ignored or denied by the Bangladesh Government, donors, and civil society alike. Dalit women's issues in particular have received scant national or international attention.

There is little empirical research on the issues of Dalit women. Thus, the focus of this current research is to assess the situation of Dalit women to provide recommendations for future programming and advocacy strategies that may improve the situation of Dalit women.

### 1.2 Objectives

The focus of this study has been developed based on the following specific objectives:

- To understand the nature of and the key factors contributing to the cultural, social, economic, and political vulnerability of Dalit women in Bangladesh.
- To identify their perception of social inclusion and exclusion.
- To identify the scope to reduce inequality and marginalization of Dalit woman.
- To provide a strategic direction for future development interventions to empower Dalit women.
- To generate recommendations for possible advocacy opportunities for Dalit women's issues.
- To generate recommendations for national level advocacy and policy provisions to

change the lives and livelihoods of Dalit women.

- To analyse the legal and policy frameworks of women's right protection (e.g. CEDAW, National Women Development Policy) and their implementation, and other related policies to protect Dalit women's rights.

### 1.3 Conceptualizing the Dalit

In Bangladesh, Dalit is very loosely used as an umbrella term that includes members of Hindu and Muslims communities involved in certain professions viewed as unclean or degrading (Uddin, 2015; Chowdhury, 2009). Therefore, the Dalit are those who are oppressed, excluded, marginalized, and structurally subjected to inherited inequality because of their occupation, descent, caste, or group identity, based on the notion of 'untouchability'. This notion derives from religious ideas of purity/pollution.

### 1.4 Significance of the Study

The available information on the Dalit in Bangladesh mostly concerns their social and historical trajectories, lack of access to basic services, the nature of their marginalization and its processes. However, research on the Dalit in relation to broader social and cultural forces is rare, and research on the status of Dalit women in relation to their gendered position within their own community and the larger mainstream community is non-existent. No attempt has been made to understand the inner dynamics of the Dalit community and the position of women within it, which is vital information for any future development interventions.

The present study provides systematic quantitative and qualitative information about Dalit women residing in 20 districts and belonging to different ethnic groups within the Dalit. This study has been designed to provide quantitative and qualitative as well as analytical information to illuminate

the complex and dynamic relationships of Dalit women within and beyond Dalit communities. It is expected that the findings of this study will provide input to help design appropriate programmes for Dalit women in the future.

## 1.5 Methodology

The study adopted a mixed-method approach through a combination of interview surveys, FGDs, KIIs and participant observation. Thus, the analytical approach applied both quantitative and qualitative techniques.

### 1.5.1 Sample Design and Sample Size

We consider the population proportion  $p$  is 0.75 and find the smallest sample size  $n$  that will provide the confidence level is 95, i.e. margin of error of +/- 5percent. We use the following formula when the population size  $N$  is known.

$$n = [(z^2 * p * q) + ME^2] / [ME^2 + z^2 * p * q / N];$$

when the confidence level is 95 percent, i.e. margin of error of +/- 5 percent.

While the population size  $N$  is unknown and large then we would consider the standard sample size 384.

To select an equal number of respondents from each sub-caste, a total of 500 samples were determined by considering the standard statistical method among the total target beneficiaries of 20 districts and eight sub-castes of the Dalit population. The interviewer selected one or more residential area for each caste and, through systematic random sampling, selected a household and respondent from that area. For seven sub-castes, 20 respondents were randomly selected from different districts, to total 60 respondents from each of the seven sub-castes. Finally, we selected 80 respondents from an eighth sub-caste. This brought us to a total of 500 targeted respondents to be interviewed for this research.

### 1.5.2 Data collection method

The following quantitative and qualitative techniques were applied to collect field data:

**Survey:** The study team conducted a quantitative survey through a close-ended questionnaire. Five hundred respondents were distributed in eight locations across all eight administrative divisions of Bangladesh. The respondents were all Dalit women from eight separate communities or sub-castes within the Dalit population.

**Focus Group Discussions:** A total of 32 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted around the country. In each of the eight locations, four FGDs were held. The FGDs included four types of participants: a) women of the Dalit community; b) men of the Dalit community; c) girls of the Dalit community, and d) boys of Dalit community.

**Key Informant Interviews:** A total of 32 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were conducted as part of this research study. KII respondents were chosen from upazila administration representatives tasked with delivering services to Dalit communities. Here, officials included upazila social welfare officers, upazila women's affairs officers, and upazila youth officers.

### 1.6 Limitations of the Study

Despite the sincere and rigorous efforts of Nagorik Uddyog, the organization leading the research, it was not possible to complete the targeted number of KIIs in the allotted time. In many cases, the absence of the relevant government officials at their desk during the time of the study was a major hurdle. Some of these officials were away in Dhaka or at their divisional headquarters for their official assignments. Other positions were vacant. The research team attempted to collect the appropriate information from officers in immediately junior positions, but this often proved difficult; many junior officers were apprehensive to talk to researchers, or to

provide any documentary-based information.

The research team also found that a number of the selected officials were reluctant to respond to interviewers, and some officials outright refused to respond. As a result, we estimate that 25 percent of the KIIs could not be conducted.

In the study design, the team had planned to conduct KIIs with Union Parishad (UP) chairmen. However, most of the chairmen of the areas surveyed were away at a national meeting of the Awami League, Bangladesh's ruling party. Because of limited time and resources, it was not possible for research team members to extend their stay and try to make the missing interviews upon the chairmen's return.

There were also limitations in conducting the survey at the community level. In some cases, female respondents in FGDs were shy and less responsive when discussions of reproductive health issues were led by male facilitators. In other cases (for example, among the Telagu in Dhaka, and tea garden labourers in Srimangal), language acted as a barrier. The task of collecting quantitative data through survey questionnaires was also formidable. The team was able to conduct the FGDs smoothly but faced difficulties gathering the Dalit community members at particular times of day. Therefore, they had to wait for long periods prior to the interviews.

Despite these factors, the research team was lucky to be introduced to the respondents by trusted project personnel, which made it possible to collect rich data within a relatively short period of time.

# Review of Literature

## 2.1. Literature Review

In India and Nepal, there has been a significant amount of research on castes, ‘untouchables’, and the Dalit. The research has focused on the historical and sociological trajectories of caste systems in the Indian subcontinent. Similarly, anthropological research on social inequality, and social and economic justice issues is not new. Sociologists and anthropologists have devoted time and energy to understanding the production and reproduction of inequality in different societies across time, space, and gender. In many studies, researchers have also sought theoretical understandings of the intersection of gender and caste in Indian Dalit communities. As a dynamic social site, research into Dalit communities can help unpack many of the theoretical concerns existing in poverty, social justice, resistance studies, as well as studies on power and agency, etc.

In Bangladesh, in recent years, a large number of research reports on the Dalit have begun to emerge, mostly carried by various national and international NGOs, UN agencies, and other donor agencies. These studies focus mainly on understanding the situation of the Dalits and the problems they face, such as the process of their marginalization and issues of their human rights.

In these studies, the findings concerning Dalit women and their lives are more or less the same. Dalit women are treated as a homogenous category, and the differentiating dynamics of age, role, educational background, social status, and cultural differences among sub-castes are not considered.

According to different studies<sup>1</sup>, Dalit women in Bangladesh — who occupy the bottom of both caste and gender hierarchies — face multiple forms of violence and discrimination (as Dalits, as members of an impoverished underclass, and as women), and are thus particularly vulnerable. As Cosimo Zene writes: “one particular group among Dalit worth mentioning... are Dalit women who, having challenged the double burden of oppression, firstly within their own group as well as the oppression coming from the rest of the society, have also been able to offer a critical, alternative approach to ‘feminism’ in a post-colonial setting” (Gramsci and the religion of the subalterns: the case-study of the dalits (untouchables) in south asia: 2012). The endemic gender and caste discrimination and violence Dalit women face is the outcome of severely imbalanced social, economic, and political power equalities. Dalit communities are patriarchal and hold deeply conservative values about the roles of women, leading to severe restrictions of their rights, mobility and freedom. Many girls are forced to marry young (age 10-12), are unable to leave their homes without being accompanied, and lack any financial independence. As in many societies, notions of purity are used to control women, and they are unable to marry outside their caste.

Dalit women who work are employed mainly as sweepers or cleaners, and they face regular physical, verbal and sexual abuse from both employers and the public. The standard government maternity leave is six months but Dalit women only receive two months from the Dhaka City Corporation. In reality, in most municipalities, they must return to work just few

<sup>1</sup> See Islam & Parvaz: Parvaz 2013; 2014, Mazharul Islam & Das: 2008, Islam: 2011, Nagorik Uddyog: 2015; 2013, Pal: 2015; UPR 2009

days after childbirth. Maternal mortality rates are also higher than average among Dalit women and the level of education is far lower. A recent survey conducted in 2011 in a number of tea gardens in the Chittagong area found that Dalit women's awareness of general health and healthy lifestyle topics was superficial. Home delivery was most common in all tea gardens (93 percent), and the majority of deliveries (82 percent) were attended by traditional birth attendants. Mothers did not exclusive breastfeed for six months, and complementary food given to the children was often nutritionally inadequate. A United Nations independent expert on water and sanitation and an independent expert on human rights and extreme poverty visited a Dalit colony in 2011 in Bangladesh and reported that they had no access to water and safe sanitation. Dalit women and girls had to carry the water up several flights of stairs, posing a serious threat to their physical wellbeing. In addition, the women's toilet area had a hole in the ceiling, which boys used to watch the girls, depriving them of privacy<sup>2</sup>.

Dalit women also face higher levels of rape and sexual assault than average. For example, in July 2009 in Dakatia Village, Jessore, a Dalit girl was raped and, in the same month, a young Dalit woman (19) was gang raped. Islam (2011) shows that Dalit girls feel insecure as non-Dalit boys feel that it is almost their 'right' or 'privilege' to touch or push up against a Dalit girl when they see her on the street. The insecurity arising from this constant abuse discourages Dalit girls from venturing too far from their homes. Thus, this paper recommends that special attention be given to these groups of women. Issues faced by Dalit women need to be prioritized, as it is clear that their situation will not change unless issues such as their right to property, reproductive health, early marriage, dowry, and lack of financial independence are addressed. In

<sup>2</sup> See Islam & Parvaz: Parvaz 2013; 2014, Mazharul Islam & Das: 2008, Islam: 2011, Nagorik Uddyog: 2015; 2013, Pal: 2015; UPR 2009

one study (Altaf and Islam, 2014), it was found only 5 percent of Dalit settlements had separate latrines for women. Around 96 percent of women respondents expressed concerns about privacy while using shared latrines. Unhygienic conditions around latrines also pose various health hazards.

Separate Nagorik Uddyog (2013, 2015) studies found that Dalit women often experience discrimination as a result of their distinct style of wearing the sari. Known as the Hindi style, this particular draping makes it easier to identify them as Dalits. As a result, they suffer 'untouchability' in the form of teasing, barred entry to restaurants, etc. Non-Dalits do not allow them to enter their homes. The practice of 'untouchability' is so deeply embedded in our society that discriminatory customs toward Dalits are considered normal. This study found that Dalit children face social problems in greater society when going to school and also within school because of their low caste status in society. They are refused admission, forced to sit on separate benches or on the floor, barred from drinking water from common glasses, made to clean schoolrooms, and subjected to humiliation by teachers and classmates for their families' social and cultural identity, etc. In many places, Dalit are not allowed to enter restaurants or temples, buy or sell in public marketplaces, ride public transport, enrol in schools, eat from common plates, rent or buy flats, find decent employment etc.

The existing studies<sup>3</sup> found that Dalit communities have their own governance system, known as panchayat, which decides internal and external socio-economic, political, cultural, and gender practices as well as communication with mainstream society. Women are largely absent from the traditional Dalit panchayat system, which rarely includes governing female members. Women are not allowed to enter

<sup>3</sup> Please see Islam & Parvaz: Parvaz 2013; 2014, Mazharul Islam & Das: 2008, Islam: 2011, Nagorik Uddyog: 2015; 2013, Pal: 2015

into family arbitration. Instead, male members represent female household members, who are bound to submit to panchayat arbitration without question. Dalit women do not play any role in decision-making processes, and they cannot make decisions regarding their own personal issues. They have no alternative but to accept the decisions of male family members (i.e. husband, father, brother, etc.) regarding marriage, childbearing, or traveling anywhere outside the home. According to religious stricture, Dalit women do not have divorce rights, and thus many women stay with violent and patriarchal husbands and continue to suffer abuse. Girls are blamed, even when they are tortured by their husbands. Cross-caste and cross-religious marriages are not accepted by the Dalit community; as a result, men and women who are marry outside their caste or religious group, are forced by the panchayat to leave each other. After being forced to separate, the women are treated very badly and humiliated by the community.

Tea workers generally wake up early in the morning, complete all household tasks, and arrive at the tea gardens by 8:00 am. Some walk 4-5 miles to reach their workplace. They are generally employed in plucking tea leaves or trimming tea shrubs, which is unusually hard and hazardous labour. Young women workers often become victims of sexual harassment. As the perpetrators are typically their superiors, they remain silent about these incidents to retain their jobs. Neither the Government nor tea estate owners have initiatives for the betterment of tea workers.

In Dalit Human Rights in South Asia; Regional Synthesis Report, Dr. Gobinda C. Pal (2015) writes that, in Bangladesh, no specific government measures address the nature of caste and gender-based violence and the vulnerabilities faced by Dalit women, nor tackle the situation of Dalit women within wider gender measures. As a result, Dalit women continue to experience violence of

multiple forms from multiple members of general society as well as within their own communities. The practice of caste discrimination and violence create a heightened level of vulnerability in their everyday lives. However, the condition of Dalit women cannot be understood in isolation from the overall deprivation, exclusion, and neglect to which Dalit communities are subject. In this paper, the author also identifies the following gaps in policies:

## 2.2. Gaps in Laws and Their Implementation in Bangladesh

There is little understanding of the additional vulnerabilities of Dalit women to gender violence and exploitation due to their intersecting caste and gender identities, and the different ways that this violence manifests.

The rights and entitlements of Dalit women are not specifically addressed by any of the government mechanisms to ensure their development and empowerment.

As education is not recognized as a fundamental right, the state is not obliged to protect and fulfil the right of girls to education with specific measures to achieve gender equality. The Primary Education (Compulsory) Act of 1990 deals more with mechanisms to ensure compulsory education, and not with issues of gender and caste equality and non-discriminatory access to education. Consequently, only a few Dalit girls attend schools, and the majority drop out before completion.

No disaggregated data by gender and caste exists on the educational status of Dalit women.

The draft Education Act of 2013 states that primary education will be recognized as a right for every child, but issues related to gender and caste equality and non-discrimination are not clearly built into this draft law.

Lately, the Government of Bangladesh has begun to include issues of Dalit marginality in its policy discourse. However, this discourse is limited to maintaining quota systems for Dalit employment.

Serious theoretical and academic literature on urban Dalits has recently begun to emerge. Studies by Uddin (2015) are worth mentioning. Uddin (2015) attempted to shed light on the vulnerability of the Dalit using a theoretical lens proposed by Nancy Fraser (2007). Uddin argued that, unless and until the Bangladesh nation-state and the dominant mainstream society recognize the identity and cultural diversity of Dalits, initiatives to reduce the sufferings of the Dalit (most by international donors) cannot be successful.

### 2.3. A Theoretical Framework

There is a need to theorize Dalit's social inclusion and exclusion. The concept of social exclusion-inclusion was prominent in policy discourse in France in the mid-1970s. Then, the concept was later adopted by the European Union in the late 1980s as a key idea in social policy and, in many instances, replaced the concept of poverty (Rawal, 2008). If we are allowed to perform an oversimplification of popular and dominant theories of inclusion, by and large, most scholarships on social exclusion argues that marginalized people need access to economic resources to become productive members of society. In this way, their marketable skills and knowledge can be utilized which, in turn, helps them improve their socio-economic conditions. These theories view poor or marginalized people as victim of larger social processes. Lack of state intervention and the dominance of market logic are viewed as the two main villains for the domination and subjugation of marginalized peoples. In this framework, marginalized people are seen as victims of institutionalized domination and subordination, lacking any agency or power to fight against it. Thus, scholars advocate a framework of inclusion

through access to education, health, and other basic services, and their entitlement to these services as human beings and citizens.

This inclusion school of thought is popular and dominant, and attempts to include the Dalit in mainstream society are driven by many national and international NGOs and donors. Lately, the Government of Bangladesh is taking minimal initiatives toward inclusion in the form of declaring quota systems to secure traditional Dalit jobs. Despite these attempts, a viable framework of inclusion programmes is yet to be achieved.

Following a Bourdieuan model (1977), in contemporary market-based societies, three forms of capital are necessary for any individual to make a decent living: economic, social, and cultural capital. Dalit women lack all three and have no guarantee of accumulating any of the three while dwelling in bounded, patriarchal Dalit communities. They fear not having a decent living, and being overruled by the patriarchal ideology and social structure. They have no access to land, credits and loans from formal institutions, and cannot access other economic resources. They have limited social capital through kinship networks within their communities. They are not allowed to gain other forms of social capital through institutions such as schools, clubs, associations, alumni networks, etc. Lastly, cultural capital refers to marketable skills and knowledge that enable one to make a living. Most Dalit women lack this also, particularly as they lack enough education to get non-traditional jobs in a competitive market such as that of Bangladesh.

Like other scholars, I see the Dalit community and Dalit women as a dynamic and complex social site which is heterogeneous and requires a holistic understanding that is attentive to and informed by theories of power, agency, and resistance. As a very first step in that direction, I have tried to unpack the complex dynamics in women's lives in selected Dalit communities and

suggested that Dalit communities as a social site deserve long-term anthropological and sociological research using a gender lens — which, in turn, might provide useful theoretical insights to a reassessment of dominant theories of social inclusion/exclusion, markets, and issues of power and agency. Therefore, any practical or strategic changes (such as increasing their control over resources and, concurrently, accumulating the social capital necessary to change the patriarchal social structure of Dalit communities, as so needed by Dalit women) requires an understanding of the community as a complex gender, social, economic, political, and ideological field where different intersections within the field constantly orient and reorient the norms, beliefs, and consciousness of Dalit women and men in their daily life experiences.



# Socio-Economic Conditions and Cultural Dynamism

In this chapter, the general socio-economic background of the study population is discussed, such as their education and literacy, income, expenditure and savings, and the problems they face in their daily lives, especially in regard to their health and hygiene. This chapter contains qualitative and quantitative information about the study population's lives and livelihood.

## 3.1 Education and Literacy

The Equity Watch 2014 survey suggests that almost half of Dalits (44.9 percent) never attended school, only 36.4 percent attended primary school, 12.5 percent attended secondary school, and only 4.3 percent attended the higher secondary level. A HEKS baseline survey in 2013 found literacy rates among male and female Dalits to be 48.3 percent and 38.7 percent respectively. Survey results shows that 84.3 percent of respondents mentioned poverty as the main reason for not attending school. Other causes included the distance of schools, parents' negligence, and practices of discrimination in school.

Field data shows that, among 500 Dalit women surveyed, only 44.4 percent went to school; among them, 63.1 percent completed primary level education, and 5.9 percent completed secondary level education. However, none of the respondents of this study completed HSC (Higher Secondary Certificate) level education. The study found that the rate of literacy among the Dalit women has increased, and that enrolment in primary education has significantly increased. But the rate of further education (i.e. higher than the primary level) has remained almost constant. Dalit girls' aspirations toward higher education remain shadowed by the extreme poverty of their communities, and other additional factors

including lack of awareness, early marriage, etc. Field data also shows that 33.3 percent of Dalit women have experienced discrimination while students.

Though Bangladesh has achieved commendable progress in education, especially in primary education, the status of education of Dalit communities — and, more specifically, of Dalit women — is not compatible with the national average. The dropout rate of Dalit girl children is high. Enrolment of Dalit girls in secondary, higher secondary, and higher education appears to be rare. However, all parents with children we spoke to, irrespective of gender, wanted to send their children to school. They expressed their dissatisfaction and frustration at past difficulties in gaining admission for their children at nearby mainstream private or public schools. However, they also said that acceptance of their children in schools is gradually increasing.

## 3.2 Livelihood Options

Livelihood options for Dalit women are very limited. This section highlights the major sources of livelihood for Dalit women in the study areas. The field data shows that, out of 500 respondents, 47 percent of Dalit women work at home and not involved in any economic activities. Their rate of unemployment is quite high. For those who do work, the major income earning activities are cleaning (17.2 percent), tea plantation labour (15.4 percent), pig rearing (5 percent), and agricultural labour (4 percent). Sweeping/cleaning has been the main source of earned income for Dalit women for generations. Only a few holds permanent positions as cleaners or weepers in government sectors such as railways, municipalities and hospitals.

Office hours for government cleaning jobs are usually in the early morning, between 6:00-8:00 am. Thus, in theory, whoever holds a permanent, part-time government job can finish their job by 10:00 am and then be free to work a second cleaning job in a private home or business to earn additional income. In reality, Dalit women said in discussion that they cannot work two jobs to earn more money because they need to manage their households and care for their children.

Dalit women are also involved in pig-rearing, a traditional occupation passed down from generation to generation. Due to various reasons, the living spaces of Dalits are gradually shrinking; hence, pig-rearing has become a challenge for Dalit women. A few women of the Bashfor caste are involved in alcohol production.

Apart from these traditional jobs, Dalit women have no alternative source of income. Data shows that a small number of Dalit women (14 percent) received skill training from NGOs and from upazila youth development offices. The women believed that could earn income through poultry-rearing, but lacked the capital to do this, and could not access capital or loans because of their low caste identity. They also lacked adequate land for any type of farming. They were aware of opportunities to generate income from sewing, but they had little access to sewing instruction or sewing machines.

### 3.3 Income

Over all, Dalit women and men do not have diverse sources of income. Generally, their only income is derived from their traditional occupations — though other sources can include money lending, liquor selling, and pig-rearing. The study findings show that Dalits who work in government hospitals, railways, and in private organizations as cleaners or sweepers mostly have a fixed monthly income. The monthly incomes of Dalit households in this study ranged from under

Taka 2,000 to over Taka 10,000. Of the 500 households surveyed, 28 percent have monthly incomes of Taka 10,000 or above; 20 percent are in the Taka 4,000-Taka 6,000 range; 17.8 percent are in the Taka 6,001-Taka 8,000 range; 17.6 percent in the Taka 8,000-Taka 10,000 range; 8.6 percent in the Taka 2,001-Taka 4,000 range, and 8 percent households have monthly incomes of less than Taka 2,000. On the other hand, the pattern of expenditure varies across households, depending on the number of household members and the nature of their occupations. Dalit women complained that male household members spent less on household needs and more on their personal needs, i.e. alcohol and smoking. Alcohol-related expenditures the husbands were found to be higher in some households. The largest percentage of households had monthly incomes above Taka 10,000. The sub-castes of these households included: Bashfor (4.8 percent), Telagu (4.8 percent), Domee (7.2 percent), Robidas (2.2 percent), Rishi (1.4 percent), Kawra (1.8 percent), Jaladas (5.6 percent), and tea labourer (0.6 percent). Of households with monthly incomes of less than Taka 2,000, 3.8 percent were Kawra, and 3.6 percent were Robidas.

The study found that a few Dalit women have a tendency to save money, but a large number of Dalit women depend solely on their husband's income. The findings show that Dalit women have a mixed attitude towards savings. The willingness to save or not to save depended on whether the Dalit woman had control over her own income and had surpluses after meeting basic needs and expenditures.

### 3.4 Health and Hygiene Scenario

The Government is the basic service provider in Dalit communities, but does not provide regular and adequate utility services. Also, the overall unhygienic conditions of their communities leave them vulnerable to health risks and diseases. Scarcity of safe water, inadequate sanitation and drainage systems, lack of hygiene, lack of knowledge of proper menstrual hygiene management, lack of solid waste disposal management systems, and congested and unhygienic living spaces are some of the severe problems and health hazards faced by Dalit women and children in this study.

The finding shows that the majority of respondents (59 percent) reported suffering from fever, cold, and coughs. They normally ignore general sicknesses like fevers or colds. In the case of a serious sickness, they go to the upazila health complex. Most (25.4 percent) had gone for treatment at some stage of sickness, if the money could be arranged. But many of them experienced inappropriate behaviour or attitudes by hospital employees and doctors. In these cases, they said, a group of middlemen will try to extract from them whatever sum of money they can offer from selling the last of their family valuables. The general health awareness of respondents was satisfactory. They reported that NGOs and government community clinics run health awareness programmes on different primary health issues in areas where they live. In discussion, Dalit women said that their children are immunized. They also reported visiting health complexes for antenatal and postnatal services during and after pregnancy.

In urban areas, the water and sanitation facilities of Dalit colonies are very poor and inadequate, directly impacting health and hygiene. Facilities include tube wells, open bathrooms, and toilets. Some tube wells are installed near the latrines. Some latrines are unhygienic and without tanks.

There are hanging latrines in some selected areas and sludge is directly disposed in the nearest long ditch through a pipeline which, in turn, creates unhygienic conditions. 48.8 percent of households have access to hygienic latrines, and the rest use unhygienic latrines. Among 500 respondents, 24.4 percent household have attached toilets, 9.4 percent have enclosed latrines with walls and a roof, 35.2 percent have fenced latrines with no roof, and 64.8 percent of households do not have access to any toilet. A Danida study found that going to open spaces far from home for bathroom purposes brings hazard in girls' and women's lives. There was evidence that women and girls were sexually harassed while using toilets.

### 3.5 Kinship and Marriage

Kinship ties play a significant role in the lives and livelihoods of Dalit women. Two forms of kinships are dominant among Dalits: kinship through marriage and kinship through blood. Also, fictive kinship known as patano relationships is practiced but is not very common. Monogamy is the dominant practice. As a bounded community, marriage is permitted only among themselves, in line with their respective clans. However, data suggests that, although very rare, inter-caste or inter-religious love affairs and marriages do occur between Dalit boys and girls.

Only 3.6 percent of the women and girls in this study married a boy from a different caste or religion. Seventeen out of 500 women married out of their caste/religion. Although it took time, gradually 77 percent of families accepted these marriages after permission was granted from the panchayat. Early marriage is a problem hindering the development of Dalit girls. 38.6 percent girls are married off between the ages of 16-18. According to respondents, poverty and social insecurity are two major reasons that parents arrange marriages for their under-18 daughters.

### Chapter-3 Socio-Economic Conditions and Cultural Dynamism

The practice of dowry is very common. The amount of dowry depends on various factors. Along with material possessions such as wristwatches, bicycles, televisions, and phones, cash dowries are quite popular among the Dalit. The amount of cash varies from household to household, depending on income. Boys with jobs in public sectors demand high amounts of cash at the time of dowry negotiations.

Respondents had relatives across Bangladesh's Dalit community. Some families entertained relatives from India as well. These kinship networks play an important role in their lives. These days, they are connected through mobile phones. Close kin help each other during times of dire need, and Dalit women specifically feel secure living with relatives.

# Marginalization and Vulnerability of Dalit Women in Bangladesh

In academic literature, some scholars consider social exclusion to be synonymous with poverty, while others consider it as a means to explain poverty. Social exclusion can be defined as the “inability to participate effectively in economic, social, political, and cultural life and, in some characteristics, alienation and distance from mainstream society” (Duffy, 1995: 17). It should also be noted that social exclusion is a multidimensional concept (Room, 1995: 3). The literature on Dalit communities explores how Dalit women struggle to survive in Bangladesh, without adequate housing or basic services. Researchers need to consider the following.

## 4.1. Multiple Forms and Causes of Marginalization of Dalit woman

Deprivation and exclusion are the everyday reality of Dalit women of Bangladesh. Dalit women rarely work outside their established boundaries. They mostly work as cleaners and are very low paid. With the help of NGO credit interventions, some have found employment outside their traditional jobs, but do not earn much from this work. Moreover, Dalit women who work lack control over their earnings.

Dalit women’s traditional occupations (e.g. cleaning, pig-rearing, or tea labouring) are caste-based, which makes it difficult to change occupations. This is a serious barrier to their upward economic mobility and, along with other structural barriers of poverty, perpetuates their impoverished condition. In addition, their mobility is restricted, as their status and social capital is deemed very low in their patriarchal communities. These communities are totally male dominant, and women occupy the bottom rung of the social strata.

Dalit women’s political influence in the clan, caste or panchayat structure is so low that they are excluded from any decision-making process at the local level and, due to patriarchal cultural norms and ideologies, are not allowed to represent their communities at the national level. This lack of political and social power leaves them unable to challenge their marginalization and exclusion. All these factors feed into each other, perpetuating the low economic and social status of Dalit women and reproducing it over the generations. Therefore, the marginalization of the Dalit woman is multidimensional, and has to be understood within the interconnection of economic, social, and political phenomena.

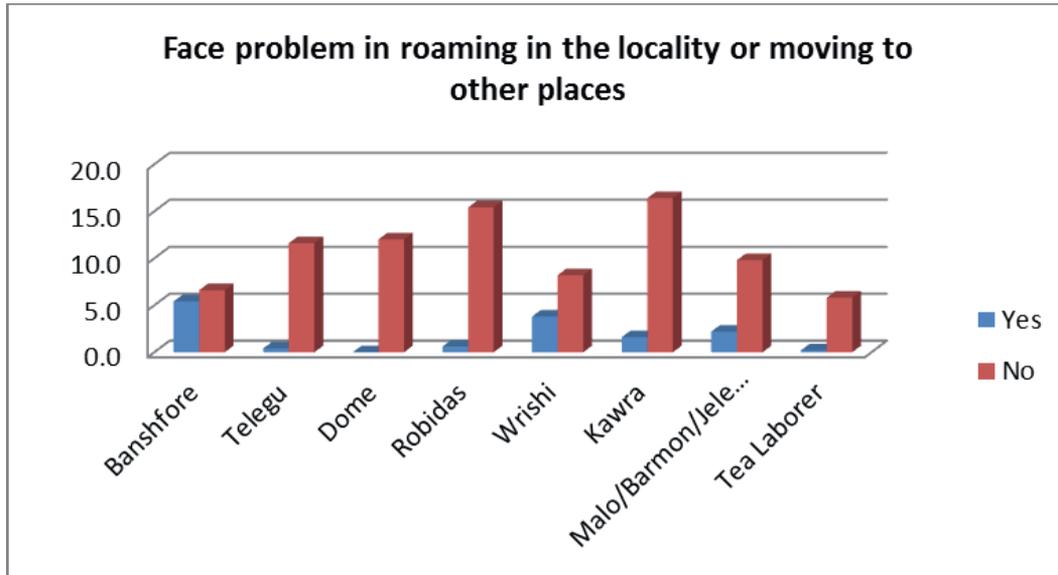
In the following section, the different dimensions of their marginalization are discussed.

## 4.2. Exclusion in Public Space

‘Public’ space is not always open to everyone. Hierarchies and discrimination are clearly visible in places that are supposed to belong to all<sup>4</sup>.

With rare exceptions, Harijan (sweeper) women and men are not allowed to enter local restaurants where their occupation is known. They are required to stay outside, and restaurant staff hand food to them there. They are not allowed to use any utensils belonging to the restaurant, and must carry their own plates and glasses to eat/drink. Sweepers belong at the bottom of the bottom among the Dalit, and they face extreme exclusion—specifically in restaurants within their localities. However, sweeper women of different castes said that hiding their identities may allow them to enter restaurants far from their localities.

<sup>4</sup> In case of tea labourers, mobility is restricted within tea gardens, and they cannot go the areas where managers live.



They added that Dalit men, especially younger ones, can sometimes enter restaurants, but that the Dalit woman's distinctive style of wearing the sari (which is considered an identity marker) prevents them from doing so. This is the key reason that women of younger generations do not wear saris in their distinctive traditional style<sup>5</sup>.

To access public places and gain acceptance in mainstream society, younger generations of Dalits said that they like to move freely about. Women reported that they typically did not have trouble in public places or in public festivals like Bengali New Year, because non-Dalits often cannot identify them by looking at them or listening to their Bangla. According to the diagram below, around 5 percent Bashfor women, less than 5 percent of Rishi women, and around 2 percent of Kawra and Jaladas women said they faced problems moving around within the larger community or accessing different public places.

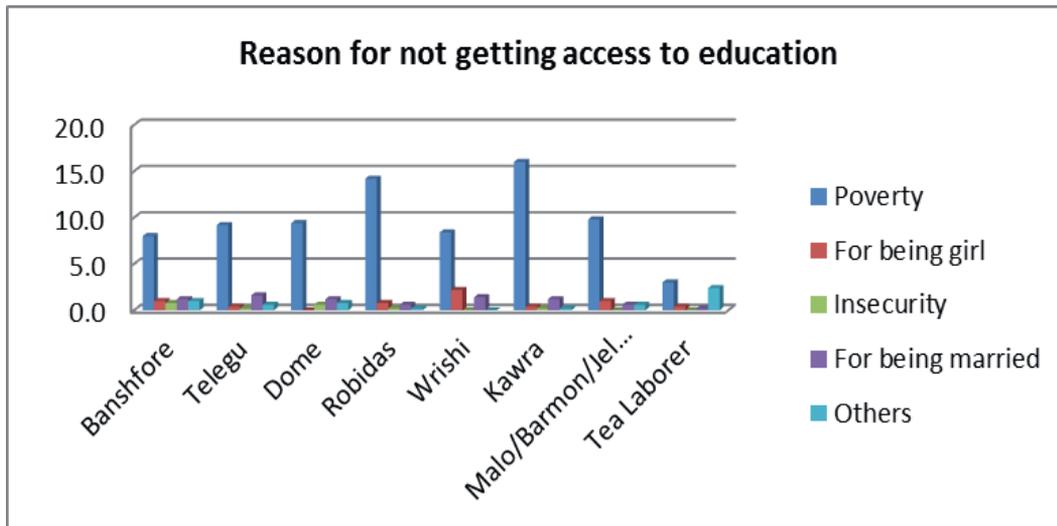
<sup>5</sup> This extreme exclusion of sweepers is more prominent in the northern part of Bangladesh. The southern parts and coastal areas are more progressive and the gap has been reduced remarkably in these areas, according to Uttam Voktho, a Dalit leader from Barisal. Mr. Voktho belongs to the Dome cast.

In general, a positive attitude toward Dalits is increasing among mainstream, non-Dalit people. For example, in Srimongal, one government officer said that, even 10 years ago, it would have been impossible for his family to welcome any Dalit woman or man inside their house. But now they are not hesitant to let a barber or a cobbler inside. However, it will take a long time for people like him to accept sweepers inside their homes.

However, some of the young Dalit women participants of this study expressed their frustration to the researchers, partially blaming their fellow Dalit men for such exclusion. They said that the Dalit men go to the restaurants on their way to or from work, carrying their cleaning instruments, and generally exhibiting an untidy appearance. Thus, they don't present an impressive sight. If they appeared more neatly, they might be treated in a better way by the restaurants.

### 4.3 Access to Education

There is no doubt that Dalit women have been left behind by the education system. Two major causes of their low participation in education are patriarchal ideology and poverty, and



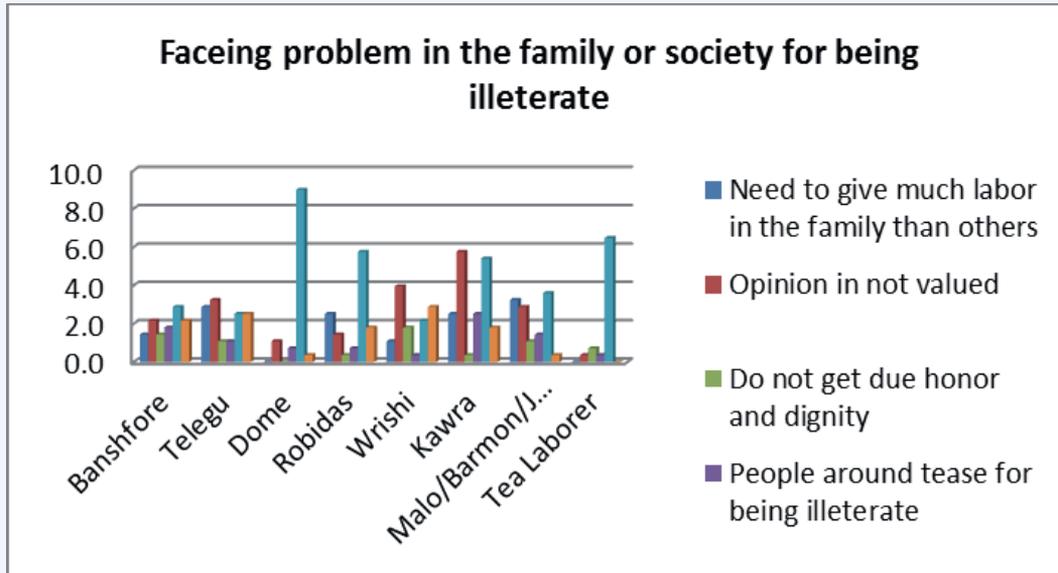
there are many other causes that also need to be addressed. Among our respondents, the majority of Dalit women did not go to school. Out of 500 respondents, 56 percent of women are literate. Among them, 63 percent completed the primary level; 23 percent completed class eight; 10 percent completed the SSC level; and 8 percent completed the higher secondary level. The graph chart below shows the distribution of reasons given by the 500 Dalit women and girl respondents for their poor access to education.

In patriarchal communities and in poor families, the father or the brother makes decisions regarding a girl's education. In most cases, boys are considered assets for future as boys are the source of social power. So, if a situation arises that forces families to choose between sending a boy or a girl to school, the boy will be chosen.

Dalit women and girls' lack of access to education forces Dalit women to remain a muted group within the Dalit community. They can speak their voice within the family, but not within their larger community. They rarely participate in the panchayat or other social meetings, apart from NGO organized groups or committees. Because of their illiteracy, they face the following problems in their community:

In tea gardens, the situation is different. Every tea estate has a primary school located inside the garden, thus 100 percent of children attend primary school. In government-run primary schools, children receive all the facilities mandated to them by national education policy. In addition, Dalit children residing in tea gardens have access to NGO-run primary, pre-primary and non-formal schools.

One girl living in the Srimongal's Vurvuria Tea Garden cried when we asked about her dreams. Her parents are tea workers, and their economic status is very low. Two sisters and one brother depend on her parents' income. She studied up to grade five in the tea garden's primary school, which was free. However, her parents could not afford the cost of sending all three children to high school, so they decided to continue the education of their son and their younger daughter. As the eldest, the girl was required to sacrifice her dream of studying and, instead, stay home to take care of the household.



A fair number of girl children also attend high school in the main upazila and do not face problems in school. Some girls from tea gardens also attend colleges in Sylhet or in Maulvi Bazaar, but the number is not very significant.

Dalit children are gaining increased acceptance at school and discriminatory attitudes are slowly changing, but they continue to face discrimination at school to varying degrees. Many children reported being hurt by the harsh treatment of non-Dalit children and teachers at school. The following diagram shows the different forms of discrimination faced by Dalit children at school:

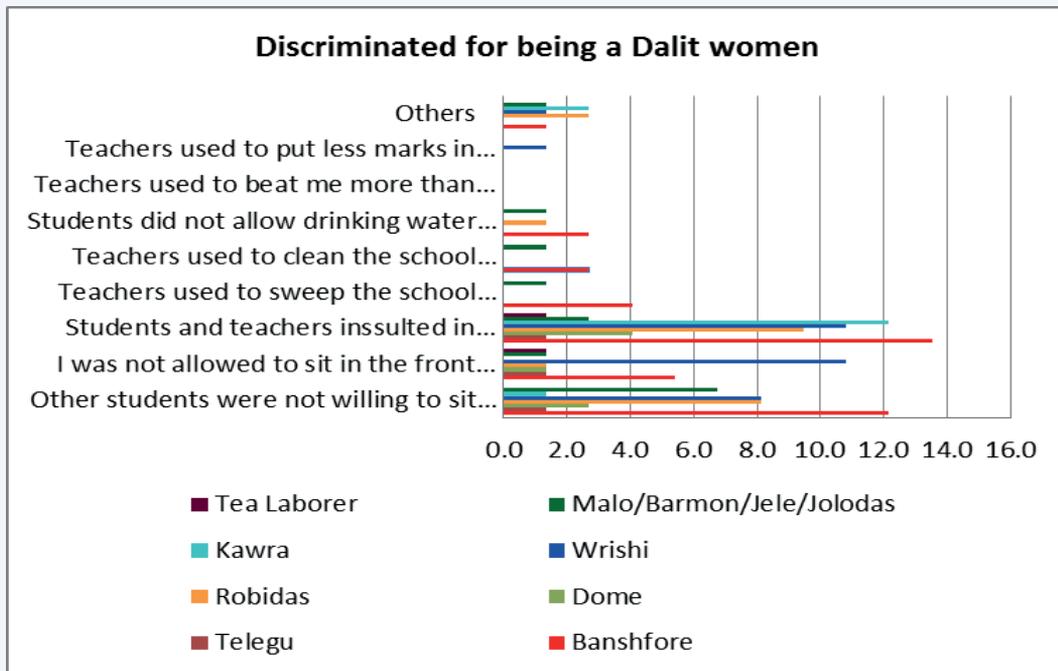
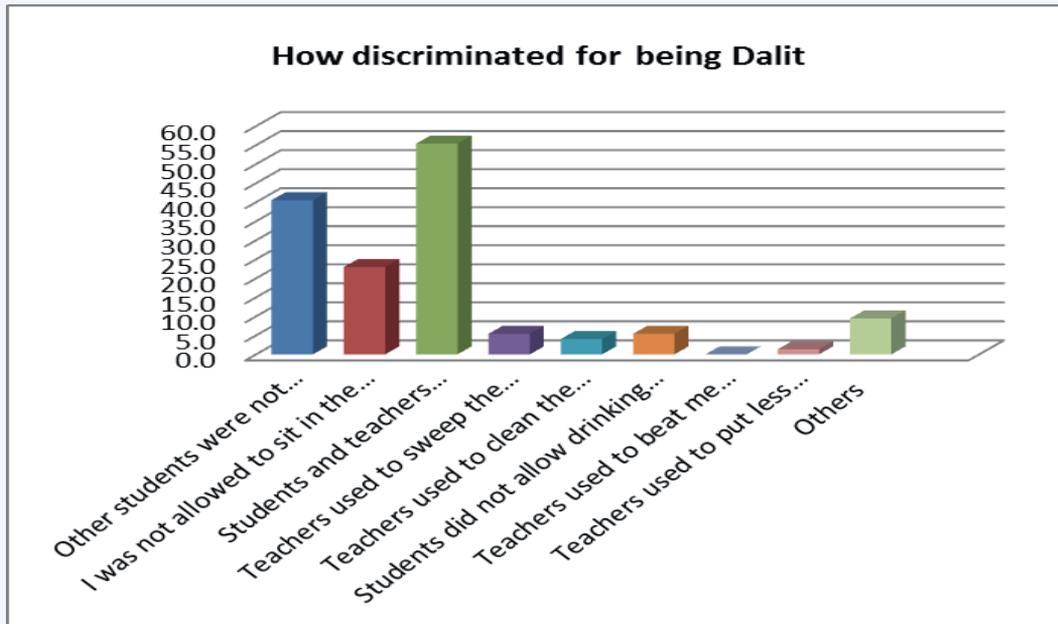
Findings show that seating arrangements are a major source of exclusion at school: 41 percent of non-Dalit children do not like to sit next to a Dalit child, and 23 percent of respondents said that Dalit children are not allowed to sit on the front bench at school or other educational institutes. Bullying and name-calling is another major problem. Fifty-five percent of respondents said they were bullied by teachers or other students, using insulting terms such as ‘Methor ar Meye’, ‘Muchir Meye,’ ‘Bagani’ etc.

We also found that discriminatory attitudes vary by location. According to the findings, Dalit school children are more vulnerable in the Khulna and Rangpur divisions of Bangladesh.<sup>6</sup> In this study, the Rishi, Bashfor and Kawra respondents were selected from these areas. The diagram below shows discrimination faced by school children by caste.

In some areas, the harsh school environment forces children to drop out of school.

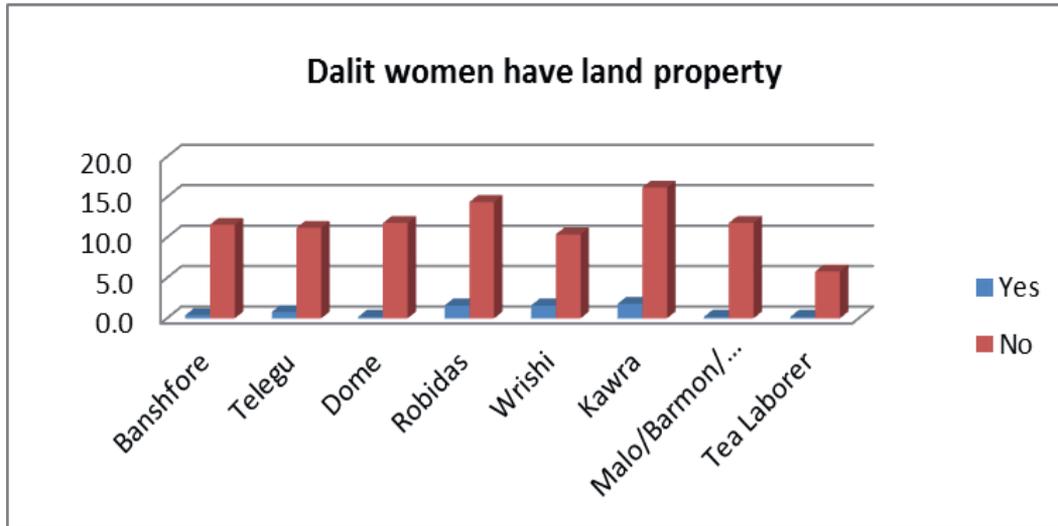
In Kashebpur, Jessore, the math teacher of class four in Kaliari Govt. Primary School of Kashebpur told 27 children of the Rishi community that they are dirty, smelly, and should not come to school. Afterwards, the Dalit community complained to the Upazila Executive Officer (UNO) that their children had been badly treated by this teacher. But, but the insecurity caused by this incident led parents to stop sending their children to the school (Prothom Alo: 25 July, 2016). In another case, in the northern part of Bangladesh, a girl

<sup>6</sup> Uttam Vokto and Bivutosh Ray, two prominent Dalit leaders, said that Dalit communities living in northern Bangladesh are more vulnerable and victimized by discrimination than Dalits living in southern Bangladesh and southern coastal areas.



named Soma Das of the Fakirpara Harijan colony was physically assaulted by another student's mother and brother in the classroom. Soma, a student of class ten in Ayub Ali Girls' High School in Thakurgaon town, visited her classmate Afsana's home and, according to her statement,

Afsana's mother later discovered that a mobile phone was missing. Afsana's mother came to school, accused Soma of stealing the mobile, and beat her to get it back (The Daily Star: October 7, 2016).



Prevailing attitudes towards the Dalit discourage them from pursuing education. Girls, in particular, feel insecure, and this sense of insecurity prevents their parents from sending them to school. Poverty, combined with social insecurity and the discriminatory attitudes of non-Dalits in mainstream society are identified as major reasons that Dalit girls do not attend school — which ultimately contributes towards low literacy rates among the Dalit women. No matter how much they study, they fear that they will always be treated as ‘untouchables’; their identity will always be limited to ‘Rishi’, ‘sweeper’, ‘bagani’, etc., and that they will always face discrimination in finding decent employment because of their ‘Dalit’ social identity. As a result, there is an increasing trend of parents or children themselves changing their family names when enrolling in school to hide their Dalit identity, in the hope that this will help them avoid exclusion. This creates further complications: First, they may have problems during identity verification; second, they will face difficulties claiming reserve quotas and stipends held for Dalits and other ‘disadvantaged’ groups.

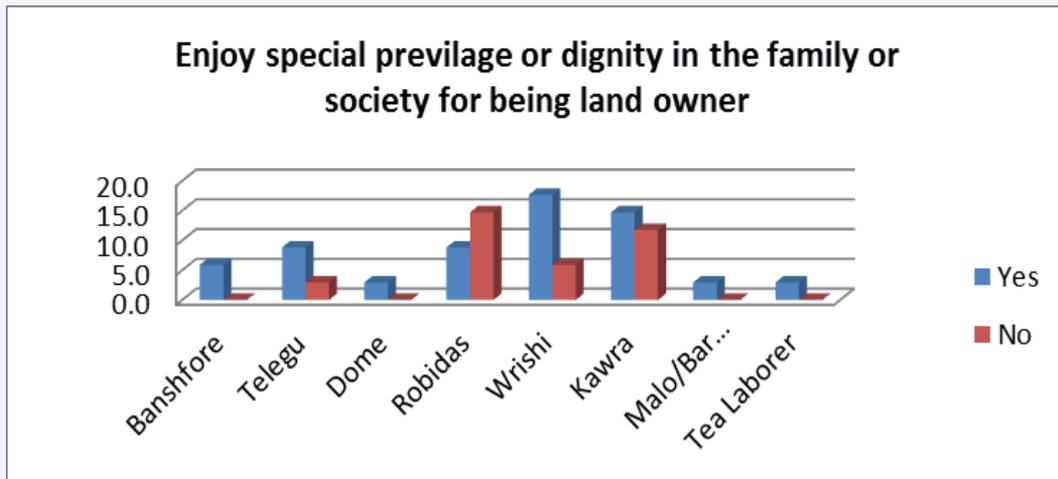
Another cause of exclusion from education is that children, especially girl children, have to assume certain household responsibilities from an early

age. Because of the nature of their jobs, parents typically leave home very early in the morning and return late. Children are left home alone, and the older children have to look after their younger siblings. This is a big cause of low attendance and high dropout rates among Dalit girl children.

#### 4.4 Access to land

In general, Dalit people own very little land and reside mainly in government colonies and, in rural areas, on government lands. Historically, they were brought from different parts of India during the British period and confined to specific areas to live as ‘untouchables’, away from mainstream society. Dalit women rarely own land unless it has been donated by others or inherited from their parents or their husbands. Nevertheless, a few women in this study had access to land, which is considered the most important economic resource in create positive change in life. The following diagram shows the distribution of Dalit women who have access to land by caste.

In total, 6.8 percent of women have land in their own names. Out of this 6.8 percent, less than .05 percent of women from Bashfor, Domee, Jaladas and tea labourers have their own land. Around 1 percent of Telagu women, and around 2 percent

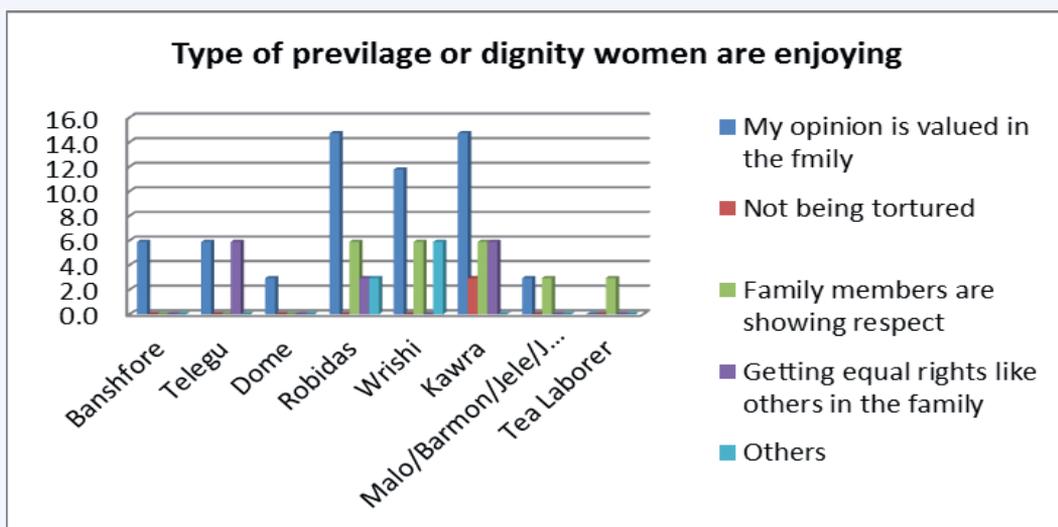


of Robidas, Rishi and Kawra women have their own land. Respondents said that having land in their own names had a positive impact on their personal and family lives, as shown in the following diagram.

According to respondents, the social position of land-owning Dalit women is higher compared to other women in the community. Having access to land or other economic resources improves their status within the family, though the women's position within the larger community of their caste or the Dalit community in general remains same.

The following advantages are enjoyed by Dalit women who own land:

With the exception of tea workers, access to land raises status within the family for Dalit women of all castes. According to the findings, land-owning Dalit women's opinions regarding family matters are more valued by other members. But owning land or other economic assets does not prevent physical violence perpetrated by male family members or in-laws. For members of the Kawra caste, the study found, physical violence has been reduced for these women but not abolished.



However, the majority of men and women do not really believe that women have any right to parental property after marriage. For example, among tea workers, parents choose one of their children to inherit their job in the future, and that child is allowed to remain in the family house. They are reluctant to assign their jobs to their daughters, even if the son has a poor ethic and is unlikely to properly look after the parents in their old age. In group discussions, none of the men nor women stated that they were willing to give their jobs to their daughters. This is also true of other Dalit sub-castes. Thus, Dalit women have virtually no way to inherit land from their husbands or fathers. However, the findings show that land ownership or access to land can bring positive change to their family life.

### 4.5 Access to Economic Resources and Loss of Traditional Jobs

Dalit women have no access or very limited access to means of production such as land and capital. Thus, they find it very difficult to find employment or start a small business of their own. Also, the fact that Dalit communities are patriarchal in structure and ideology combined with insecurity caused by the Dalit's status as a low or no power holding social group, means that they are scared to allow their women to travel outside of their own community. The movement of unmarried and newly married young women within is also very restricted by male family members. This lack of social mobility and the family's strict rules prevents Dalit women from accessing employment other than their traditional professions. In cleaning and sweeping jobs, Dalit women mainly work where their male family members work. According to the data, Dalit men believe that limiting Dalit women to working within the community ensures social security and women's physical safety.

Dalit women lack the start-up capital, required knowledge, skills and capacity to start their own businesses. Some NGOs have provided sewing

training to Dalit women and given them sewing machine. In Srimongal, the upazila social welfare office provided sewing training and loans to a number of female tea garden workers. This gave Dalit women and girls an alternative income-earning opportunity, but their tailoring endeavours resulted in little success. As poor women of the tea garden labourer caste working out of their own homes, they received few orders. Some other young tea garden women work as salesgirls in the shops of Srimongal. Most of these shops are run by members of the Monipuri ethnic group. And some Kawra and other Dalit women work in the fields as agricultural labourers. Dalit women complained that they are not offered maid servant jobs in the neighbouring areas.

Dalits, in general, are losing their traditional jobs as cleaners and sweepers. Although the Government has renewed its directive to reserve 80 percent of cleaning and sweeping jobs for Dalits, the quotas are often not practiced in reality. Lately, recruitment for cleaning and sweeping jobs in government hospitals and railways has become more formal: announcements are published in national and local newspapers; the minimum educational requirement has been moved up to the completion of class eight (08); and, in the recruitment process, the Government has introduced a written examination followed by an oral examination. As the findings show, Dalit women are often very poorly educated; thus many Dalit women even do not qualify to apply for their traditional jobs. In addition, a lack of social mobility and communication competence act as major constraints preventing Dalit women from going outside their locality to attend written or oral examinations, which are often held in big cities like Dhaka. Because Dalit women are mostly employed as cleaners and sweepers, these recent shifts in policy badly affect them. Also, to get cleaning and sweeping jobs in hospitals, railways and municipalities, one needs to either

bribe or ask a favour from government officials or politicians. The findings show that many Dalits struggle to meet their daily expenses. They are thus unable to arrange the money to pay bribes and are thus being deprived of the traditional jobs to which they are entitled. Dalit men can capitalize on good relationships with government officials and other influential local politicians such as MPs or Ministers to secure cleaning or sweeping jobs, but Dalit women lack the social relations to do this. Thus, Dalit women are gradually losing their traditional occupations.

Another important economic activity for the Dalit woman is rearing pigs. Pigs, in addition to being a source of protein, play a significant role in Dalit culture. Pork is considered a necessity for arranging feasts for almost every ceremony, such as marriages, funerals, etc. Therefore, pigs are high demand in the community and are a lucrative source of income. However, rearing pigs is gradually becoming a challenge, as many Dalits do not have the space required for pig farming. Most Dalit sub-castes rear pigs, but it is the traditional occupation and one of the major economic activities of the Kawra caste in particular.

In Naogaon, Kawras are gradually giving up pig rearing in order to make themselves more acceptable to mainstream society. As a majority Muslim country, the mainstream population of Bangladesh considers pigs and pig-rearing to be dirty and undesirable. The Kawra women who participated in the group discussion said that, because they no longer rear pigs, they are no longer considered dirty by their neighbours. Of the study respondents, only 6.4 percent still rear pigs. Among that 6.4 percent, 4.9 percent are from the Bashfor caste, 3.9 percent are from the tea worker caste, and 41.8 percent are Kawras who still rear pigs. Pig-rearing is traditionally done by women, though men take the pigs to market and have control over the earnings. A large number of Kawra women have changed their occupation

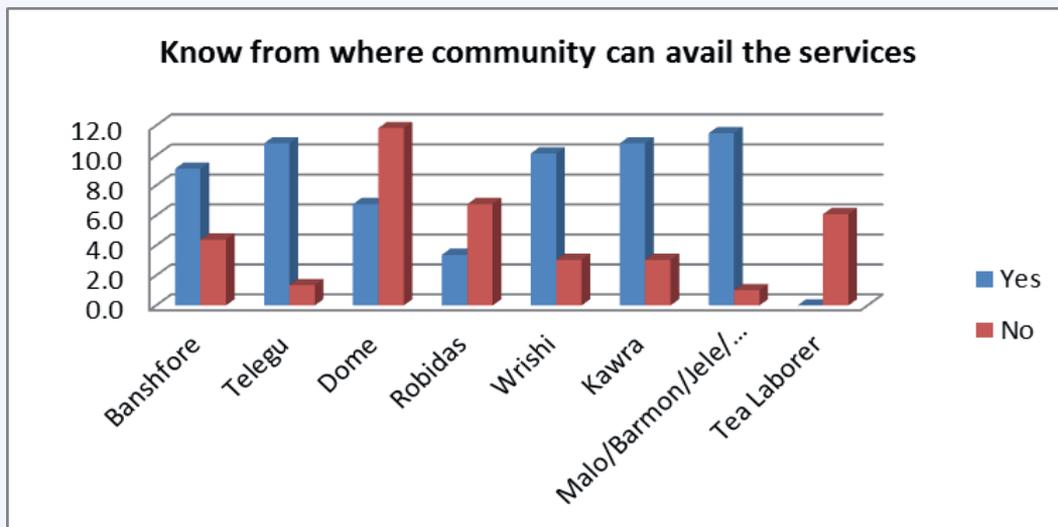
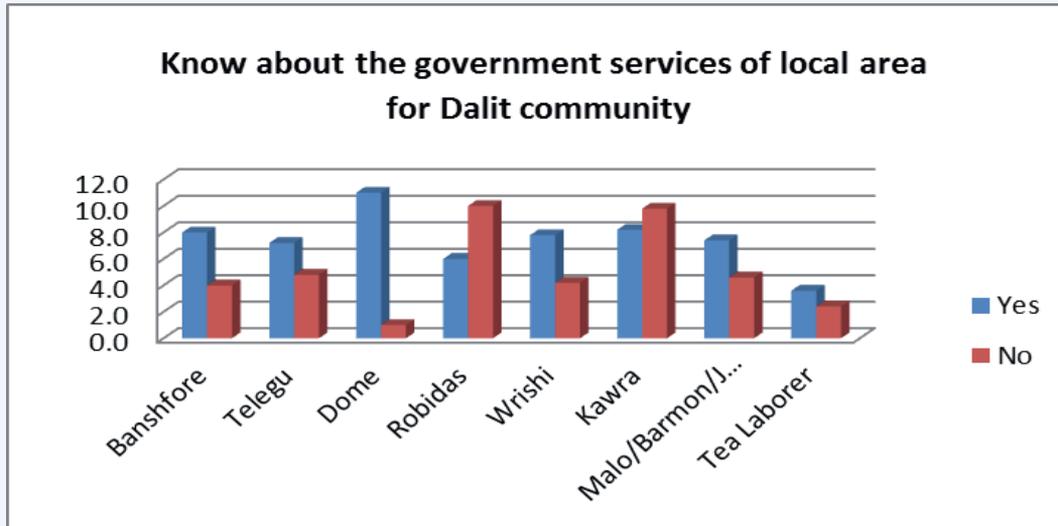
and now work as agricultural labourers. But the qualitative data reveals that many Kawra women do not work outside the house and have no opportunity to earn income.

To fill the gaps left by the loss of these traditional jobs, NGOs offer different skills-training programmes to create alternative options of earning a livelihood. But these trainings only cover a few Dalit women, and a majority of Kawra women are left behind, unable to economically contribute to their families. Similar scenarios are unfolding in Dalit communities where women are traditionally employed as sweepers or cleaners. It is difficult for a Dalit woman to find new employment.

#### **4.6 Limited Access to Social Safety Net Programmes**

As citizens of the state, Dalit women are entitled to government services in Bangladesh. Moreover, they most often work for local government bodies such as municipalities that deliver services to citizens. Yet their access to these services ties is limited. When interviewed for this study, local government officials claimed concern for the wellbeing of Dalit communities. In reality, however, Dalits receive very little access to social services. The data shows that they are aware of different government schemes for the welfare of citizens, but rarely take advantage of them.

The data shows that they know the names of government service programmes, and are even aware of the procedures required to access them. According to the data, the tea workers are the least knowledgeable, followed by the Robidas caste, who know little about how to get an aid card for access to different services. Domee women's awareness level is similar to the Robidas'. Ironically, among the eight groups surveyed for this report, the tea workers are the only group with locally elected members and chairmen of the Union Parishad and upazila level from the local Dalit population.



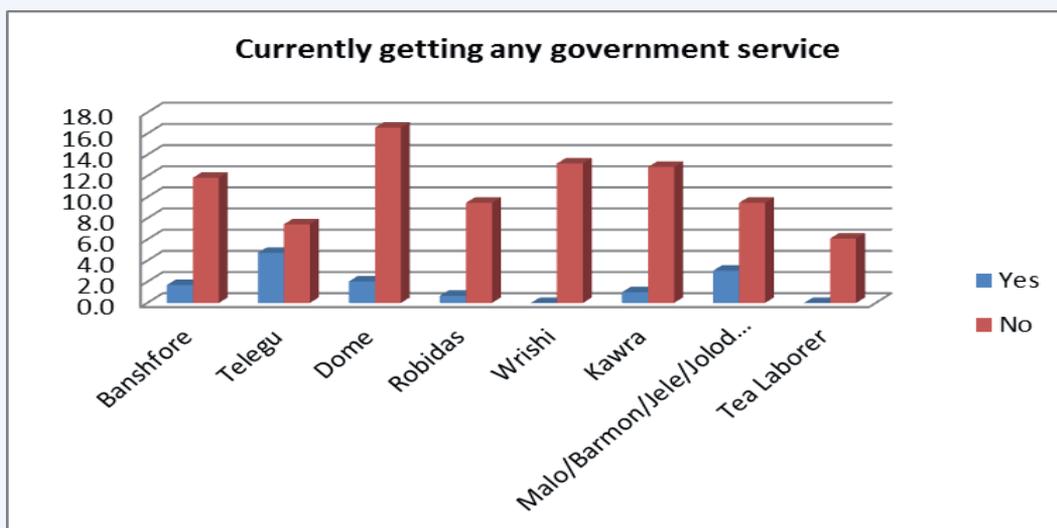
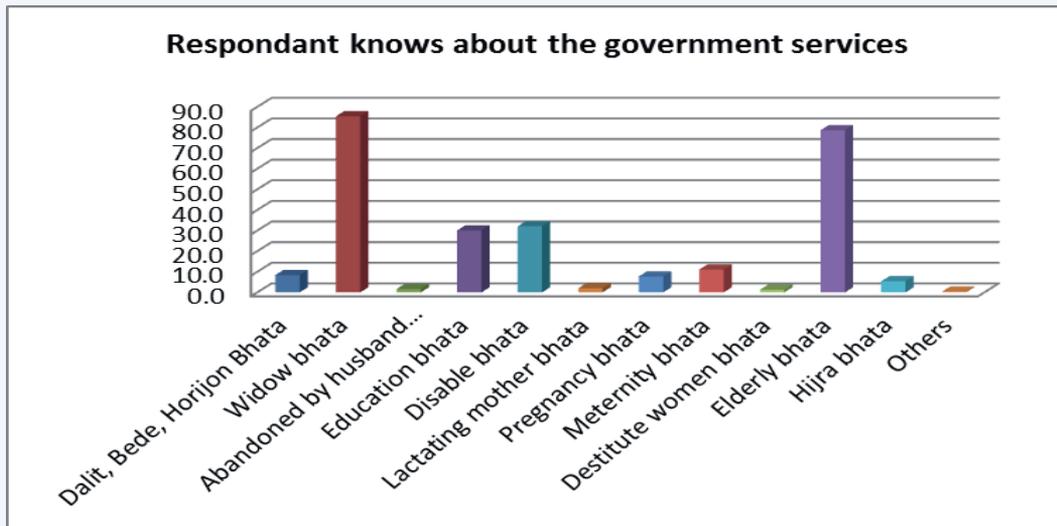
Tea worker women actually prefer not to leave the tea garden, as they receive rations as tea workers, have free government schools inside the tea estates, and have access to free health centres run by the estate owners. The following diagram shows the awareness levels of different groups regarding how and where to access government programmes.

The study respondents were mostly aware of social welfare schemes benefiting widows and elderly people, but they lacked knowledge of schemes

specifically created for their communities, such as allowances for Dalits, Bedes, Harijans. Dalit women not only lacked awareness of general education and disability allowances, but were also unaware of the special Dalit women's education stipend.

The data reveals that, despite awareness of various government programmes and benefits, few Dalit are enrolled.

The Dalit women surveyed for this study reported that Union Parishad (UP) members who submit



lists of programme recipients often, for political reasons, fail to include Dalit women's names. Instead, because Dalit support is not vital to winning elections, these UP members include the names of poor non-Dalit women from mainstream society — instead of Dalits — to buy the votes of that particular family. In discussion, Dalit women told us that they are unable to secure programme aid cards because UP members request bribes, which they cannot afford to pay. In addition, they are sometimes deprived of social safety net programmes dedicated to them. In some areas,

data shows that Dalit allowances are also given to non-Dalits. However, we found that Dalits receive aid cards such as elderly allowances, widow allowances, etc. According to the study team's observations, the number of aid cards is often inadequate for community demand. A few Dalit women also receive employment through schemes such as the UP's 100-Day Employment Programme, Food for Work, etc.



# Dalit Women and Empowerment

In this chapter, specific aspects of Dalit women's lives are described, with the aim of showing the Dalit community as a living space and interrogating notions of Dalit women's belonging within culture and society. The discourse that arises is a reminder that the patriarchal community is a social site that continually forces women to reproduce, reinforce, and internalize patriarchal norms and values, and it requires them to negotiate different strategies for existence within the Dalit community and co-existence with the dominant mainstream Bengali society.

## 5.1 Discourse on Dalit Women Gender identity

Dalit men and women have multiple identities, such as caste, clan, national, and class. These identities have been historically and culturally constructed, and thus must be understood in context. Within caste, Dalit women and men's identity are related to their clan affiliation<sup>7</sup>. There are multiple clans within each caste, and there is a hierarchy among clans within the socio-cultural and political context of a given caste community. For example, there are eight clans in the Bashfor caste, and Bashfor women and men are known by their clan identity.

In general, Dalit women's role have been defined by the social rules of their clan, and this clan identity exists only within the caste of the Dalit women. The clan identity of Dalit women restricts their social life and marriage within their own caste; to secure their existence within their caste and geographical area, they are prohibited from acting against the wishes of their clan. For example, when a boy from an upper clan marries a girl from a lower one, the boy's family generally

<sup>7</sup> Dalit people are known by their clan identity in castes where they only have clan in those communities.

Within the study area, a boy from the Telagu caste married a Telagu girl from a lower clan. His family never accepted the girl, and the couple had to live in a separate room in the colony where the boy's family resided. But this created a socially difficult situation for the boy's family, so the couple recently moved to Dhalpur where the girl's family lives. Her family has made a separate living arrangement for their son-in law.

does not accept the girl, and the panchayat will send the boy to live with the girl's family. If this couple refuses to live with the girl's family, they can arrange their own living situation. But when an upper clan girl marries a boy from the lower clan, according to the rule of the panchayat, the girl must move to the boy's family. According to the culture of the caste, it is the woman who must change her clan identity by changing her title, even if they marry a lower clan boy. These rules of inter-clan marriage and inter-caste marriage have historically has been imposed by the clan's headmen and the panchayat. Women lack representation and participation in the panchayat system in most castes<sup>8</sup>.

Additionally, social hierarchy among castes means that Dalit women from lower castes are not allowed to take food with upper caste families.

<sup>8</sup> Recently, the Telagu caste has included women members in the panchayat. The Kawra caste also has two female panchayat members. This is the outcome of church-based NGO intervention over a long time-frame.

Katapally Sorothsoti is a Dalit girl from the Telagu community living in Gubtoli. This year, she was admitted in an honors program. She and her sister started using the Das title when they enrolled in school, dropping the title of their clan Katapally. Their mother, who works in a private office as a cleaner, also does not use their clan title.

Merry, a second-generation converted Christian woman from Telagu community, has been working at an NGO as cook. Her given name is Kakkara Merry, where Kakkara is the title of her clan but, to hide her caste identity from the mainstream population, she no longer uses her clan title. Her family members who live in Bangladesh also hide their Dalit identity by dropping the clan title from their names.

If a social programme like a *sraddho* is arranged, upper caste Dalits rarely invite lower caste Dalits. However, class can make a difference: A few Dalit men have become acceptable to all castes due to their class status, but lower class Dalit women are rarely acceptable to Dalits of higher castes or clans due to their caste or clan identity. In terms of Dalit identity, 'women' is not an essential category; rather they have different clan and caste identity.

In mainstream Bangladesh society, non-Dalits tend to link their identity to occupation, not to caste. Different non-Dalit dominant groups often construct the identity of Dalit as 'other'. This narrative of 'otherness' attains deeper, broader meaning and significance in the political, social, and economic spheres that encompass Dalit lives in general and Dalit women's lives specifically. Indeed, such narratives lead to different forms of vulnerability, exclusion and injustice. They are commonly depicted as 'dirty', both in reference to their profession and personal hygiene. They are said to be 'unclean' and to live in 'unclean' residential areas. The practice of pig-rearing, considered 'dirty' by dominant Muslim groups and others, emphasizes this narrative of 'uncleanness'. Pig-rearing has historically been a Dalit women's job, though it is now being replaced by other activities, especially among the Kawra.

It is also said that the Dalit cannot speak 'proper' Bengali. Dalit women and girls are depicted as bare-foot, confined, and hesitant people who rarely venture outside. There is a strong belief that these characteristics are so rooted within that they have become part of the Dalit persona.

Dalit women can be easily identified by non-Dalits by their dress<sup>9</sup> and language. To avoid discrimination at different places and institutions, Dalit women of younger generation continuously negotiate how they present themselves. Most no longer dress in their traditional style, and they speak Bangla as spoken by mainstream Bangladeshis. Many also change the title of their clan or caste when enrolling in school. Educated Dalits or working Dalit women are identified by their religious identity. At the same time, older Dalit women still dress in their traditional style, speak their traditional language, and not willing to change their identity through negotiating culture and tradition.

Through the strategic construction of their image and identity vis-à-vis how they appear to non-Dalits, young Dalit women are continuously negotiating their cultural and social identity and

<sup>9</sup> Dalit men do not have a distinctive style of dress and thus cannot be identified on the basis on their clothing. Their traditional language, however, is the same as Dalit women's.

trying to minimize discrimination by members of mainstream Bangladeshi society.

## 5.2 Role in Decision-Making

Historically, Dalit communities are patriarchal, and women and girls live at the edge of society. Families are run by strong patriarchal values, which often limit Dalit women's freedom of choice or self-expression in household decision-making. The data shows that women accept their subordinate position within the household and do not believe they have a right to participate in family decision-making, or to freely express themselves.

Consequently, male are the bread winners, and Dalit women are economic dependent on them. Among our respondents, a large number are homemakers and not earning. Dalit women are mostly illiterate and their mobility is very restricted. However, FGD data reveals that attitudes towards the woman's role in decision-making in the family and other social sites are changing. More and more men now discuss family matters with women of the household before making final decisions. This change in attitude mainly prevails among Dalit men who are educated, who have been exposed to the outside world through work, and who are also involved in NGO activities. Factors that contribute to women speaking up in the family social site, and also in larger society include education, access to economic resources, political power, and social capital. The data shows that, although only 6.8 percent of Dalit women own land, that land ownership has a positive impact on their family life. With the exception of the Jaladas and tea worker Dalits, all female respondents cited ownership of land as the most valuable asset to help raise their status in the family and to give them a voice in decision-making.

Dalit women in tea gardens are an exception. Women's education (though many tea worker

In a FGD with Dalit women of the Telagu community, participants said: "We are not educated, and have no or very little knowledge about the outside world. So we are not the right people make decisions regarding our children and other household matters".

women are illiterate, girls are becoming educated) and participation in politics is gradually changing their lives — though the change is very slow and not yet visible. For example, in three tea estate-based unions in Srimongal (Satgao, Kalighat, and Razghat Unions), nine female tea garden workers have been elected to UP membership positions. A tea garden woman also participated in an upazila-level election for a vice president position in Srimongal, but did not win. We have not come across of a single case of Dalit women standing for elections in other areas of Bangladesh, though a woman from another minority group (the Adivashi, or indigenous tribes) participated in a UP election.

In the event that a woman is widowed or abandoned with small children, she becomes the key decision-maker in most areas of her children's lives. Still, the wider kin network and clan members must be involved when single mothers arrange their adult children's marriages. In families where widows and single mothers have adult sons, women cede the key decision-making role to their sons, and the sons control the mothers' lives. Old women typically have no voice in the family. However, mothers-in-law usually exhibit power over their daughters-in-law; in most

cases, without the mother-in-law's permission, young married women cannot go anywhere.

### 5.3 Mobility of Dalit Women

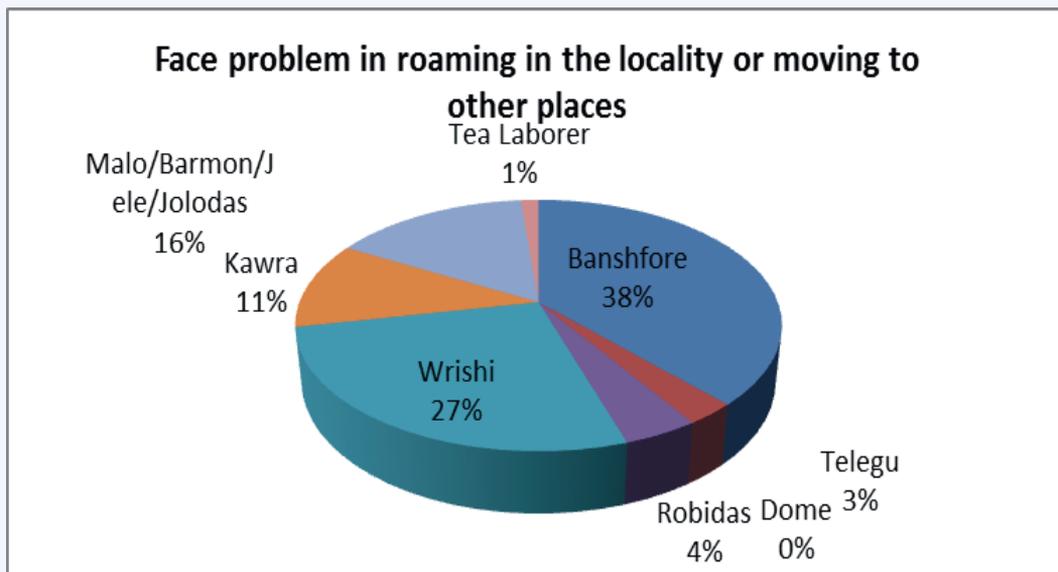
Dalit women's mobility and their public role is defined by male family members and the rules of the clan. The number of working Dalit women is low, and those who work are mainly employed in cleaning or sweeping, agricultural day labour, pig-rearing, and tea garden labour. These women go to their work places on their own, but they need permission from male family members to go anywhere else, even to roam within the boundary of their own community areas. Often, Dalit women hardly leave the house. In public places where they cannot easily be identified as Dalits, neither men nor women experience problems. The data shows that the young Dalit generation is able to move between different places — the market, Boishakhi Mela (Bengali New Year Festival), etc. — without issue. According to the survey, the problem of mobility within the community's locality has been reduced:

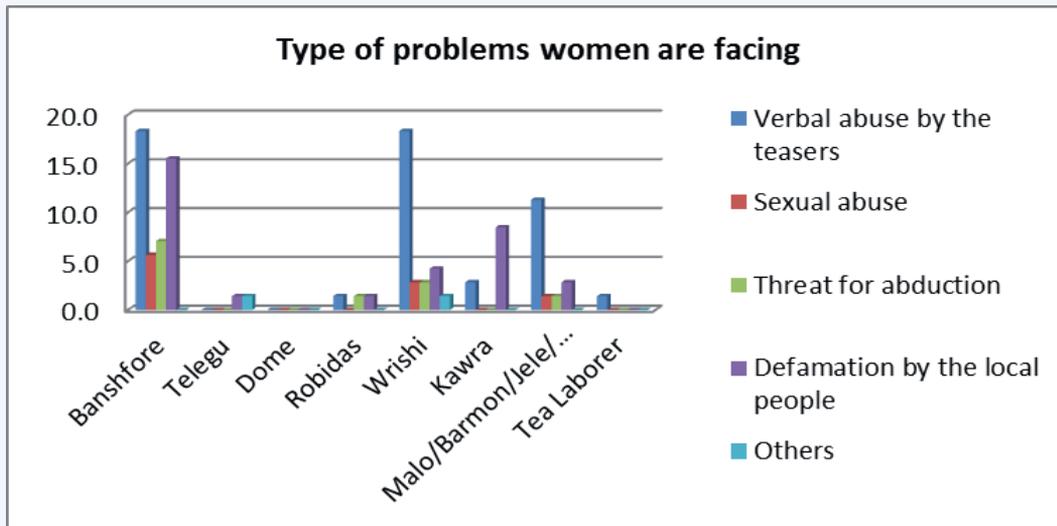
The mobility of different Dalit castes varies partly because of their varying occupations, and how

'dirty' their work is seen in the eyes of non-Dalits. Freedom to roam around within the locality does not necessarily mean that they can move fearlessly. The following diagram shows the problems women face or fear they will face when they leave their homes.

Verbal abuse or eve teasing is a very common type of harassment faced by Dalit women and girls. School-going girls are especially vulnerable to this harassment on their way to school. The problem of eve teasing is more prevalent in districts and semi-urban areas. Thus Bashfor, Rishi and Jaladas women and girls reported this problem more than other groups in this study. Parents feel insecure to send their girls to school, as the perpetrators of the harassment are often mainstream, non-Dalit boys with links to local 'musclemen'. A negative consequence of such eve teasing is that parents may stop sending their girls to school. For example:

Dalit women's mobility is limited within their own communities and requires the permission of male family members i.e. father, brother or husband. The family will determine how far a girl or woman can go alone, depending on her age and marital





status. School-going girls travel to school in groups and, after school they usually move in own community as a group. Before puberty, girls are allowed to move around freely. After puberty, however, teenage girls are not allowed to go anywhere in their community alone, without first getting permission from their father or brother. Young married women also have very limited movement within their own community. After marriage, they cannot do anything of their own choice. After giving birth to two children, Dalit women no longer have the social status of ‘young women’. This changes their freedom of mobility, as old and widowed Dalit women do not have the same restrictions on moving around within their locality. The key reason for Dalit men to control their women’s movement within the community is to control their sexuality and ensure that their unmarried and young married women do not have unsanctioned sexual contact. The honour and status of a Dalit family are partly dependent on their women and girls’ character and modesty.

#### 5.4 Gender-Based Violence and Dalit Women

As members of a patriarchal community, Dalit women from all eight castes reported being

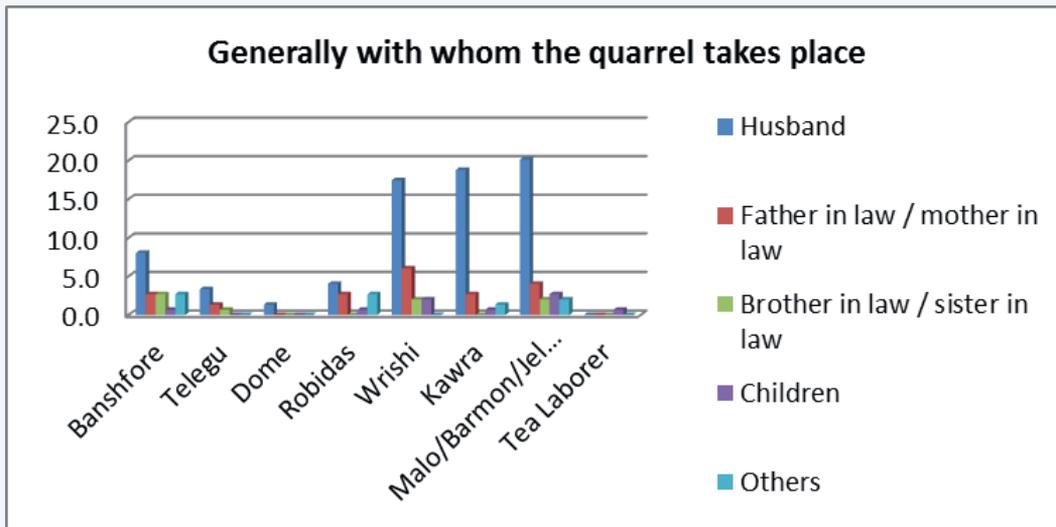
Suma Jaladas, a high school student in Chakaria, said: “On way to my school every day, local bad boys tease me and my female schoolmates. I feel insecure and am always scared while going to school. I shared this with my family. Now I am under pressure by my parents. Very soon, my parents may stop my education. They are trying to arrange my marriage and, if they find a good groom, they will marry me off.”

victimized by violence. They are often physically and mentally tortured by family members.

Most of Dalit women believe that they have a right to access food, shelter, clothes, and education. They say they are poor and do not have access to their basic needs as human being. Apart from basic rights, however, they have no idea what ‘right’ means. They do not consider freedom of choice, control over their own income and property, or freedom from physical or mental torture to be

Purnima Rani, a Rishi woman, said, “Conflict between the husband and wife is a regular incident. The husband beats his wife, then loves his wife again.’

In an FGD, Bashfor women said: “Bashfor women are regularly beaten by their husbands even for very silly reasons. Men do not value women in the family or society.”



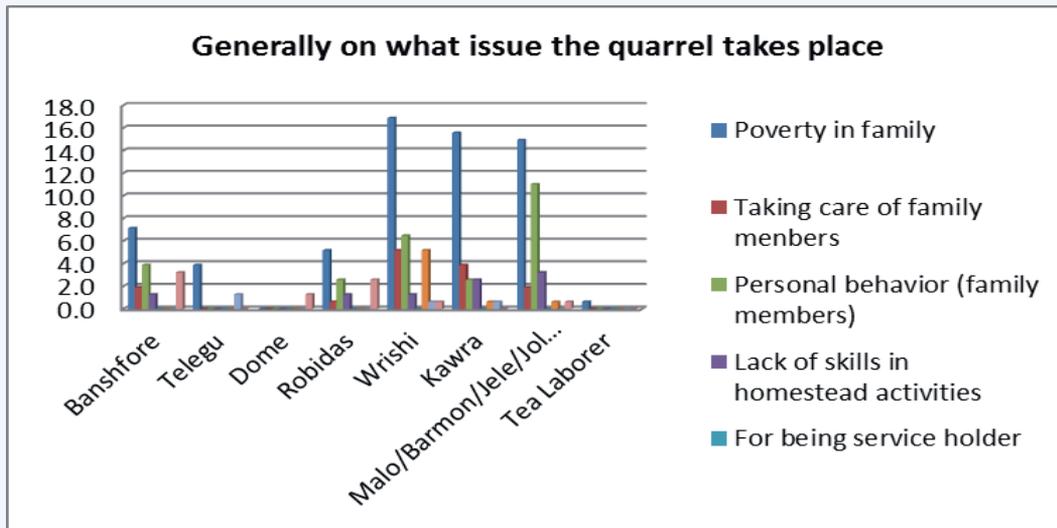
their right. The data shows that there is degree of variation in the ways Dalit women of different castes face domestic violence; irrespective of caste, however, all Dalit women experience males domination and physical harassment as daily facts of life.

In Dalit communities, women rarely initiate debate or conflict with their men or their in-laws. They are in constant fear of being beaten or mentally tortured by other family members. The graph shows that women are mainly assaulted by their husbands after marriage.

In the discussions, women of different castes said that their men’s major problem is alcohol

addiction. They spend half their income drinking alcohol. One consequence is that they remain poor. However, they said they cannot speak up against their men’s drinking because it is not the women’s income; as for the women who do work, have are not allowed control over their income or how it is spent. The following graph shows the reasons for which women are verbally and physically abused:

Dalit women say that, even if they can be saved from abuse by the outside world, they cannot be saved from the mental and physical abuse of their own family and community members. Kawra, Telagu, Bashfor, Rishi, and tea garden women and girls said that the women of their



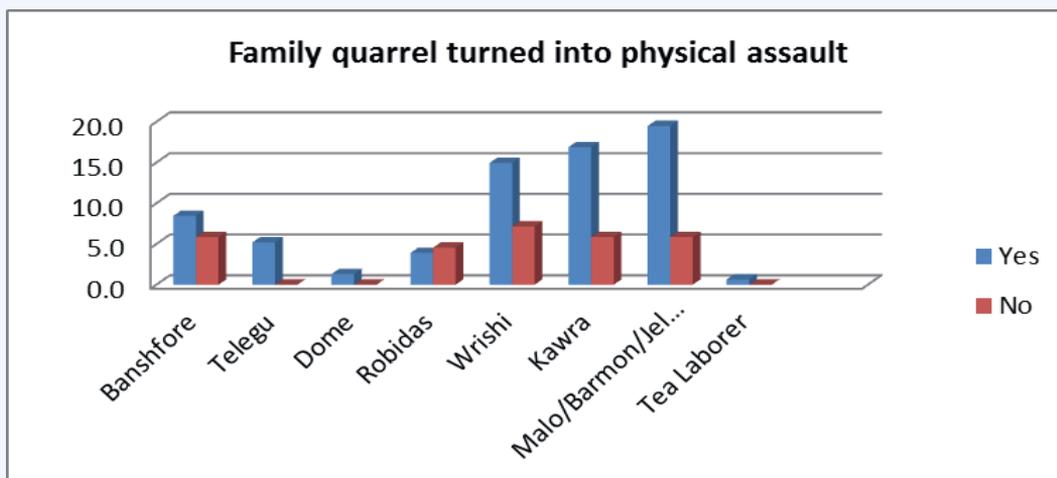
communities are more subjected to violence by their families than by the society outside. In many cases, verbal quarrels turn to physical assaults.

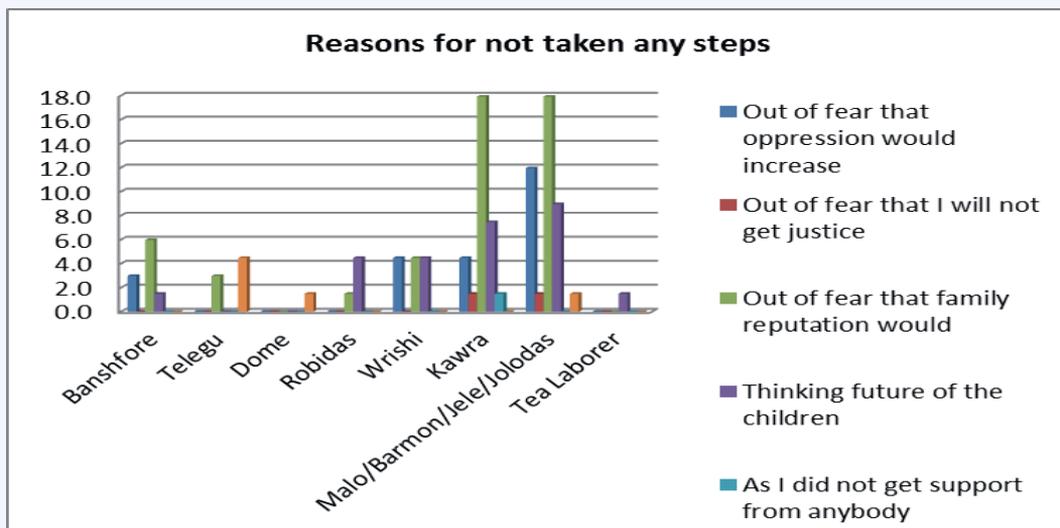
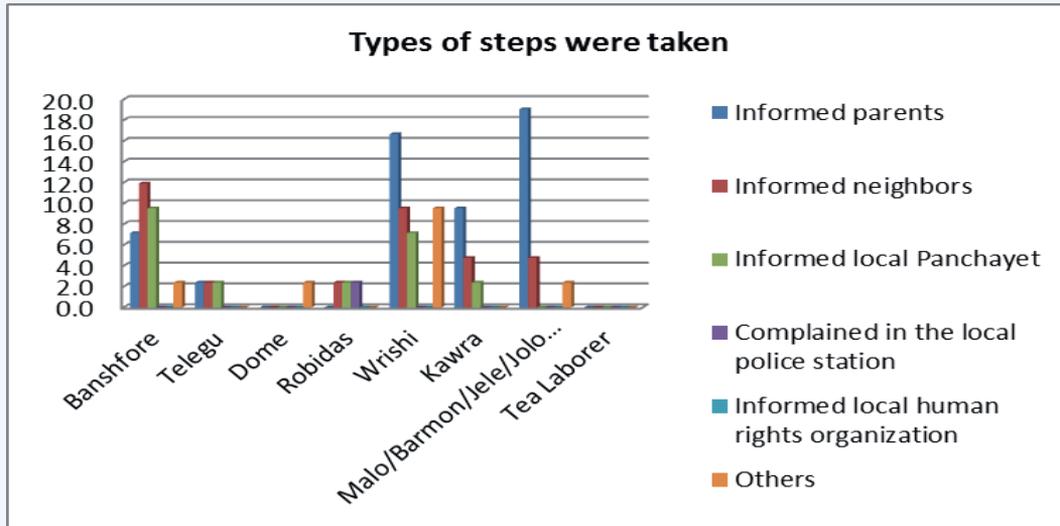
In most cases, women try to hide these incidents from outsiders and keep it within family — unless the abuse becomes unbearable. They rarely take steps to prevent their men from beating them other than to inform their parents, neighbours, or the *panchayat*.

Unless the violence becomes severe, Dalit women are reluctant to take the issue to the panchayat. Only when women are badly beaten

and their family members and clan members fail to resolve the problem themselves, do they bring it to the panchayat. The following graph gives the reasons women are unwilling to complain against their men and in-laws:

We found that owning property, such as land, did not reduce the level of violence the women face, though it did significantly influence the women’s ability to voice their opinions in the family. According most respondents, violence against women persists because men control their lives. Another cause of violence against women is alcohol or drug abuse. Wine is produced in the

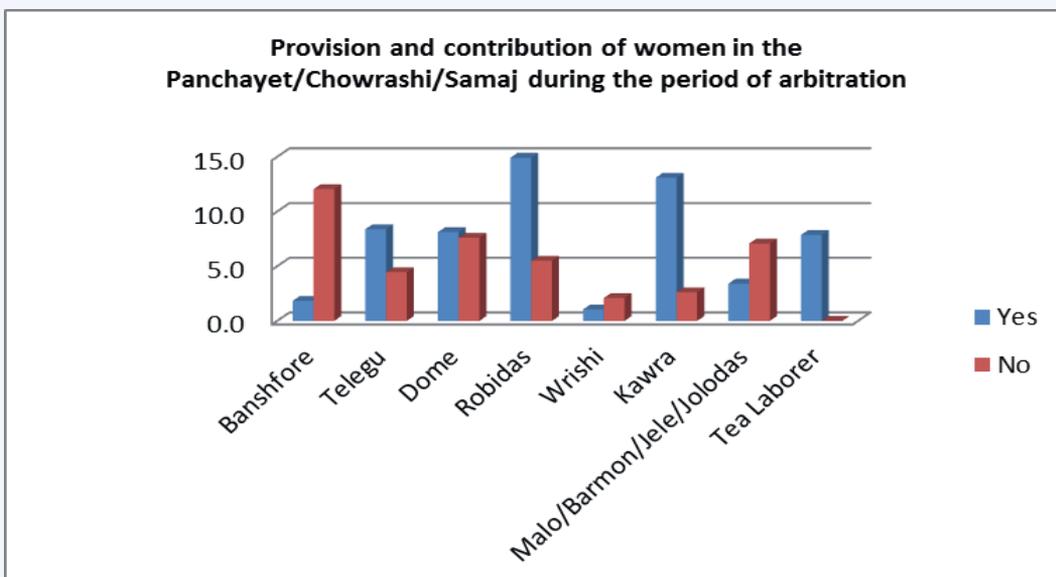
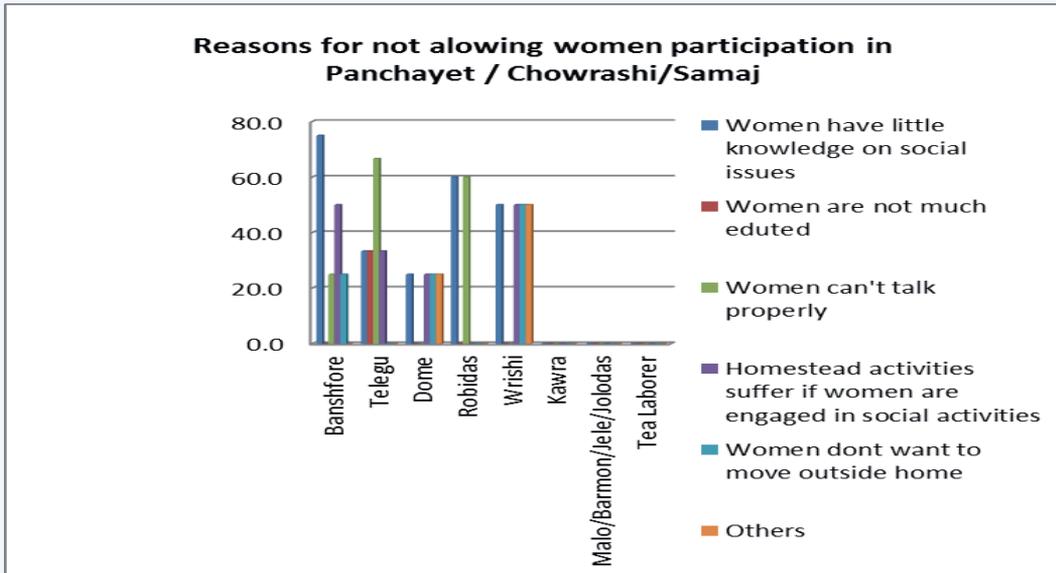




communities and is widely consumed by men. Sometimes, when they drink too much, Dalit men lose control and engage in disputes with their women, which often result in violence. After informing their parents and clan members, Dalit women must wait for their clan members to try to resolve the problem. They can only go the panchayat to seek recourse when their clan members' efforts have failed.

### 5.5 Dalit Women in Panchayat

The panchayat system is a community space where Dalit women might play an important role beyond their immediate households. Historically, Dalit women did not participate in the panchayat in any caste, neither as members of the body nor as subjects of arbitration. Recently, the situation has changed. Now, most castes have female panchayat members. Many castes have two female panchayat members, and some



have three female panchayat members. The following diagram shows the reasons why women previously were not allowed in the panchayat:

However, the study shows that Dalit women's participation in these arbitration sessions remains almost non-existent. Panchayat committees may include female members, but they are not actively

participating. The following diagram shows the distribution of women's contribution to panchayat sessions by caste:

The Bashfor caste does not believe in women's rights, and Bashfor women are the most marginalized of all Dalit women. The Jaladas recently allowed two women to participate in

panchayat committees as observers, but Jaladas and Rishi women do not have a right to express their opinions during panchayat sessions. Female panchayat members have a long way to go to reach full and equal participation, but the inclusion of female members is a major step forward and represents a significant shift in the mind-set of Dalit men.

### 5.6 Political Participation of Dalit Women

Apart from the panchayat, women have no other role in public. Neither Dalit men nor women participate in mainstream politics, as they are excluded by their Dalit identity. Mainstream politicians not allow Dalits to participate in elections, even if they are engaged in actively working for the party. However, Dalit women do cast votes in recent days, which they did not before.

The situation of Dalit women of the tea gardens is different, however. Like other Dalit women, tea garden Dalit women recently received the chance to become members of their local panchayat, but they have a long history of participating in national politics.

There are many male chairmen and members of Union Parishads and Upazila Parishads in Srimongal who come from tea worker families. These men inspired women of their caste to participate in local government elections at the union and upazila levels. In three tea estate-based unions (Satgao, Kalighat, and Razghat), nine seats have been reserved for women. Tea worker women been elected to all nine seats.

The term empowerment contains the word power, often invoked as an explanation for many different types of events and phenomena. Power is broadly defined as the ability of a person or a social unit to influence the conduct and decision-making of another through control over active forms. Thus power means control over material assets, intellectual resources, and ideology. As

discussed in the previous sections and in this section, Dalit women lack capital of any kind. They have little economic activity, and those who do work lack control of their own incomes. They have only their role in the family, and they are shut out from roles that would allow them to change their material condition in a way that might also bring positive change to their social lives.

Dalit women have a long way to go to become empowered.

Gita Goswami is a woman from Srimongal's Hosenabad tea garden. She completed her SSC and she joined a tea garden level trade union. As a trade union leader, she formed a mothers' club in Srimongal where she worked to raise tea garden women's awareness of critical issues, including health, children's health, and the need for women to come of the house and participate in the community activities. After working as a trade union leader for 28 years, Gita Goswami now leads the Committee of Concerned Citizens group of Transparency International-Bangladesh in the Srimongal area.

# Reviewing Relevant Policies, Law, and the Constitution

Various policies that guarantee the rights of marginalized populations, including the rights of the Dalit, are included in the Constitution of Bangladesh. These policies eliminate all forms of exploitation<sup>10</sup>, guarantee free and compulsory primary education<sup>11</sup>, guarantee special provisions/affirmative actions for children<sup>12</sup>, and prohibit forced labour<sup>13</sup>. Moreover, a number of policies are in force in Bangladesh dealing with the protection, maintenance, and well-being of citizens in general that also specifically cover disadvantaged, marginalized, and ethnic minority groups. In addition, some new policies affecting these populations are to be implemented. The policies most relevant to Dalits and Dalit children are as follows:

## Constitution

The constitution of People's Republic of Bangladesh, the supreme law of the land, unequivocally guarantees that all its citizens are equal and so shall exercise equal rights. This is one of the basic safeguards against discrimination and exclusion. In this connection, relevant sections of the constitutions articulate:

### “Section 27.

*All citizens are equal before law and are entitled to equal protection of law. Section 28. a*

<sup>10</sup> Article 14, though it focuses on peasants and workers, could be widened to include Dalits and Dalit children. The article states: ‘It shall be a fundamental responsibility of the state to emancipate the toiling masses — the peasants and workers — and backward section of the people from all forms of exploitation.’

<sup>11</sup> Article 17

<sup>12</sup> Article 28 (4) states: ‘Nothing in this article shall prevent the state from making special provisions in favour of women or children or for the advancement of any backward section of citizens.’

<sup>13</sup> Article 34

*The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth.*

*Women shall have equal rights with men in all spheres of the State and of public life.*

*No citizen shall, on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth, be subjected to any disability, liability, restriction or condition with regard to access to any place of public entertainment or resort, or admission to any educational institution.*

*Nothing in this article shall prevent the State from making special provision in favour of women or children or for the advancement of any backward section of citizens.*

### Section 29.

*There shall be equality of opportunity for all citizens in respect of employment or office in the service of the Republic.*

*No citizen shall, on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth, be ineligible for, or discriminated against in respect of, any employment or office in the service of the Republic.*

*Nothing in this article shall prevent the State from making special provision in favour of any backward section of citizens for Republic; giving effect to any law which makes provision for reserving appointments relating to any religious or denominational institution to persons of that religion or denomination; reserving for members of one sex any class of employment or office on the ground that it is considered by its nature to be unsuited to members of the opposite sex.”*

It is clear from the mentioned sections of the Constitution that the law and fundamental policy of the state do not support any form of discrimination against any citizen based on religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth, or profession. It also allows affirmative actions for disadvantaged sections of the population such as Dalits. However, in reality, Dalits are discriminated against and excluded from most of their rights and opportunities.

The 15th amendment of the constitution states, “The people of Bangladesh shall be known as Bengalis as a nation and citizens of Bangladesh shall be known as Bangladeshis.”

The amendment on one hand claimed to ‘restore secularism’. On the other hand, it kept Islam as the State religion.

Through the inherently contradictory statements in the 15th amendment, religious minorities are marginalized. Also, by making “Bengali” a national identity, those of different ethnicities are also marginalized. Thus, the Dalits, who are minorities in Bangladesh both in terms of religion and ethnicity, become even more vulnerable in this way.

### **Anti-Discrimination Act (Draft)**

To eliminate ‘untouchability’ and “discrimination based on caste and profession”, the Law Commission has drafted the “Boishamya Bilope Ain - 2014” (Elimination of Discrimination Act - 2014). The significance of this law lies in the fact that it addresses the issues of Dalits, which is the first official recognition of the term “Dalit” by the state. It has now become a moral obligation on part of the Government to enact the law as soon as possible. But there is no specific mention of Dalit women in the draft law.

### **Policy Related to Higher Education Quota**

The Prime Minister of the Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh gave an order on 29th May 2012 to reserve quotas for Dalit

students in educational institutions.

This quota policy has not yet been implemented in these institutions under the National University, and the Education Ministry has not yet issued an official circular regarding it. The educational institutions impacted by this policy also do not reference Dalit quotas in their advertisements (Fair, 2015).

### **Bangladesh Sixth and Seventh Five Year Plan (2011-2015, 2016 – 2020)**

#### **Sixth Plan Progress with Inclusion Regarding Dalit**

Dalit status or identity is historically associated with occupations that are regarded as ritually ‘impure’. In Bangladesh, Dalits are categorized with respect to their work, religion, and ethnicity. The Dalit have been confined to specific jobs and segregated from full participation in the mainstream society. Dalit communities are some of the most economically marginalized and socially excluded groups in Bangladesh. Despite their long presence in traditional Bangladesh society, Dalit communities do not receive focus in development interventions, and are hence are often referred to as the ‘missing poor’. Economic disparity is not the only problem faced by these marginalized groups, but also non-economic problems, some of which include: (1) ‘untouchability’ and the hatred associated with social exclusion; (2) lack of self-esteem and dignity; (3) estrangement from most livelihood activities; (4) forced eviction from land; (5) insecurity within family and society; (6) ignorance and lack of information; (7) environmental disasters; (8) lack of access to legal aid services; (9) lack of access to government services. Social boycotts and forced labour are often imposed on Dalits as a means to control and exploit their labour. Considering the severity of their situation, the government of Bangladesh first included the issue of the Dalit in the Sixth Five Year Plan.

*Sixth Plan Strategies:* The Sixth Plan aims to include these disadvantaged individuals in the socio-economic realm and protect their rights through different strategies. First, the Plan aims to cooperate with local bodies and NGOs to identify the disadvantaged people and enable them to participate in development activities. Then, priority will be given to the disadvantaged communities in khas land allocation. Tea garden owners will also be encouraged to assign some land within their tea garden estates to their extremely poor workers as a means for them to build their own gardens. Finally, all government functionaries will need to coordinate their activities at all levels to ensure the effective governance of this issue.

*Implementation:* The Government remains committed and highly sensitive to the needs of these marginalized groups. Legal provisions are in place to protect them against social and political discrimination. Yet the weakness in public administrative capacity and the absence of strong local governments has limited the implementation of government policies. The new National Social Security (NSSS) puts considerable emphasis on bringing these marginalized groups under the umbrella of social protection. The adoption and eventual implementation of the NSSS would be a considerable step forward.

### **Inclusion Strategy for the Seventh Plan**

The vision of the Government is to erase the discrimination and exploitation faced by Dalit communities in Bangladesh, so that they can take their place as full citizens of the country.

- *The Government will uphold the right to education for children from Dalit communities with the expectation to ensure schools becomes non-discriminatory and inclusive spaces for all children. This recognizes the increased interest and conviction among the marginalized that education holds the key for socioeconomic mobility. In this regard, a special quota for Dalit and other excluded*

*students will be created in government schools and colleges, and access of Dalit adolescents and youth to all government-owned skill training institutions be ensured.*

- *Local Government Institutions, i.e. Upazila and Union Parishads, along with NGOs will be involved to locate disadvantaged Dalit people and help enable them to participate in development activities. Dalit representation in all committees of political parties at national and local level will be ensured.*
- *The Ministry of Land will give priority to allotting khas land to people of Dalit communities for settlement under the Asrayan type housing project. For tea garden workers, planters/ owners will be encouraged to earmark land within the estates so that they can build their own dwelling. Special programmes like construction of sweeper colonies will be implemented.*
- *Massive awareness raising to stop all kinds of discrimination and untouchability against Dalit and excluded communities will be undertaken.*
- *The Government will form a special commission on Dalit to evaluate current environment and level of discrimination and provide key recommendations on improving the socio-economic conditions of Dalit communities in Bangladesh.*
- *The Government will review the allotment policy of colonies under every City Corporation and municipality and ensure that marginalized groups of Dalits are allotted harassment free access to electricity, gas and water supply services.*
- *Dalits will be given preferential access to cleaning jobs in municipalities, including lease of public toilets of City Corporations to Dalit sweepers.*

- *Proper resettlement will be provided for evicted Dalit families.*
- *Dalit households will be given preferential access to social security programmes. Such affirmative action will be combined with capability enhancement and confidence building, to empower these groups to have a voice and make claims, and an effective grievance mechanism.*
- *Massive public education against discrimination and towards equity-inclusion will be promoted, building greater transparency through social audits and public hearings.*

### **The Vision for Social Security System in the Seventh Plan**

A range of socially excluded populations face various social discriminations based on religion, ethnicity, profession, or illness. The Government is highly sensitive to ensuring the elimination of all kinds of socio-economic discrimination against these groups through legislative and other affirmative actions. This is a major agenda item for the Government's broader Social Development Framework. The Government will also ensure that these minority groups have equivalent access to all Social Security programmes and to all publicly provided basic services in education, health, nutrition, population planning, water supply, and sanitation as the rest of the population. The Government believes that these two strands of public policy are the best way to support the development of these groups.

The Government is aware that special efforts will be needed to reach many of the members of these groups. This will involve sensitizing the staff of Social Security agencies as well as relying on local government and NGOs for identifying potential beneficiaries. A mechanism for effective grievance redressing will also help bring members of these excluded populations into the Social Security network. In the Seventh Five Year Plan,

the Government used the term 'Dalit' as a generic term and did not make any specific mention of Dalit women or men.

### **Policy Related to Employment**

The Prime Minister of the Government of People's Republic of Bangladesh gave an order on 29th May 2012 to reserve 80 percent of all cleaner and sweeper jobs of in all the government, autonomous, and non-government institutions for the Harijans and Dalits. This was published in the Bangladesh Gazette on 4th April 2013. However, in reality, the system is not being maintained and members of non-Dalit dominant groups occupy those posts instead. In addition, this policy did not consider the various occupations of different Dalit sub-castes.

Apart from above mentioned jobs, no quotas or affirmative action programmes have been implemented by the Government to ensure Dalits equal access to any other type of employment.

### **Policy of Distributing State Owned Land to the Landless.**

Ownership of land in Bangladesh is vested in either private individuals or entities of the State. Khas land is government owned land, including agricultural and non-agricultural land, and water bodies. There is no up-to-date data about the amount of khas land in Bangladesh. The estimates of khas land are open to contestation, since land records are poor and open to legal challenge (Shah B.K, 2010). According to a report (2005) of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Land, there is 5,000,000 (50 lac) acres of khas land in the country; a major portion of landless families can receive settlement of this land (AIRD 2015)

The estimated amount of total identified (based on official sources) khas land in Bangladesh is 3.3 million acres, with 0.8 million acres of agricultural khas land, 1.7 million acres of non-agricultural khas land, and 0.8 million acres of khas water bodies (ALRD 2010). Of immediate relevance to

agrarian reform, 0.8 million acres of agricultural land (4 percent of Bangladesh's total agricultural land) and 0.8 million acres of water bodies, an important economic resource, can be put at the service of the nation's resource-poor (Shah B.K, 2010). In a campaign brief, Land Watch Asia states that khas land and khas water bodies cover some 2.1 million hectares, 24 percent of which are agricultural. Agricultural khas land covers some 321,323 ha, of which 43.47 percent has reportedly been distributed to landless households (ALRD & SHED 2011).

### **Policy to Distribute Agricultural Khas Land**

After Bangladesh's independence, the instruments of khas land distribution became the Bangladesh State Acquisition and Tenancy (Fourth Amendment) Order 1972, the Bangladesh Landholding Limitation Order 1972, President's Order LXI 1975, and the 1984 Land Reform Ordinance. The most important Government notifications relating to the settlements of khas land are the Land Reform Action Program 1987 and the Agricultural Khas Land and Settlements Policy 1997.

To assist the process of khas land identification and its equitable distribution, government policies and the regulatory framework — especially the 1984 Land Reform Ordinance and the khas land management and distribution policies of 1987 and 1997 — provided concrete directions towards establishing national and local level committees for overseeing khas land identification and distribution, identification of landless persons, and a prioritization process as well as a procedure for raising public support for securing access to khas land. One enabling law was the policy instituted in 1997 to distribute khas land to landless peasants, defined as landless families dependent on agriculture for their livelihood. This also prioritized certain groups, such as families of free Domee fighters, families that had lost their land to erosion, and families whose lands

were expropriated by the government. According to these policies, it is very hard for Dalits to get access to government khas land as landless poor, because their livelihood is not dependent on agriculture. But in the Seventh Five Year Plan, the Government specifically mentions the rights of the Dalit to receive government khas land. In the same policy, the Government also encourages owners of tea gardens to allocate land to poor tea labourers for homestead gardening.

### **Safety Netting Programmes of Governments**

The Bangladesh Government has more than a hundred social safety net programmes run by three ministries: Ministry of Local Government, Ministry of Social Welfare, and Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs. The major of social safety net programmes (SSNPs) in Bangladesh can be divided into four broad categories: (i) employment generation programmes; (ii) programmes to cope with natural disasters and other shocks; (iii) incentives provided to parents for their children's education; and (iv) incentives provided to families to improve their health status. The SSNPs can also be grouped into two types depending on whether they involve cash transfers or food transfers.

The Government has specific SSNP programmes for the Dalit, Harijan, and tea worker communities. In the case of the Dalits and Harijan programmes, cash is provided to eligible poor families of the Dalit and Harijan communities. The eligibility criteria states that old, widowed, single, or poor Dalit and Harijan women receive preference. In the tea garden social welfare programme, food is provided in three instalments over a year to one family, the economic value of which food relief should be not more than Taka 5,000 per year for each family. The eligibility criteria for this programme also states that old, widowed, single, or poor female tea labourer are given preference for food relief.

Apart from these two specific schemes, the Ministry of Social Welfare and Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs run two separate stipend programmes for at risk children, funded by UNICEF. A member of a community-based child protection committee selects children for this stipend programme. The Ministry of Women and Children Affairs provides Taka 30,000 in two instalments to families whose children are at risk of dropping out of school, or who are working as child labourers. As per the conditions of the stipend, families are required to start some small business and send their children back to school. In another stipend programme, the Ministry of Social Affairs provides Taka 2,000 per month to families to reduce household level poverty and to bring children back to school. But none of these programmes select children from Dalit communities — despite the fact that, among the Dalit, school dropout rates are quite high, and most Dalit families are poor and thus lack the economic capacity to bear their children's educational expenses.

According to the Constitution, Dalits are entitled to receive any government SSNP as long as they meet the eligibility criteria. Some programmes cover a number of tea labourers, but Dalits are not covered by other SSNPs apart from the specific ones allotted for them.

### **Other Policies**

In addition, other national policies such as the National Education Policy 2010, National Health Policy 2011, National Women Development Policy 2011, National Children Policy 2011, and National Labour Policy 2012 mention “marginal social groups”, “minor ethnic groups”, “backward groups”, etc., and recognize the need to give special attention to their development. The Dalit are not specifically mentioned, but they are potentially covered under these groups. However, some of the nation's most important policies such as the National Land Policy 2001, National

Agricultural Policy 1999 and Draft Agriculture Policy 2010, National Population Policy 2011, Draft National Housing Policy 2008, National Food Policy 2006, National Water Policy 1999 and National Social Welfare Policy 2005 barely mention the needs of marginal groups, let alone the Dalit.

# Recommendations and Conclusion

## 7.1 Recommendations

### For Government and Legislative Bodies

- As citizens, Dalits are entitled to receive allowances under different social welfare schemes provided by the Government. However, quotas must be allocated for Dalit women under the schemes appropriate for them. BDRM and other sector players must engage in lobbying and advocacy work with the line ministries, i.e. MOWCA and MOSW.
- There is a lack of accurate data on the Dalit community. The Bureau of Statistics needs to conduct a census on the Dalit population, including gender disaggregated data.
- The education policy needs to ensure Dalit children's right to education and their right to be free from discrimination within educational institutions.
- Ministry of Education along with the Ministry of Social Welfare need to jointly ensure that stipends for Dalit children go to the right families at the right time.
- Ministry of Social Welfare needs to redefine and re-conceptualize the concept and term 'Dalit' to ensure that the right people are getting the allowances reserved for Dalits.
- Many laws and policies include the broader term 'marginalized and disadvantaged', which excludes Dalits by not mentioning them in particular. So it is recommended that the existence of the 'Dalit' and of 'Dalit women' is specified with the appropriate meaning in those laws and policies.
- It is necessary to define the term 'Dalit' in the documents of social welfare schemes. When

the term 'Dalit' is taken outside its specific context, there is scope to exclude real Dalits from the social welfare schemes.

### For Sector Players (NGOs, INGOs, and Development Partners)

- No existing programmes specifically target Dalit women and children. Sector players need to start specific interventions for them.
- Child-rights based INGOs and NGOs need to have specific programmes for Dalit children's issues — specifically, to stop their sexual abuse.
- Development interventions for Dalit women should be long-term and should focus on future generations and youth. Ensuring proper education and facilitating decent income-earning opportunities could be the most effective way to empower future generations of Dalit women.
- Dalit women are losing their traditional jobs and households are suffering from poverty. INGOs, NGOs, and DPs need to take interventions on livelihood development options related to the market value chain.
- Sector players need to provide integrated development programmes for Dalit communities so that Dalit women can accumulate social, economic and cultural capital.
- In addition to government efforts, NGOs and other institutions should provide skills-training to Dalit women to help them find alternative means of income.
- Government and NGOs programmes should

target young Dalit men and boys to positively change their attitudes towards women and violence against women.

- Focus should be given to promoting positive interaction between Dalit and non-Dalit children at school, and raising non-Dalit children's awareness of the dignity and rights of the Dalit. To accomplish this, INGOs and NGOs need to begin initiatives to engage with school teachers, PTAs, and mainstream non-Dalit children.

### **For Dalit Networks and Dalit Communities:**

- Network leaders must engage in policy advocacy with the appropriate parliamentary standing committees in order to ensure education for Dalit children, increase the number of allowances for Dalits, and appropriately define the term 'Dalit' in policy documents.
- Community networks must work with men and youth to reduce gender inequality at the family and clan level, and stop gender-based violence in family and society.
- Dalit networks and civil society organizations must foster positive, effective, and meaningful interaction between Dalit men and women. Advocacy programmes to reduce domestic violence must be organized and promoted.
- Dalit networks and civil society organizations need to take initiatives to ensure the active participation of Dalit women in local power structures and in the panchayat.

## **7.2 Conclusion**

The status and situation of Dalit women belonging to marginalized communities must be understood by taking into account the different dimensions of inequality that shape their lives: class, caste, culture and, of course, gender. Dalit women face discrimination both as women and as members of marginalized communities. They also suffer gender-based discrimination and violence within their own households and communities. In light of these issues, it can be said that Dalit women occupy the bottom rung of society. High rates of illiteracy, child marriage, early motherhood, violence of multiple kinds, economic deprivation, etc. are common struggles they face daily.

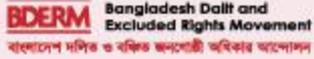
Therefore, as a social group, Dalit women face a double vulnerability: First, they are vulnerable as women living on the margins of a historically male-dominated minority community; second, as Dalits, they are vulnerable to abuse and exclusion by members of mainstream society.

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