

Concept Note

Inception Workshop for the UN Women Project

Introduction

Strengthening economic rights of Dalit Women with particular focus on Land, Higher Education and Livelihoods (skill development) in South Asian countries of Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka. The Inception workshop marks the initiation of this project in the region. The Inception workshop would introduce the organizers and coordinators with the team of the project and introduce the guidelines for implementation and monitoring and evaluation of the results. The workshop would also be a platform for clarification and review of the project variables and objectives.

Background

Caste-based discrimination (CBD) affects 260 million people globally. The largest numbers of affected people are located in South Asia. With no official recognition of CBD and very little political will to address CBD, there are currently few laws, policies and schemes in place which work toward preventing, addressing and eliminating CBD. Those facing CBD are commonly known as 'Dalits', literally meaning downtrodden or broken people, formerly known as the 'untouchables'. Dalits is now a universally used terminology and the UN has identified it as discrimination based on work and descent.

Further down the caste hierarchy and patriarchal structures are Dalit women who are triply alienated on the basis of class, caste and gender. Dalit women face a high degree of violence and oppression. Their low status and position in society excludes Dalit women from all aspects of life – social, political and economic – and consequently perpetuates their disenfranchisement and oppression. As well as physical violence, Dalit women face economic violence as a result of this triple burden. Due to acute landlessness, extreme levels of poverty and degrading traditional practices, Dalit women are forced to do menial jobs without pay for non-Dalits. Dalit women also form a huge part of the bonded labour and construction workforce where they face severe discrimination, exploitation and are susceptible to physical and sexual violence. Dalit women are overwhelmingly underrepresented in skilled and professional work, largely due to CBD and also because young women often dropout (if they make it at all) of colleges due to CBD and poor conditions in schools and hostels, forcing them to either stay in low paid jobs or carry out traditional degrading forms of work.

Despite outward and obvious economic violence inflicted on Dalit women, little recognition has been given to Dalit women's economic rights in South Asia within legal, policy and budgetary frameworks. Pro-women and/or pro-Dalit budgetary allocations, in general, have failed to address Dalit women's rights and cater to their specific needs. As such, Dalit women in South Asia remain an extremely marginalized and invisible group in policies and consequently budgets.

In Bangladesh, the government has allocated some budgetary allocations for Dalit women under its poverty eradication programme. However, these budgetary

allocations are not backed by policy measures, and therefore can be reduced or eliminated entirely at any time. Further, the allocations are minimal and do not address the full developmental concerns of Dalit women. The social security net also allocates funds by providing special allowances for employment generation of socially excluded communities, however Dalit women have not benefitted from this.

In India, budgetary provisions are supported within the Scheduled Caste Sub-Plan (SCSP) for Dalits which require budgetary allocations proportionate to the Dalit population. Gender Resource Budget statement details out the allocation for women specific schemes. However, none of these policies specifically target measures for Dalit women's economic empowerment.

In Nepal, although the Constitutional Amendment in 2011 prohibits CBD, social practices such as witch-hunting and caste-based atrocities have prevented Dalit women from venturing into the economic domain. Policies in Nepal also do not focus on caste induced vulnerabilities of Dalit women which require policy and budget support in order to bring Dalit women into mainstream economic occupations.

In Sri Lanka, Indian Tamils are one of the most marginalized groups in Sri Lankan society. Although the government is seen to be providing development opportunities for women, youth and children etc., issues of Dalit Tamils and other Dalit groups, including women, are not addressed. There is no institutional structure in place, such as a separate ministerial department, which is dedicated to the welfare of marginalized communities.

The Project

The project aims to strengthen regional and national policy and budgetary frameworks to fulfil Dalit women's economic rights, with a particular focus on land, higher education and livelihoods, in South Asia in Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka.

The intervention will adopt a three-tiered approach: (i) to create an evidence base on the existing gaps in policy and budgetary frameworks on Dalit women's economic rights at the regional and national level to ii) develop recommendations to existing policies in India and Nepal and suggestions on new policies in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka which does not have specific policies with regard to these thematic areas. These policies and schemes will be on land, higher education and skill development of Dalit women. The recommendations will be more responsive to the needs of Dalit women by providing recommendations based on gap analysis iii) in order to create support networks, enhance political will and to facilitate iv) and a regional Declaration on Dalit Women's Economic Empowerment for consideration within SAARC; (i) to ensure that the Dalit women's movement and national and international Dalit solidarity networks are strengthened and are key players in driving policy change for Dalit women's economic rights and; (ii) to develop the capacity of Dalit women's groups to create, assess, analyse and advocate for adequate and effective budgetary frameworks for Dalit women's economic rights. The framework of analysis for this purpose will be 1) recognition and affirmative action 2) planning and budgeting. The above three approaches cross-intersect at various levels with the ultimate aim of developing an evidence base to

support the Dalit women's movement to exert political pressure and create political will for the recognition, promotion and fulfilment of Dalit women's economic rights.

Rationale for the Project

Crimes against Dalit women often manifest in the form of extreme physical and sexual violence, which is why many past interventions and Dalit women's groups have particularly focused on this aspect of Dalit women's lives. As a result and whilst there is increasing recognition of Dalit women's economic rights, these have largely been small isolated efforts. Recognition of Dalit women's economic rights have not found a prominent place in larger macro-level debates and discussions around women's economic empowerment and gender-responsive budgeting. Dalit women's economic rights have also not found recognition within parallel movements, including the larger women's movement and the Dalit movement. This calls for a single and independent intervention which essentially builds understanding of Dalit women's economic rights amongst Dalit women themselves, so that they can exert their influence to bring about macro-level changes with an aim to strengthening regional and national policy and budgetary frameworks.

The programme specifically aims to expose and build an evidence base on policy and budgetary gaps on Dalit women's economic rights within regional and national frameworks. The evidence base will be used to build consensus of multiple stakeholders, including Dalit and women parliamentarians, academicians, Dalit women and men, Dalit groups and international and national solidarity networks and stakeholders on existing gaps and the need to address these in South Asia through a regional mechanism, and also nationally within policy and budgetary frameworks. Whilst the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is currently a relatively weak forum, the recently elected Prime Minister of India has pointed to a need to strengthen this and there appears to be some political will amongst other countries to follow suit. It is, therefore, also an opportune time to seek regional recognition, support and consensus to enhance Dalit women's economic rights.

The Dalit movement is well known for its grounding in grassroots Dalit communities and is legitimized by their solidarity and support. It is imperative that the Dalit women's movement and leadership continue this legacy. Building the Dalit women's movement to exert pressure, demand and assert their economic rights is a key component of this intervention. This process of capacity building, awareness raising and extending understanding on economic rights is likely to improve gendered relations within Dalit households, and possibly the wider community where Dalit women will be better equipped to challenge economic violence and prevailing power structures.

There has been piecemeal development for Dalit communities by governments in South Asia with each of the countries at different trajectories in addressing the issue of Dalit women's economic rights. As well as minimalistic policy frameworks, problems in policy implementation are further exacerbated by the fact that there are clear diversions of public funds, even where funds are earmarked for the upliftment of Dalit communities; this is clearly evident in India. In some cases, for example Sri Lanka, there is no recognition of a 'caste' issue and therefore no means by which to address the issue.

Creation of regional and national networks of Dalit women's CSOs and CBOs working on policy and budgets will facilitate sharing and replication of best practices and models, collective problem-solving and will also strengthen national, regional and international advocacy for Dalit women's economic rights. Building capacities of Dalit women's organizations to monitor budgets will enhance transparency and accountability with an aim to increase national and local budgets for Dalit women's economic rights.

Specific budgetary analysis and advocacy will be done by Dalit women's CSOs and CBOs on select programmes and schemes in the areas of education and livelihoods. These two issues have been honed down on as these combined can really uplift Dalit women's economic status and position in society; Dalit women are generally often the targets of schemes on sanitation, health, etc. Whilst these do address Dalit women's economic concerns, they do not wholly go to the heart of tackling the root problem and underlying causes of Dalit women's oppression. Expansion of Dalit women's livelihoods will aim to include addressing issues of CBD and violence within the workplace, ensuring decent work, minimum wages, social protection, etc. within the framework of the right to decent work and livelihoods. Analyses of schemes around Dalit women's vocational and higher education will specifically be targeted with a view to improve Dalit women's educational and work prospects and break cycles which confine Dalit women in oppressive and degrading occupations.

The inception workshop would be held on 6th and 7th June 2016 in Kathmandu, Nepal.