



Trapped in Poverty: caste-based discrimination and employment

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Poverty is an outrage against humanity. It robs people of dignity, freedom and hope, of power over their own lives.

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Cover: A young dalit man completes his day's duties as a DCC cleaner on Dayaganj Road, Dhaka.

Photo credit: M. Raisul Islam

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Introduction

Addressing inequality is fundamental to social justice and sustainable development. As the world considers new global development goals for sustainable and equitable development beyond 2015, and as it becomes clear that economic growth alone is failing to eradicate poverty, inequality has become a key theme in the development discourse and an increasing concern for policy-makers as well as citizens. Inequality has particularly damaging impacts on the lives of the poorest groups, especially where they are subject to multiple forms of discrimination, powerlessness and social exclusion. Together these contribute to inequality of opportunity that compounds and perpetuates existing income disparities. Addressing inequality therefore demands a focus on the most vulnerable groups in a society, to ensure no one is left behind and to close the growing gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged communities. The crucial tasks are to identify the people among whom poverty persists, understand the specific barriers they face in realising their rights and achieving equality in development outcomes, and amplifying their voices so that they can actively challenge the systems and structures that keep them poor.

Access to employment has been seen as one of the most important ways to tackle inequality.¹ While decent work is critical to inclusive economic development and is a route out of poverty, the most marginalised groups are often disadvantaged in the workplace and in labour markets, suffering low pay and poor working conditions. Often, social hierarchies and their associated power inequalities are magnified and exploited in the workplace, trapping people in adverse employment conditions. While a job may give a person status therefore, it can also do the opposite. This report illustrates one such example, and highlights the need to address discriminatory practices and power inequalities in order to promote decent work for all.

This report focuses on dalit communities employed as municipal cleaners in Dhaka, Bangladesh.² It examines how social norms, including caste-based discrimination and gender inequality, have forced them into certain occupations and conditions of employment, and it discusses the living conditions of these workers and their families and their access to educational and alternative economic opportunities. It suggests some concrete steps that the Government of Bangladesh can take to address these issues, including fiscal measures, provision of essential services, the enforcement of existing laws and human rights norms, and the establishment of a special commission with a mandate to address the concerns of socially excluded groups.

To date, studies examining the socio-economic conditions of the sizeable population of municipal workers in Bangladesh, focusing on the minority dalit community in Dhaka, have noted the congregation of this community in cleaning occupations within the municipality and have pointed to the link between these occupations, physical segregation, social alienation and their low socio-economic status.³ However, there has not yet been any systematic detailed study focusing on the terms and conditions of such employment, and how social inequalities structure access to alternative employment opportunities.

The research conducted included a literature review, consultations with Christian Aid partners who work among socially excluded communities, and interviews with individuals and groups in the focus communities. Primary data was gathered through a variety of methods including consultative meetings with stakeholders and key informants associated with the focus communities, a survey, focus group discussions, one-to-one interviews and the recording of personal stories among communities in five study sites across Dhaka.⁴

Context

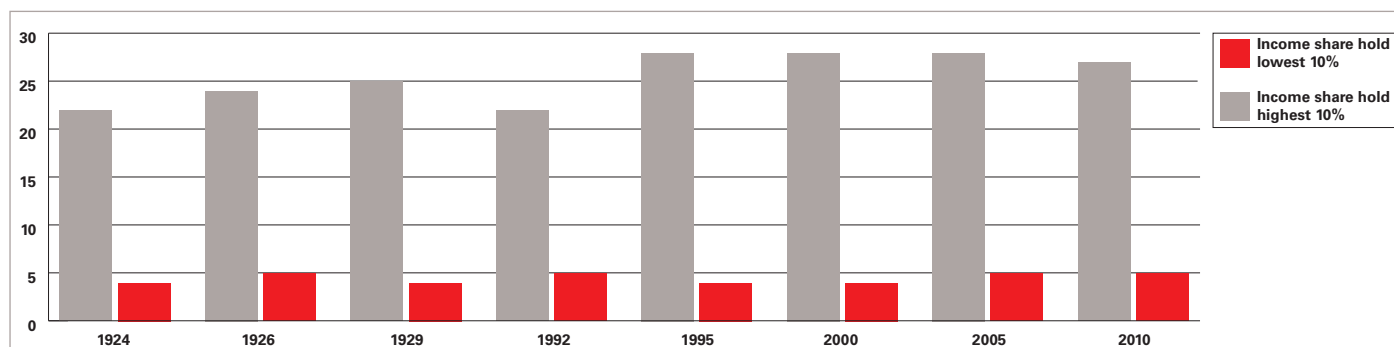
The Bangladesh Constitution⁵ sets out a framework for addressing social exclusion and the inequalities that result between different groups of people. It spells out the state's commitment to human rights and freedoms and respect for the dignity and worth of the human person (Article 11). A number of commitments are made and rights guaranteed, including the emancipation of workers from all forms of exploitation (Article 14); to ensure the provision of basic facilities to all citizens, including the right to work with a reasonable wage (Article 15); and to ensure equality of opportunities so as to remove social and economic inequalities (Article 19). Cutting across these state commitments is the right of all citizens to non-discrimination on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth (Article 28).

In 2013 Bangladesh was listed among the six smaller economies that have made substantial progress in the speed and scale of human development.⁶ Poverty declined steadily at an annual rate of 1.8% between 2000 and 2005, and 1.7% between 2005 and 2010 and national progress towards most of the Millennium Development Goals is on track, yet many development challenges remain.

Income inequality is a serious concern. Having risen substantially during the late 1980s and 1990s, it still has the potential to dampen the pace of poverty reduction and contribute to social instability. The Government of Bangladesh plans to address income inequality through a range of measures to create high income jobs, boost

productivity and sharpen the equity aspects of public spending, but there are many challenges. These include the need to improve the country's tax system (at 9% in 2010, the tax to GDP ratio is low, limiting revenues available to further development aims); and the need to generate sufficient employment to absorb a labour force that is growing at a rate of around 3.2% per year.⁷ There is cause for optimism with anticipated 8% and 10% growth in real GDP in 2015 and 2021 respectively,⁸ and national development plans that aim to reduce unemployment to 15% by 2021.⁹ However, at present, the vast majority of the country's workforce remains employed but poor, in the informal sector with no job security, no social security and poor pay. This is a situation that persists despite the constitutional standards and a host of labour laws to protect workers' rights.¹⁰

For certain sections of the labour force, the barriers to obtaining a decent job are compounded by the discrimination they face because of their social status and associated forms of disadvantage. Discrimination based on caste or ethnicity, as well as gender, is widespread in Bangladesh as in other parts of South Asia. These entrenched social inequalities determine to a large extent people's educational and employment opportunities, thus underpinning economic inequalities.¹¹ In this context, national development plans have now recognised the need to address social injustice, to understand the pattern of discrimination against occupational groups related to caste systems, and to promote targeted policies aimed at improving their living conditions and access to decent employment.¹²



Income Distribution in Bangladesh (Source: Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics: HIES-2010 REPORT¹)

Profile of the municipal employees

The study focuses on municipal cleaners from socially excluded communities employed in the Bangladesh capital, Dhaka. Municipal cleaners are the largest group of public service employees of the Dhaka City Corporation (DCC)¹³ and most work for the Conservancy Department, which deals with the management of the city's solid waste. There are an estimated 8000 cleaners, of whom about 18% are women.¹⁴

The DCC cleaners are from diverse communities. According to DCC officials, about 18-20% are from non-Bengali communities, the descendants of municipal workers who were recruited from other parts of India by the British administration before India gained independence and Bengal Province was partitioned to create East Pakistan.¹⁵ This study focuses on these Hindu descendants of migrants from India who retain their distinct languages (Hindi, Telugu and Tamil) and are among the most vulnerable groups among the cleaners. Those interviewed expressed strongly their feelings of being excluded from equal access to the social, political and economic resources enjoyed by the wider population because of their caste status, and also because being ethnically different from the wider Bengali community sets them apart and contributes to their social exclusion.

Dhaka has changed its political identity in the decades since their parents or grandparents travelled there for work, so these communities have no ancestral village in the land that is now Bangladesh. Although they have citizenship rights, they are very conscious of this lack of a 'home village' which means that their jobs with the DCC and an allotted space to live in the DCC housing areas that these jobs bring, are all the more important.

As was the practice traditionally within the caste system, the cleaner's job has often been passed on through generations. Although this research was unable to find any evidence that this is a formal arrangement, the job is widely perceived to be a hereditary form of employment among both DCC officials and the cleaners themselves, among whom there is an implicit understanding that their jobs are descent-based and would pass onto their children. Originally, the new migrant communities worked alongside East Bengal's own communities who did descent-based work including those known as Hari (scavengers) and Dom (handlers of the dead and cremation), who were also seen as outside of the caste system, and lowest in the social hierarchy. Some of the Hari and the Dom worshipped the Hindu goddess Kali¹⁶ and some were Muslim descendants of the camp followers of the Mughal armies who were traditionally allocated a range of menial tasks including cleaning.

Most of the study-group self-identify as harijans, the title given by Mahatma Gandhi to those formerly known as 'untouchables', the numerous sub-groups within the social hierarchy who were seen as outside of the caste system and restricted to forms of work considered to be 'impure'. Today, in India especially, many of these groups identify as dalits and have joined forces in a social movement to fight discriminatory practices based on caste and to claim their rights.¹⁷ In Bangladesh this movement is also emerging. Although many respondents in the study did not identify themselves as dalits, they nevertheless were very conscious of the discriminatory attitudes and prejudices that reinforce their social isolation. This caste-based discrimination, while rooted in Hinduism, persists within communities who have since converted to Islam, Buddhism and Christianity across the South Asia region.

Terms of employment

The cleaners are supervised by conservancy inspectors (CIs) who wield considerable power as they are responsible for assigning work sites, checking attendance, paying salaries, granting leave and making other decisions regarding the cleaners' employment. Most CIs are Bangla-speaking. Though rare, an educated cleaner can get promoted to this position, but this is as far up the hierarchy as cleaners rise in the context of this employment.

The DCC retains the authority to employ cleaners as and when required, and cleaners are employed under two sets of rules. 'Regular employees' are permanently employed on a fixed monthly salary of around Tk.5,600 – Tk.13,000 per month, with a range of benefits such as a festival bonus, medical allowance, annual leave and overtime. Women who are regular employees are eligible for six months of paid maternity leave. 'Muster roll' (MR) workers are casual workers hired on a no-work-no-pay basis and earn a current daily rate of approximately Tk.270, which is the same for men and women. They have no additional benefits. There is no maternity leave, though women can remain absent for a fixed number of days during pregnancy provided they arrange for a substitute to take their place in agreement with the Conservancy Inspector. The woman then has to share her salary with the substitute (and often with the CI).

Most workers are on the MR, and many remain there for more than 15 to 20 years, tolerating the substantial difference in pay and working conditions in the hope of getting 'regularised' one day. One official of the DCC justified this:

'We are government and we have to give employment to the poorer section of the society. So we are giving. They are getting Tk. 270 - Tk. 280 per day and they live in one of the many colonies DCC has made for them. Yes, I know the environment of the colonies. They are full to the brim with generations of family members living in the same quarters, not meant for so many people. Now where will the Department accommodate their staff if they come as regular staff?'

Among the employees interviewed there was consternation that an order providing for 80% of cleaner jobs to be reserved for dalits¹⁸ was not being implemented. Some DCC officers interviewed felt it was not fair to register a quota in a public service job just for one social group, but acknowledged the 80% rule.

Many interviewees reported that an informal system of subcontracting is emerging, in which the regular jobs are given to Bengalis who act as unofficial contractors, subcontracting the job to one or two people from the dalit community and giving them a portion of his wages. It is not clear why some Bengali cleaners apparently have this greater power and status. As one person put it:

'So before one had to "polish up" the CI. But now, you have to do it to a fellow cleaner. The wages he may pay or may not. You have to go to him and literally put your head down at his feet to get whatever money he'd give you...'

Another indication that job security could decline in future is a trend towards formal privatisation and subcontracting in both public and private sectors in the South Asia region. Municipal cleaners in other countries in the region have suffered declining work security and conditions as a result of an end to permanent employment opportunities in municipalities. In Bangladesh, the DCC has been privatising certain sections of its waste management services since 2003.¹⁹ In the face of this, most interviewees expected that the government would somehow take care of their situation. One woman's reaction was, 'They will have to make satisfactory arrangements for us as we are the DCC's employees. We are supposed to work for them till death.'

The nature of the work and associated barriers

Historically the cleaners used to clean the external environs of private houses and collect and dispose of household rubbish, but this practice stopped in 1983. Nowadays they sweep the streets, remove waste and clean surface drains, septic tanks, markets, public toilets and hospitals. Some also handle dead human bodies and their preparation for autopsy or cremation, and dispose of animal carcasses.

These kinds of work are still perceived by many to be a source of impurity and this is reflected not only in how the wider population views the cleaners, but also in the cleaners' sense of self-worth and of their place in society. While the job of a cleaner with the DCC does come with a degree of security and some benefits, parents and children consulted generally abhorred the job. The social stigma attached to the work they do, rooted in their caste identities, affects their entire lives, resulting not only in poverty but also powerlessness. One interviewee said that the job took away everything else 'save their own bare skin', and a father expressed that he feels his children are ashamed of him.

Many of the respondents expected their children to have the opportunity to be their 'replacement' at their death or if they wanted to give up work. While this is seen as a benefit by some, it is also perceived as a trap by others, especially

'We are what we are and have been like this for ages....we have been thrown down by those who made the edict that our sthan [place] is where there is no light... generation after generation... what is there to think? How you want us to think? We know we will clean garbage whether we look like a handsome film star hero or the villain. Why am I to invest family money to a losing concern? To make my educated son a cleaner? Educated cleaner! I don't go along this line of wasting money. I had one son do matric pass... He's now in college, reading on his own money. My second son I keep in the school, but he just fails. I have kept him in school as I don't want him to become a vagabond. He'll take my job after I stop. There's nothing to think beyond this about my children.'

Sunder Lal, 39, regular employee



While an elderly cleaner rakes strewn rubbish into the DCC supplies disposal container in Dhaka, a younger cleaner scavenges for items of re-saleable value.

the young. As one respondent aged 24–25 put it: 'Our father's understanding of a barrier is that nothing should come between him holding the job and his son holding the same job after him. He has no idea that he himself is a barrier to our wishes.'

Some parents also expressed that life is no longer as it used to be 15 or 20 years ago, and that their children will not necessarily get their jobs automatically. They reported that these days 'hereditary' jobs often have to be secured through payment of bribes to the workers' union and bosses and through extra work done for free. Many feel ashamed of these practices, but are trapped in a system of exploitation.

Access to alternative or supplementary job opportunities remains limited but is expanding. Many young people have high aspirations and seem determined to avoid the looming threat of a 'descent job' although some also feel trapped by family attitudes or their living situation. For older men in the communities interviewed, the preferred alternatives or additional sources of employment included office cleaning, security work, gardening and rickshaw pulling. The younger men are more inclined to diversify their sources of income, reporting a wider range of jobs including as film studio hands, in shopping malls and in fast food restaurants.

For women the choices remain more limited and most women generally do work they can carry out within the home, such as making clothes, unless they are very poor and forced to scavenge for recyclable materials for sale. Although social norms are gradually changing, many parents fear for the safety and reputation of their daughters should they go out to work and mix with wider society (and sometimes a young woman's lack of safety is linked to her caste identity, which renders her more vulnerable). Young women with some education often work at home coaching school students in groups for a fee.

These alternative sources of income generation supplement household incomes so that families are able to make ends meet in an expensive capital city. However, transforming these additional sources of income into main occupations is more difficult, due to a number of factors including limited educational achievement and limited access to skills training. Moreover, when asked whether they would choose another job in place of a cleaner's job as their prime work, interviewees tended to give two reasons for not wanting to change: the fact that the cleaner's job provides accommodation and also the enhanced security they gain when they are able to live together with others in their community. Perhaps a better question is one raised by one of the interviewees, Pappu, when asked what he thought of cleaning as a profession: why should he not be able to feel proud of what he does?

'See, I am a person who has been nurtured by the narrow outlook of a miserable world day in and day out, which is only known to the generations of this world itself. Nothing that you have felt comes anything close to us. Yes, it is a profession that is our occupation and as such we bear the brunt of what it means to others. Cleaning garbage, or keeping the city clean should be a very noble and important job in the time when everybody is talking big about environment degradation. I would really ask you a question: please tell me why this job has not been modernised in the era of such advancement? I have seen a couple of videos on clean cities on the internet. When you see the men and machines working together, I feel I could work happily and feel proud with such a job.'

Measures for how the cleaner's job could be transformed are discussed later in this report, but access to alternative sources of employment is also a priority. Access to education is one key to this. However, for the children of dalit cleaners, education is particularly problematic. Interviewees reported frequent discriminatory practices and derogatory, dehumanising and disrespectful behaviour by school authorities and teachers towards dalit students or parents. Often the affected children are so horrified or humiliated that they resent going to school and either underachieve due to the detrimental effects on their studies or drop out altogether.

Parents mentioned that children who suffer in this way often develop poor health or aggressive behavior. They added that their children also lack a home environment conducive to study, or anyone to help them with school work. Most parents are non-literate and cannot afford extra tuition. Often, they expressed that the school education system 'exposes children to what is bad' such as bullying, segregation, discrimination in class work and activities, and teachers manipulating examination results of good dalit students.

Money is also a determining factor. Families are poor and as education costs money, it is widely felt to be of little benefit unless it translates into a well-paid job. To the majority of the parents, therefore, education is not a high priority, though many parents expressed satisfaction that their children were attending school, and within the five communities consulted around 9,500 children are attending schools.

There is also evidence of change. Many relatively younger parents are eager to send their children to school and are resolved to support their children in coping with the difficult classroom situations. The survey revealed that where both parents have had some schooling, or if their mother had passed their Secondary School Certificate, children were more likely to be going to school. A few students were enrolled in undergraduate courses at the National University and one young woman was completing her Master's in Education at Dhaka University. Nevertheless, support for education among those consulted is very much based on the likely return on the investment and a few expressed that higher education was not necessary. Moreover, the education of older boys was generally prioritised among siblings.

While the Government of Bangladesh is confident of achieving the Millenium Development Goals 2015 target of 100% enrolment in the primary education, it is clear that there are barriers to overcome in order to achieve a truly inclusive educational system. There is a need to institute equality and inclusion measures in educational institutions to support children from socially excluded communities to access and remain in education. Wider measures targeting families and communities also need to be considered, in order to both strengthen their livelihood base and transform social norms and attitudes that mitigate the right to education, particularly for girls.

Gender inequalities

The municipal cleaners' jobs were probably among the first where men and women worked together in public. Traditions of *purdah*, whereby women's seclusion is linked to their status, mean there is still a perception among some that women only choose to work in public out of desperation. A common saying is, 'What not poverty can make one do – bringing out their women to work too.' However, for the Hindu non-Bengali women of low socio-economic status, this was perceived to be less of a concern.

It is not clear how women first came to work as cleaners. One former employee of the DCC speculated that some must have been asked to do their husbands' or fathers' jobs when the men were unable to go to work. Although employment as cleaners opened up scope for these women to work, many faced resentment from male relatives as a result. This was compounded by

'I always come at 5am on dry days and sweep the portion of this road allotted to me, so that the road is clean and healthy for the users when they start their day.... I have been given my father's job after he died. Yes, this blessing is still there but many things have changed. My husband? He is a rickshaw repairman, so two of my elder sons assist him. No, no school for them. However, I have sent my youngest daughter and the youngest son to school. This makes me happy. I get 7,500 taka as salary for every month and I give it over to my husband. We women don't keep money with us. It's not a good thing for women and her household to keep money and husband to be asking for it. He is the one who buys food, medicine and things. When I need money, he'll ask why. If he thinks I am right, he'll give some, or else no. He does the savings. One daughter is married off. One daughter is to be married. Two sons to be.'

Ramla Rani, DCC regular cleaner, Dhaka

discrimination and powerlessness on several levels. Not only were they poor, socially excluded, and women, they were also considered as belonging nowhere – living in a country that was not theirs, where they did not speak the language and had no 'village home' or ancestral place.

Although not a route out of poverty, the work of the cleaner offers a degree of security and a place in society, albeit on the margins. As Dhaka grew and more people were needed for the cleaning and sanitising of the city, this job came to be seen to be the right of the non-Bengali Hindu dalits, on the basis of descent. However, this right has been gradually eroded so that while there is still a perceived entitlement to the work, often people have to buy their way into jobs. In one group meeting, participants expressed the deep anger felt when the administration 'tricked' family members into giving up their work:

'After Liberation²⁰ there was famine. We were told by our officers that they were cutting back jobs due to a financial crunch. It was going to be "one family one job" from then on. So we women, except those who were widows, withdrew. They had promised us that as soon as country's financial situation became good, we would be given back our jobs. But they have given our jobs to the Bengalis who are not of the sweepers' jaat [caste]. Jobs are sold like in nilaam [auction]. If a woman now needs a job, she is made to do work in places she is not to be... and pay an amount that the union-wallah would let her know.'

Another said: 'This is same for anyone one of us – man or woman. The other system is to give up 6 months wages and work for free as a Muster Roll employee. It is making us poorer.'

This system of employment is not contributing to women's empowerment. Some male participants in the study stated that, 'since women earn and look after families and everything, they are the decision-makers.' But few women agreed, and later said that nothing changes: 'We and our children listen to the master of

the family – that is the tradition.’ In another group one response was: ‘Work is work. Work brings money. But that is not to change the social norms. Our society is patriarchal. My husband is above everything, anything. Children have to respect their father.’

As the case study of Ramla Rani on previous page illustrates, women often do not have control over the money they earn. Moreover, this work is done by women in addition to the burden of unpaid household work. The detrimental effects on women’s health due to overwork has been little explored, though there is acceptance that it makes women more vulnerable to illnesses and poor health.

The women workers under the DCC have to be very careful and alert in dealing with men who are not of their caste. Violence and abusive behavior was widely reported in the study and some women spoke of sexual coercion by their CIs. Harassment of female workers includes placing them on work sites far from their homes, meaning a longer journey to work and making it difficult to fit in household

chores. These kinds of tactics are seen as a way to get women to leave their jobs so that supervisors can auction the vacancy. As a result, the number of dalit women workers has fallen sharply. As one woman put it: ‘We don’t feel secure anymore. Some of us have spent some money to stay nearer our area.’ Women who work alone in public places suffer the constant fear of violence.

Dalit women who do not work are also at risk of violence and are often extremely poor. Many face domestic violence, which is also very common among the wider community. However, dalit women find it particularly difficult to get any form of legal support. For example, they face discriminatory attitudes when filing cases at police stations (which often refuse to take up their case, referring them instead to local authorities). Dalit women who are not Bengali are further disadvantaged, since their access to information is constrained by language and lack of links to the wider community, and they generally do not have the possibility of support from family living elsewhere in Bangladesh.



In a DCC cleaners’ residential area, an elderly women washes clothes with rationed water.

Living conditions

The lack of a 'home village' to go to was strongly felt among the study group. Because of their social status, they would find it difficult to buy land in the city even if they had the means, because many vendors would not want to sell land to them. As one young man put it: 'That's why, no matter what, even if I have to crush my dreams, I have to join DCC and work to keep that little space – it is a place to live. You may have seen and heard how we hate ourselves for being marked by our parents to be the next *jharu* [broom] holder.'

According to the DCC officials, there are currently about 8,000 Cleaners, of whom 75% live in the cleaners' staff quarters, sometimes called 'colonies' (although some cleaners feel this is a derogatory term). Their homes are 'plot houses' (homes built on plots given to their forefathers in the early days of Dhaka municipality²¹) or more recently built multi-story blocks of dormitory style accommodation. These have limited communal washing and sanitation facilities.

The right to live in these 'colonies' is an important reason why families are desperate to have one member employed in the DCC. The responses of many cleaners involved in the study suggested that the security this provided was particularly critical due to the hostile attitudes of the wider society.

Most cleaners' residential areas are in the older part of Dhaka. As the city grew northwards, the residential areas remained in the south. One, which had become a huge slum, was bulldozed to make way for the up-market residential area of Gulshan, with around 600 former occupants relocated to open plots of land, which had no provisions for safe water and sanitation.

Several huge and old housing complexes remain. All have sub-divisions according to the identity of the people accommodated there. Peoples' place of residence is thus strongly linked to their occupation, although this seems to be changing as people diversify their income sources and new people move into these areas (often as sub-tenants).



Congested living in an old multi-storey building and other types of accommodation in Dhaka City Corporation cleaners' staff residential area at Gonoktuli Lane, Azimpur, Dhaka

One of the worst staff quarters is at Lalbagh Shoshanghat, which is home to 20-30 families of the dom caste (a dalit sub-group) who live in small huts made from recycled materials. It lacks decent sanitation facilities and its water source is some 15 minutes away. A new multi-storey building is being constructed for residents' rehousing nearby, but it is clear that this has not been designed with the comfort of anyone, particularly women, in mind. The rooms have no ventilation in a country that is humid and wet for most of the year, and there are no private toilet facilities. Unfortunately, there is concern that those responsible are deliberately building lower quality structures for cleaner communities.²² Much more could have been done to involve the families themselves in the design of the new facilities, a consultation process that is provided for under the National Housing Policy of 2008.

Access to water and sanitation in the staff quarters, (as in many other parts of Dhaka) is generally poor. Water pressure is low, supplies are intermittent and queues at water points are a common sight. Water collection remains a task mainly for women and girls and takes a lot out of the women's working time. Heavy buckets or jerry cans of water have to be carried upstairs in the multi-story buildings.

Inadequate sanitation facilities are also a major problem that impacts disproportionately on women. The few communal toilets that exist are very dilapidated without any provision of water for washing, and with very limited lighting. The sewer drains by the toilets are clogged with rubbish and become blocked when it rains, forcing people to wade through water and raw sewage to reach the toilets. Participants in the study described the techniques they use to avoid using these toilets any more than twice a day, and many suffer from frequent urinary tract infections as a result.

Doing laundry is also a huge challenge for women as there is no private space to put up a washing line. Women hang personal garments inside their rooms but the lack of air circulation makes it difficult to dry clothes.

Even where water and sanitation projects have been promoted in the living areas of the DCC cleaners, the additional costs often have had to be borne by the residents. Some of the DCC residential staff quarters have been brought under water and sanitation projects such as Second Small-Scale Water Resources Development Project.²³ The residents, however, were critical about this and other similar projects as they have to pay the community welfare association for new services while the DCC already deducts Tk.100 from their salaries for all amenities.



Substandard living conditions in housing at Lalbagh Shoshanghat, Lalbagh, Dhaka.



Water source and community toilets provided for women by the DCC in collaboration with an NGO. A woman wades through rubbish to reach a toilet, while water containers are lined up, and a young girl washes household items with water from the overhead storage tank.

Overall, there is a huge need for greater consultation with communities in the construction of new housing and provision of other services for the DCC cleaners. It is essential to address the specific needs of women, people with disabilities, and since people live in these areas all their lives, of the elderly. Housing has to be both adequate and acceptable to the intended inhabitants. Other institutions such as Dhaka University have built flats with running water and plumbing for their employees, including cleaners. There seems to be no reason why these facilities should not also be provided for the DCC employees.

Conclusions and recommendations

Public perceptions about socially excluded communities and the jobs they do, and discriminatory social norms and practices, need to be changed. The constitutional intention to eradicate discrimination does not seem to have succeeded. There is a need for new policies to address discrimination linked to caste hierarchies, which affects both Muslim and Hindu populations in Bangladesh. Such discrimination means that the majority of dalits are trapped in poverty with extremely limited access to adequate housing, health and education services. Dalit women face multiple forms of discrimination and violence as a result of both their caste and gender.

Much more could be done to transform the job the cleaners do into a decent job, in line with the International Labour Organization's Decent Work Agenda, which recommends opportunities for skills development, respect for rights at work, adequate social protection to promote both inclusion and productivity, and support for strong and independent workers' organisations.²⁴ The DCC employees also need to be supported and prepared for any planned privatisation of the cleaning services. In this context, the Government of Bangladesh must ensure that labour standards are enforced in all sectors and alternative employment opportunities supported.

A lack of decent housing and alternative housing options is a barrier to enabling cleaners and their families to take on alternative forms of employment and break out of exploitation in a job that stigmatises them. While the Government of Bangladesh has taken initiatives to address the housing needs of socially excluded cleaning staff of Dhaka city, the quality of the housing is poor and does nothing to improve these options or address the stigma faced by dalit communities.

In addition, the provision of basic amenities required to enjoy a decent standard of living must be viewed as an entitlement and not a welfare service, one that should

be provided to all DCC employees as a right. This needs to be backed by adequate financial allocations to ensure decent housing, water and sanitation facilities. In sum, a holistic approach to the interconnected issues of DCC workers' conditions of work, work security and standards of living is required.

Dalit communities need to be fully informed about their rights and must have meaningful opportunities to contribute to policy making at all levels. National policies, plans and budgets need to be audited and monitored to ensure resources and political will are directed to addressing discriminatory social norms and practices and their outcomes. These should be deployed for the progressive realisation of the economic, social and cultural rights of all citizens of Bangladesh.

Special provisions for socially excluded communities should be implemented, monitored and reviewed for effectiveness and appropriateness. Alongside these, raising awareness about the issues facing socially excluded communities, and strengthening negotiation skills and self-confidence of the communities themselves (particularly women among them) would help ensure their greater participation and influence, and build respect for their rights. A comprehensive analysis of the social impact of policies, plans and budgets in Bangladesh should be informed by gender analysis and should look at the nexus between gender and social inequalities to address the needs of the most vulnerable.

Much more needs to be done to stop discriminatory practices within schools and educational establishments. This must be supplemented by measures for equality and including to help raise the aspirations of dalit youth, support their integration into educational establishments, and equip them with the skills they need to be able to seize the available job opportunities.

Key recommendations for how these issues could be addressed include:

1. Recognition

There needs to be greater attention paid to gathering accurate disaggregated data concerning the numbers of socially excluded women, men and children from different communities, and their socio-economic development levels.

There are no census population figures for these communities, or for many other small communities who collectively fall under the dalit or harijan category. This means that state and non-state projects and programs among the DCC cleaners need to take stock of the social identities of the beneficiaries and the dynamics of social relations that operate in the local environment. The DCC's own 'Slum census and floating population count', taken between 25 April and 2 May 2014, may be one example of this.²⁵

2. Transformation of the nature of work

All efforts should be taken to modernise cleaning jobs so as to reduce hazards and risks, to empower employees, to highlight the value of their public service and to tackle stigma associated with it.

The cleaners should enjoy safe and hygienic working conditions, including protective uniforms and decent washing facilities, opportunities for training and advancement in employment, support for their freedoms of association and collective bargaining, and mechanisms for making complaints and seeking redress when their rights are violated. Employment policies and management practices should provide for women's needs, for example by ensuring safety and security at work and offering flexible hours and shifts, and should ensure that all workers are able to carry out their jobs with dignity and appropriate reward. Measures should also be implemented to ensure the cleaners enjoy greater respect and to change public perceptions of cleaning work, for example by highlighting its critical contribution to environmental health. Unfair practices, such as the less favourable terms applied to MR employees, should be eliminated.

The DCC should develop a time-bound plan of action to make the necessary changes. Further, a comprehensive labour protection law must be enacted in accordance with Articles 10, 11, 14 and 28 of the Bangladesh Constitution.

3. Housing security and choice

All DCC employees should have access to affordable and adequate housing, both during their employment and after their employment ends.

While the cleaners depend heavily on the housing entitlement that comes with their jobs, much more could be done to ensure a better standard of housing

and greater choice in housing options. More investments in decent social housing and basic services are needed across Dhaka, and this should be affordable for all people in need. The DCC cleaners themselves should be consulted about whether they have a preference for the dedicated housing provided specifically for DCC employees, and as long as these facilities are required, they should be planned with their participation so that provision is appropriate for their needs. The government has planned for the construction of four multi-story residential buildings to ease the need for housing in the overcrowded cleaners' residential areas²⁶ and in the 2014-2015 budget, an allocation was made for the ongoing construction of housing for sweepers' 'colonies'. While this is welcome, it is questionable whether segregated housing is the best solution.

For the non-Bengali cleaners who own no land or property and have no 'home village' in Bangladesh, long-term security of housing tenure is critical. The government should, in collaboration with the cleaners, plan to ensure their entitlement to housing plots with full civic amenities, within or outside of the current residential areas. There should be arrangements put into place for these families to be able to purchase these plots or houses at subsidised prices, supported by access to credit facilities.

4. Equality

Ensure the principle of gender equity in assessing and developing all interventions among the dalit cleaner communities. The government should develop a package of equality measures that support women and girls in the community to obtain education and receive skills training to support income generation. It should also support the transformation of gendered attitudes and norms within the community that currently restrict the freedoms of women and girls.

Plan for and implement a diversity rule in all workplaces. The representation of dalits should be ensured in every workplace through the issuance of an executive order by the Prime Minister to implement a diversity rule with respect to employment in any public or private workplace. This needs to be accompanied by establishment of a monitoring cell to check whether the organisations have been inclusive by doing spot audits and regular organisational reporting of recruitment and human resource development.

Provide equal access and a fair environment for dalit students in schools. The Government of Bangladesh should set in place special measures to ensure greater enrolment and sustained school attendance of dalit children, including school enrolment drives in cleaner residential areas. In addition, clear legal provisions prohibiting discrimination are needed in order to stop any

discriminatory treatment, segregation, teasing or other harmful practices against any child, and these should be designed to address discrimination based on religion, caste or gender. This should be accompanied by a system of grievance redress wherein offenses can be reported and disciplinary action taken against those responsible.

Ensure equal opportunities to move into alternative forms of employment.

While the working conditions of cleaners are improved, greater opportunities must also be opened for dalits to have the freedom to move into alternative employment should they wish to do so. Beyond having access to and enjoyment of their right to education, dalit youth should be linked to skills training opportunities and programmes to build their entrepreneurial capacities.

Pass anti-discrimination legislation: The rights of dalits must be protected by law. The proposed Anti-Discrimination Bill, given by the Law Commission to the Law Ministry (2014), is a significant positive step. It moves towards recognising that discrimination of any kind, including that based on caste, religion or gender, is unacceptable, prohibited and a punishable offence. The government must take all steps to pass this law at the earliest opportunity and put in place effective measures to ensure its implementation.

Form a national commission for socially excluded communities. Dalits and other socially excluded communities are an intrinsic part of Bangladeshi society as citizens of the country, but have been and still are pushed to the margins. It is heartening to note that the Government of Bangladesh has recognized the presence of the dalits in the country in recent years, though issues of identity (as dalit or harijan, or both) remain unresolved. A way forward is to establish a commission for the protection and promotion of the rights of socially excluded communities. Already, the government has received suggestions for establishing a National Commission for Minorities for their protection in the face of unabated and systematic communal violence.²⁷ However, the government should consider a wider Inclusion Commission to specifically work to protect and ensure respect for the rights of socially excluded communities. The Commission would be the interface between the government and these communities in order to strengthen the ability of the Bangladeshi state to protect and promote the rights of some of its most vulnerable citizens.

5. Addressing caste and gender discrimination and violence

Holistic planning to end caste discrimination and violence: A comprehensive plan of action needs to be developed by the government to address caste discrimination and violence in Bangladesh, including

intersectional discrimination and violence against dalit women based on their caste and gender. This plan of action should include a clear statement recognising caste as a discrete structure that hinders the country's progress towards democracy and equal citizenship rights, and non-discrimination as an inalienable right. It should include measures to eliminate and prevent segregation and caste discrimination against Dalits in access to all public and private spaces, employment, housing, education and healthcare, as well as ensure protection from violence.

Changing social norms and attitudes that foster caste based discrimination: Specific measures are required to raise awareness among the public and among government officials, teachers and media practitioners on caste discrimination, such as through internal training and public campaigns. The media, religious, educational and cultural institutions and other parts of civil society should contribute to correcting the spread of prejudices and negative attitudes towards dalits in general, and dalit cleaners in particular. Furthermore, they should endeavour to build the capacity of those communities, as well as recognize the contributions of affected communities to the development of society.²⁸

6. Fiscal measures

Well-targeted tax and fiscal measures are needed to support the needs of socially excluded groups, realise their rights, and address inequality. The Government of Bangladesh could do more to raise the national tax to GDP ratio (for example, by rationalising tax incentives) so as to make available revenues for measures specifically for the development of dalit communities. A fiscal allocation made in the 2013-14 national budget²⁹ of Tk.123 million in support of excluded communities was a positive move and should set a precedent. This fund provides for a stipend for school children, skills training for adults and support for income-generating activities. In addition, senior, disabled and insolvent members of these communities are to be provided with allowances. Such mechanisms need to be monitored well, with the participation of women and men from the target communities, in order to ensure effective disbursement and utilization of funds.

Going forward, greater investment in skills development among poor and socially excluded communities is a priority. A strategic plan of action is needed, developed with the participation of people within and outside dalit communities, for the education and skill development of dalit youth. This should support education and training for salaried work and self-employment.

Endnotes

- 1 Asian Development Bank, *Asian Development Outlook 2012*, 2012 adb.org/sites/default/files/pub/2012/ado2012.pdf
- 2 The word dalit, comes from the Sanskrit root dal- and means 'broken, down trodden, or oppressed'. It is the title that many groups who are socially excluded within the context of caste hierarchies in South Asia have adopted. These groups were formerly known as harijan, or 'untouchables' in much of the subcontinent, and in Bangladesh the term nomosudra is also used. While acknowledging the different nomenclature adopted by those engaged in cleaning, this report uses the term dalit, which is recognised both within and outside the country.
- 3 Farzana Islam and Mohammad Nasur Uddin, 'Intricate Tale of Social Exclusion: Dalit women's experience of caste, class, citizenship and gender in Dhaka City', *The Jahangirnagar Review, Part II: Social Science*, Vol 32, 2008, pp15-32.
- 4 The five sites were Wari Lane, Gonoktuly Lane, Lalbag Shashanghat, Lane Gabtoli and Mirrin Jilla.
- 5 'Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh', bdlaws.minlaw.gov.bd/pdf_part.php?id=367
- 6 United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 2013. The Rise of the South: Human progress in a diverse world*, 2013.
- 7 Ministry of Planning, Government of Bangladesh, *Sixth Five Year Plan FY2011-FY2015: Accelerating growth and reducing poverty*, plancomm.gov.bd/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/SFYP-Final-Part-1.pdf
- 8 General Economics Commission Planning Committee, Government of Bangladesh, *Perspective Plan of Bangladesh 2010-2021: Making Vision 2021 a Reality*, April 2012.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 *The Bangladesh Labour Act*, 2006, for example, provides for health and safety at work, maternity rights and other benefits.
- 11 For an in-depth discussion see Iftekhar Uddin Chowdhury, *Caste-based Discrimination in South Asia: a study of Bangladesh*, Indian Institute of Dalit Studies, 2009 idsn.org/fileadmin/user_folder/pdf/New_files/Bangladesh/Caste-based_Discrimination_in_Bangladesh__IIDS_working_paper_.pdf
- 12 General Economics Division Planning Commission, Government of Bangladesh, *National Strategy for Accelerated Poverty Reduction FY2009-FY2011*; also see note 7.
- 13 Formerly called Dhaka Municipality, established in 1864.
- 14 Based on a conversation with a senior official in 2014.
- 15 Dhaka became the capital of East Pakistan in 1947 and then the capital of Bangladesh in 1971.
- 16 Ralph W. Nicholas, *Fruits of Worship: Practical Religion in Bengal*, Orient Black Swan, 2003.
- 17 Note that under international human rights law, caste-based discrimination has been recognised as discrimination based on 'work and descent', falling within the ambit of the definition of racial discrimination (descent based discrimination) under Article 1(1) of the International Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination 1965.
- 18 Prime Minister's order 2012. See 'Regarding fulfillment of basic demands of the Harijan community in Bangladesh', People's Republic of Bangladesh, Prime Minister's Secretariat, Manusher Jonno Foundation, 29 May 2012.
- 19 Dhaka City Corporation, 'The study on the solid waste management in Dhaka city', Vol 2, 2005 The People's Republic of Bangladesh & Japan International Cooperation Agency (see summary at fpd-bd.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/VOL1_SUMMARY.pdf)
- 20 Bangladesh proclaimed its independence from Pakistan on March 26, 1971 and through a 9-month struggle for liberation, gained its independence on December 16, 1971.
- 21 See note 19.
- 22 The Financial Express, 'More than half of a DCC project money goes to waste', 14 October 2012, thefinancialexpress-bd.com/old/index.php?ref=MjBfMTBfMTFfMTJfMV8xXzE0Njg0OA
- 23 Asian Development Bank, *Bangladesh: Second Small-Scale Water Resources Development Sector Project*, 2012, adb.org/projects/documents/second-small-scale-water-resources-development-sector-project-completion-report
- 24 As defined by the International Labour Organization, ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/decent-work-agenda/lang-en/index.htm
- 25 The Financial Express, 'Slum census begins', 25 April 2014, thefinancialexpress-bd.com/2014/04/25/30717; Dhaka Tribune (2014, 24 April). 'Third slum census begins on April 25', 18 April 2014, dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2014/apr/18/third-slum-census-begins-april-25
- 26 See Ministry of Finance, Government of Bangladesh, *Four Years of Progress: Bangladesh Marches on. Budget Speech 2013-2014*, June 2013, mof.gov.bd/en/budget/13_14/budget_speech/speech_en.pdf
- 27 The Daily Star, 'Protection regime for minorities', 7 June 2014, thedailystar.net/law-and-our-rights/protection-regime-for-minorities-28826
- 28 Recommendation based on the Human Rights Council's draft UN Guidelines for the Effective Elimination of Discrimination based on Work and Descent, 2013. un.org.np/attachments/united-nations-principles-and-guidelines-effective-elimination-discrimination-based-work
- 29 See note 25, chapter VII.