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Bangladesh: Climate crisis magnifies discrimination against “invisible” sanitation workers

Bangladesh’s authorities must urgently address their failure to uphold the rights of sanitation workers, who face economic marginalization and entrenched gender- and caste-based discrimination, vulnerabilities that are only deepening amid a global climate crisis driven largely by fossil fuel combustion, Amnesty International said in a new report.

‘Left Behind in the Storm: Dalit Women Sanitation Workers and the Fight for Water and Dignity’, documents the huge barriers faced by Dalit women sanitation workers in Khulna and Satkhira, on Bangladesh’s south-western coastal belt, in accessing safe drinking water and adequate sanitation, as well as their vulnerability and exclusion in climate change relief programmes. It also explores how these workers are largely invisible in government policies on climate change, water and sanitation due to their caste, gender and occupation, despite being among the most affected by these policies.

“As one of the most climate-vulnerable countries in the world, Bangladesh must address the deep-rooted caste inequalities that have left economically excluded and marginalized coastal Dalit communities bearing the brunt of the climate emergency,” said Isabelle Lassée, Deputy Director Research for South Asia at Amnesty International.

“A climate-resilient future for Bangladesh can only be shaped through inviting excluded voices into policy conversations and ensuring their protection and equality. Bangladesh cannot build effective resilience to increasingly intense droughts, cyclones, floods and extreme heat if it leaves the most neglected groups behind.”

The report is based on interviews with 20 female and two male sanitation workers from Dalit communities in Khulna and Satkhira, located in low-lying, flood-prone areas that are highly exposed to the climate change related impacts of rising sea levels, cyclones, droughts, and flooding. Further, officials from the Disaster Management Department and Department of Public Health Engineering (DPHE) and members of WASH and Disaster local management committees from these two districts were also interviewed.

“We low caste are forgotten”

Sanitation workers in Khulna and Satkhira reported having no household water connections for drinking, washing, cooking and cleaning. Instead, many are forced to either purchase and carry water from distant treatment centres, or to collect rainwater or use public wells or pond water – with unsafe water causing a range of health problems. The cost of buying safe drinking water was another barrier, especially for families earning as little as 3,000 to 8,000 taka (US\$ 25-65) a month.

“There is no water infrastructure, tankers, or machines ever provided to our colony, even though we are all government workers... I think we low caste people are forgotten,” one sanitation worker told Amnesty International.

In addition to caste-based discrimination, women sanitation workers in Khulna and Satkhira also face challenges specific to their gender. As women, they bear the burden of water collection, an unpaid and labour-intensive chore, which limits their economic opportunities.

Toilets that sanitation workers can afford to build offer no privacy, are difficult to access, and are not resilient to weather and climate events. Many women sanitation workers delay using the toilet due to a lack of safety or privacy, leading to infections. Others struggle to manage their menstrual hygiene.

Vulnerability to climate change

After [Cyclone Remal](#), access to safe drinking water became even more precarious. A sanitation worker, Piu, said: “I could not get any clean water to drink... The water was never enough.”

The report documents how extreme weather events, made more frequent and severe by climate change, further magnify existing inequalities, trapping sanitation workers in coastal regions in a cycle of vulnerability. With 18 cyclones over 17 years, entire settlements have been caught in cycles of rebuilding they can ill afford. A basic latrine costing up to 3,000 taka (US\$25) is a stretch for many families, let alone upgrading it to make it flood resilient.

Without urgent interventions to strengthen climate resilience policies and efforts to address loss and damage through the lens of caste and gender, Bangladesh’s adaptation frameworks will continue to reinforce systemic inequalities and exclusion rather than dismantle them and advance substantive equality.

Neglected by assistance programmes and excluded from decision-making

Dalit sanitation workers in Khulna and Satkhira have an essential role in maintaining public health and sanitation infrastructure, and in post-disaster recovery efforts. Yet they are seldom included in decision-making related to any of these areas.

Kishori, a sanitation worker, said: “People expect me to live in dirt and silence, and whenever I raised my voice, I was not heard.” These women, whose labour is essential for the functioning of Bangladesh’s sanitation systems, are denied access to the very services they help sustain.

After Cyclone Remal, government assistance programmes in Khulna and Sathkira failed to prioritize Dalits and to account for barriers to inclusion, ranging from entrenched systemic caste-based discrimination and economic barriers to the absence of documentation for land tenure and location of settlements in areas prone to flooding. This often leaves frontline workers unprotected and forgotten.

Bangladesh is obligated under both the UN International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), to ensure marginalized groups' right to water and sanitation and the UN International Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) to adopt proactive measures to eliminate structural discrimination and guarantee equal access to all human rights.

Therefore, in line with these binding obligations, the authorities must collect and monitor caste-disaggregated data, establish a National Action Plan to eliminate caste-based discrimination and ensure substantive equality, as well as active, free and meaningful participation of Dalits (particularly Dalit women) in decision-making processes, at all levels of government, including with respect to water and sanitation planning, as well as disaster planning and responses.

Further and most fundamentally, the Bangladeshi government must adopt a comprehensive anti-discrimination law that includes caste and descent-based discrimination, applies to both public and private sectors, recognizes direct and indirect discrimination and provides for accessible independent complaint mechanisms and effective legal remedies. Amnesty International also calls on any state or body providing finance to Bangladesh for adaptation or to

address loss and damage to ensure that all projects are designed with full, effective and meaningful input from members of the Dalit community, are implemented in compliance with principles of equality and non-discrimination and on measurable inclusion and equity standards, and that reporting on progress and implementation includes caste-disaggregated data.

“Caste and gender-based discrimination, lack of inclusive infrastructure, economic marginalization, and climate vulnerability have converged to entrench cycles of exclusion and indignity,” said Isabelle Lassée.

“The findings by Amnesty International reflect a deeper national failure to uphold the rights of Dalit sanitation workers. The absence of caste-disaggregated data, targeted funding, and inclusive policymaking continues to leave Dalit communities significantly behind.”

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