

Opening speech for Khulna

Dear respectable guests, welcome to the regional dissemination workshop of the preliminary findings of a comparative and longitudinal study on discriminations and poverty among the Dalits and non-Dalits funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation.

This workshop is for us still part of the research process because we want you to validate our preliminary findings through your feedback, based on your valuable experience in working with Dalit communities. So, I would like to invite all of you to actively participate in this workshop.

Terre des Hommes Italia would like to extend a special thanks to the Chief Guest, the Deputy Commissioner of Khulna, Mr. Mohammed Halal Hossain and the Chair of the Session, Dr. Abdullah Abusayed Khan, Professor, Sociology Discipline, for being with us today and to help us creating bridges among the Local Government Institutions (LGIs) and the academia – they will arrive later in the morning due to other institutional engagements with the Honorable Minister of Education who is visiting today the University Education Fair. We would like also to warmly thank the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) for believing in us and awarding us the grant to carry out this study. My deep gratitude goes to the Research Team, led by Professor Ainoon Naher and Dr. Sanaul Mostafa for this exciting journey together and for listening to the communities they interviewed with open heart and mind. Thanks to the Supervisors, here represented by Dr. Firoz Ahmed and the enumerators, who have worked hard to collect the data. Without your contribution we would never be able to reach our outcomes. Thanks to the dream team of Terre des Hommes Italia I am honored to work with, for being able to make the impossible, possible. Thanks for their professionalism, team spirit and commitment to the organization they serve. I would like to express my deepest gratitude also to Swapon Kumar Das, Executive Director of the organization DALIT and his team for the support they have extended to the RT during the first cycle of the survey in granting access to Dalit respondents in remote areas. Last but not the least thanks to the women and men we have interviewed for sharing with us your experiences, views and feedback. We will make good use of the data in our hands.

In the next sessions, the preliminary findings of the research will be extensively shared. For this reason, I would like to focus on the rationale behind this study and the 3 main reasons which motivated us to design and then carry out this longitudinal survey.

First, from 2016 to January 2019, TDH Italia has implemented with a European Union grant a three years project, *Jukta Hoe Mukta (JHM)* – United We Stand, to create safe patterns of internal migration and provide marginalized adolescent girls/ young women from South West Bangladesh, moving towards Dhaka to work in the garment sector, with a platform of skills training, job opportunities and services in order for them to experience a more secured everyday life. As part of this project, over three years, a total of 616 adolescent girls (18 years old) and young women had access to marketable vocational training skills to be then placed in compliant Ready Made Garments (RMG) factories. Out of them, 174 were from dalit communities from Khulna, Jessore, Satkhira districts of Bangladesh.

Thus, TDH Italia had a strong interest in understanding the influence of migration and capacity building of Dalit girls over family dynamics and over the traditional role of dalit women within families and how this role changes as a consequence of the internal migration process. This was the first reason which encouraged us to start this journey. Second, in Bangladesh, there is scarce detailed historical documentation and analysis on the Dalits as well as a general lack of accurate statistical data on them. In fact, informal estimates of the total population of Dalits in Bangladesh range from as low as 3.5 million to as high as 6.5 million. According to some sources, there are altogether 94 different dalit groups in the country. Depending on the community they belong to, they are engaged in various professions, all of them considered as 'polluting', such as skimmers and tanners (*Rishi*), pig rears (*Kawra*), sweepers (*Harijan* or *Jat Sweeper*). In this context, this vacuum has been filled to a limited extent by NGOs that have been working with dalit communities. The existing, mostly qualitative, literature depicts the plight of Dalit communities highlighting discrimination, gender-based violence within and outside their communities, extreme poverty and poor access to resources and rights. The Dalit communities are triply oppressed by virtue of their ethnic/linguistic and religious minority statuses, their 'ritual impurity' and poor economic status. For women, of course, there is the additional dimension of gender-based violence and discrimination both within their own communities and

in the wider society. However, there is very little concrete and detailed data that can give us an accurate picture of the degree and extent of all these trends. Thus, the need to establish a robust set of data to shed light on the poverty dynamics within Dalit communities and the magnitude of their discrimination. Third, while the Dalits are believed to experience many forms of deprivations, a part of the 'mainstream' Bengali community – the poor and assetless in particular - also faces disadvantages and discriminations. Given this condition, we wanted to answer the question about the relative poverty, deprivation and discrimination of the Dalits in relation to the poor segment of the 'mainstream' community.

In Bangladesh, with regards to the legal framework to respect, protect and fulfil Dalit rights, there has been no specific law yet that addresses the needs and concerns of the Dalits of this country, except for some generic clauses in the constitution that guarantees fundamental equality of all citizens, and prohibits all forms of discrimination. In order to empower the underprivileged sections of society (*Dalits, Harijans, Bede, Tea Plantation Workers, Transgenders* etc,) and put an end to all sorts of discrimination against them, the Law Commission has prepared the Anti-discrimination Bill, 2014, which is still under consideration of the government.

In the Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights submitted to the Human Rights Council in May 2018, it is mentioned that the Special Rapporteur on violence against women had received information on high levels of violence, including rape and sexual assault, against women from religious and ethnic minority communities, with Dalits, Hindus and indigenous groups being most at risk. They were commonly victims of *salish/fatwa*-related violence. Most such violations remained unpunished.

We hope that the findings of this longitudinal study will inform coordinated evidence-based advocacy actions to boost the accountability of duty bearers on these issues. Moreover, we hope they will generate development ideas for the Government, particularly for the Ministry of Planning, to allocate public resources for the development of these poor and marginalized communities. Finally, we hope that this study will enable donors and I/NGOs to design rights-based programs in the future, which specifically address the unique areas of deprivation and discrimination of the Dalits.

With these words I conclude my intervention and I officially declare open this day of knowledge sharing and reflection. Please enjoy and participate. I now hand over the mic to my Firoz vhai.