Advocacy Brief - Upholding the Rights and Dignity of Dalits in Bangladesh

The caste structure is one of the oldest forms of social discrimination. Caste systems divide people into unequal and hierarchical groups and subject those who are deemed inferior to massive violations of their civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights. Dalits are those most affected by caste-based discrimination. The term "Dalit" refers to members of communities formerly considered to be "untouchable" in Bangladesh's caste systems. Dalits are positioned, not only at the bottom, but outside of the caste system – hence the term 'outcaste'.

In Bangladesh, caste discrimination predominantly affects the minority Hindu population and has extended to some Muslim communities. The Dalit population, estimated between 3.5 to 6.5 million, is largely marginalized, poor, and has limited access to crucial resources such as education, employment, healthcare, housing, and public services. Dalit women are particularly vulnerable due to the triple discrimination they face based on caste, gender, and economic status. While the Dalit movement has made progress in recent years, disaggregated data on the Dalit population is lacking, which hampers efforts to adequately address their issues.

Context
Dalits in Bangladesh live on the fringes of society, often in segregated, unhygienic slum areas with limited access to basic amenities. Their landlessness repeatedly forces them into abject living conditions. Exclusion and discrimination are rampant in many aspects of their lives. They are typically assigned traditionally 'unclean' jobs due to their caste status, or jobs with slavery-like conditions. Their representation in politics is minimal, and they face violence when attempting to exercise their voting rights.

Recommendations from the 2018 Cycle
Eight recommendations were made on ethnic and religious minorities and the Anti-Discrimination Bill. The recommendations supported by Bangladesh included three on the Anti-Discrimination Bill made by Georgia, Thailand and South Africa, and three on ethnic and religious minorities by South Africa, Austria and France. Two recommendations and questions directly addressed Dalits and lower castes, however, these were not accepted. Despite these recommendations, the day to day life of a Dalit in Bangladesh has not improved since 2018, and in some cases has even worsened.

Key Issues and Challenges
1. **Gender and Caste Injustice**: Dalit women and girls in Bangladesh experience discrimination at multiple and intersectional levels. They are often forced into early marriages, and are susceptible to sexual harassment, rape, violence, intimidation and often a complete lack of access to public services. According to the most recent report of the UN Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons, Ms. Siobhán Mullally Dalit women and girls face a higher risk of being forced into sex work or becoming victims of human trafficking.
2. **Business and Human Rights**: Dalits are often forced into specific types of difficult and poorly paid employment due to their caste status. Dalits are most likely to be the most

marginalised and invisible workers even in international supply chains such as tea and garments. These jobs often violate basic business and human rights principles.

3. **Access to Justice**: Crimes and abuses against Dalits frequently go unpunished. Law enforcement agencies often ignore cases of violence if the victim is a Dalit. Dalit women, in particular, are vulnerable to violence, with cases of rape or sexual assault often failing to reach courtrooms due to police negligence or threats by the perpetrators.

Recommendations

1. **Data Collection**: The government must undertake comprehensive data collection initiatives to provide clear disaggregated data on the Dalit population. This will help in designing targeted policies and interventions.

2. **Legal Measures**: Strengthen the legal framework to protect Dalits, particularly Dalit women, from all forms of violence and discrimination. Ensure that law enforcement agencies treat all cases of violence equally, irrespective of the victim's caste or religious affiliation.

3. **Education and Employment**: Improve access to quality education and create employment opportunities for Dalits outside the traditional 'unclean' jobs. Special attention should be given to Dalit women to enable them to break out of the cycle of poverty and discrimination.

4. **Political Representation**: Encourage and facilitate the political representation of Dalits through special measures such as affirmative action, at all levels of government to ensure their voices are heard and their needs are addressed.

5. **Public Awareness**: Implement public awareness campaigns to educate the wider population about caste discrimination and the plight of Dalits, and promote social cohesion and inclusivity.

Conclusion

The Dalit community in Bangladesh is at a significant disadvantage compared to the rest of Bangladeshi society. The Government of Bangladesh must take urgent and targeted action to address specific Dalit development and human rights issues.