



**DALIT SOLIDARITY  
NETWORK UK**  
A world without caste discrimination



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## **REVIEW OF THE YEAR 2014/15**

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## A Word from the Director

### Dear Friends and Supporters of Dalit Solidarity Network UK

**Caste discrimination** remains one of the biggest human rights abuses existing today, which involves the abhorrent practice of untouchability and descent-based social and economic inequality. Caste discrimination still goes unchallenged and often unacknowledged. But the tireless work of activists and supporters continues to raise awareness of this issue.

We are a unique organisation in the UK, aiming to change values and practices through policy changes worldwide. We are making a difference and we add our voice to a growing global human rights movement campaigning for change on caste based discrimination.

There have been many successes this year that you can read about in this Review, but we also have ongoing challenges – not least one of political will here in the UK. With the help of many thousands of activists and ordinary people throughout the UK, we achieved something remarkable in 2013.

However ongoing delays and stalling tactics of the Government has meant the legislation we so welcomed in 2013 has yet to be implemented.

As always I would also like to take this opportunity to thank Anti-Slavery International, without whose generous support DSN-UK would struggle to survive.

And this year I am delighted to welcome Danni Kleinaityte to the DSN-UK fold. As the new part time Administrator, Danni has already played a key role in the AGM and the drafting of this Review.

And a personal thank you to Helen Spooner for all the help and support over the summer of 2015 in the lead up to the successful event hosted by SOAS and the South Asia Institute 'Caste out of the Shadows'

I will continue to update you on our progress – both our successes and challenges. **We do hope you will be able to continue to support us in the years to come as we fight for a caste free world.**



*Nana Varnas*

## Summary

Dalit Solidarity Network (DSN-UK) began in 1998 and now brings together organisations and individuals in the UK, who are concerned with caste-based discrimination and aims to link grassroots priorities with international mechanisms and institutions to make an effective contribution to the liberation of those affected by caste discrimination.

DSN-UK registered as a charity in 2004 and since then has continued to grow as an effective campaigning and advocacy organisation working on caste discrimination in the UK. Our membership includes concerned individuals, development agencies, trade unions, journalists and academics.

We are working towards equality and social justice for Dalits both in the UK and worldwide in other caste affected countries. We are a small pioneering headquarters organisation in the UK, working jointly with other likeminded groups, building strategic alliances to maximise advocacy opportunities and build a stronger network of organisations. Our aims are to change values and practices through policy changes worldwide. We raise awareness and support Dalit demands for justice – through an effective advocacy programme.

### Key Activities Include:

- Advocacy, advice and analysis to the UK Parliament and others on discrimination the grounds of caste;
- Providing technical advice and analysis to the corporate sector in the UK and internationally on addressing caste-based discrimination and other labour rights abuses;
- Promoting international advocacy with the International Dalit Solidarity Network;
- Raising Awareness of all aspects of discrimination, exclusion and abuse of human rights on the grounds of caste-based discrimination.

## 1. Campaigns and Advocacy

### 1.1 Lobbying the UK Government

Despite the euphoria of 2013 when the Government surprisingly introduced their own amendment to the Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Bill (now Act) making it a duty to activate Clause 9 (5)(a) of Equality Act, and making 'caste an aspect of race', we are now deeply disappointed to still be waiting for the implementation of the legislation.

In July 2013 the Government introduced a timetable which set out a series of steps including a public consultation leading to the commencement of caste legislation in the summer 2015. While an initial stage of the research was conducted by the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC), that included a socio-legal review and a stakeholders consultation (published in February 2014: <http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/commission-publishes-new-caste-research>), the next scheduled stage of the process, to issue a formal public consultation in spring 2014, was never conducted, resulting in the reforms being made to the bill stagnant.

The EHRC's withdrawal from its second phase of research to establish a baseline data into the extent of caste discrimination was due to concerns that "people could find [collecting data on caste]

intrusive and it could have a detrimental effect on good relations in affected communities if not conducted with appropriate sensitivity”.

Moreover, in responses to several Parliamentary Questions about the ongoing delays to implementation of the caste discrimination legislation during the last session, Government stated that it awaited the outcome of the ruling by the Appeal Judge on a Caste legislation related to the Employment Tribunal – *Tirkey v. Chandok*.

In this case, the Claimant was a woman whose caste was described as Adivasi (or Scheduled Tribe) and who claimed that her employers had treated her badly and in a demeaning manner, in part, because of her caste. The employer sought to strike out the part of her claim related to discrimination by reason of her caste on the basis that caste is not a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010. In the first instance, the Employment Tribunal rejected this strike out application. The Employment Appeal Tribunal (EAT) upheld this decision and dismissed the appeal, allowing the caste discrimination claim to proceed to a full hearing in the Employment Tribunal.

The EAT concluded that depending on the specific circumstances of an individual case, caste-based discrimination could already be unlawful under the existing discrimination law, namely the ‘ethnic origin’ limb of the Equality Act’s 2010 race provision, *but not necessarily so*.

**DSN-UK continues to urge the Government to proceed without further delay and implement the legislation against caste discrimination and ensure protection to hundreds of thousands of its own citizens.**

In July 2014, an **Adjournment Caste Discrimination Debate at Westminster Hall** was called for by Adam Holloway MP (Gravesham) (Con) to address the lack of protective legislation implemented by the UK Government. When asked about why the Government has prolonged the implementation of legislation to protect victims of caste discrimination, Helen Grant MP, – The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Women and Equalities – responded ‘we (the Government) need to assess the feasibility of any further research into caste discrimination’. Jeremy Corbyn and Adam Holloway pointed out that caste discrimination does exist in the UK and on an incredibly large scale.

Jeremy Corbyn said during the debate: *I am one of the trustees of the Dalit Solidarity Network and a member of the all-party group for Dalits, the chair of which is Bishop Harries, a Member of the House of Lords. Together with the director of the Dalit Solidarity Network, Meena Varma, I have been to the United Nations in Geneva to raise issues of Dalit discrimination in India and many other places, but also, clearly, in this country.*



Honorary Chair and new Labour Leader  
Jeremy Corbyn MP

In November 2014, a **debate on caste discrimination and poverty in Modi’s India** was held at the House of Lords and attended by DSN-UK Director, Meena Varma. Meena provided briefs for several of the Peers present, contributing to the debate. At the end of the debate it was highlighted that a ‘longer-term structural change is required’.

In March 2015, Meena Varma spoke at the **Liberal Democrat's conference side event**, organised by the Humanist Secular Lib Dems. The Party's Equalities Motion, and the policy paper that it endorsed at the Autumn Conference, both included a commitment to tackle caste discrimination.

Following this, in April 2015, The Liberal Democrats launched their BAME (Black Asian and Minority Ethnic) manifesto, which also included a pledge to outlaw caste based discrimination. The manifesto seeks to tackle racial discrimination and boost equal opportunities for Britain's BAME communities.

## 1.2 Other Parliamentary lobbying and advocacy

### All Party Parliamentary Group for Dalits (APPG)

In May 2014 Lord Harries and Lord Alton called for the **International Development and Aid meeting** to address the lack of international aid agency engagement in South Asia in addressing the extreme poverty and discrimination faced by Dalits in those countries. It was attended by the Disaster Relief Committee as well as key Christian Aid agencies in the UK, including DfID, the FCO and others. The meeting heard an overview of the key work being undertaken in South Asia by Christian Aid India, who works in partnership with civil society organisations in India, Nepal, Bangladesh and Pakistan.

Later in the year the APPG for Dalits was reconstituted. Under the new rules it was decided that the APPG Chair must be an MP, which resulted in a new structure: Chair: Jeremy Corbyn MP; Co-Chair: Lord Richard Harries; Vice Chairs: Baroness Thornton, Lord Avebury, Lord Cormack; Treasurer: Mark Durkan MP.

### Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO)

DSN-UK and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office continue their dialogue through regular meetings. In February 2015 DSN-UK Director Meena Varma attended the FCO meeting on *Preventing Sexual Violence Initiative* (PSVI). The FCO were due to launch the Initiative in Nepal in March 2015. Meena raised the question of whether the PSVI in Nepal was focusing on Dalit women who were disproportionately the victims of sexual violence.

## 2. Working with the Corporate Sector

### 2.1 The Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI)

DSN-UK is an NGO member of the ETI, a unique and leading alliance of Companies, Trades Unions and International NGOs working together to promote respect for workers' rights around the globe.



**The Tamil Nadu Multi Stakeholder group**, with an ETI team based in Coimbatore, continues to take forward the textile and garment manufacturing and production in Tamil Nadu, India, which has grown exponentially since the 1980s and now exports globally. An estimated 500,000 people work in

the region's textile and garment industry and women workers are estimated to be about 60% of the workforce, mostly in unskilled or semi-skilled jobs. The first phase of the programme was a little slow. There has been some criticism on the lack of local stakeholder engagement and the length of time it has taken to set up and start running, especially compared to the DSN/READ programme partnership.

This has resulted in an updated report from SOMO/India Committee of the Netherlands called *Flawed Fabrics*, now published [http://www.somo.nl/publications-en/Publication\\_4110](http://www.somo.nl/publications-en/Publication_4110)

However, the programme is moving more swiftly in the second phase of its work, having run successful health initiatives. DSN-UK as a member of the Tamil Nadu Multi Stakeholder group continues to provide its expertise on caste discrimination and calls for improvements in the supply chains.

**DSN-UK is a lead NGO in Rajasthan Stone Group** (the Group), which was established in January 2012 and aims to build a sustainable model and framework that can help this sector address core labour rights issues. Priority areas include worker health, safety and welfare, worker-management dialogue, staff retention and formalisation of labour. The Group has been working with various partners, including companies, NGOs, trade unions and local industry players, to better understand the labour conditions in Rajasthan's export sandstone sector. The opening activities concentrate on Health and Safety, and also a good buy in from the local NGOs, including Centre for Dalit Rights and Gravis, both with a clear Dalit focus. We have now identified a real need to raise awareness of international labour rights standards amongst local stakeholders, as a first step towards driving long-lasting change for workers.

**The ETI Norway:** DSN-UK Director Meena Varma was asked by the IDSN and the ETI in Norway to address caste discrimination in the supply chains and make some clear recommendations to the Norwegian ETI company members. Ten different companies, including some of Norway's biggest garment and 'aluminium' retailers in Norway attended the meeting. Meena presented the *Ambedkar Principles* as a first step in raising awareness. The retailers were shocked at the scale of the caste problem in India. We hope to be able to follow up with a joint briefing paper on how to address caste discrimination in companies' supply chains.

## 2.2 DSN-UK and Rights Education and Development (READ) project on Sumangali



In Tamil Nadu, South India, textile and garment products for big brands and retailers are being made by girls and young women from low caste backgrounds under exploitative working conditions. They are recruited under the so-called 'Sumangali Thittam' or 'Marriage Scheme' whereby workers are recruited with the promise that they will receive a considerable amount of money after completion of three to five years of employment. This exploitative scheme is tantamount to bonded labour because employers withhold part of the workers' wages until the end of the 'contract'. Workers are severely restricted in their freedom of movement and privacy. The majority of the workers are Dalit (outcaste) girls younger than 18, from poor families who are lured in with the promises of a decent wage and the lump sum payment upon completion of the contract that may be used for their dowry.

**DSN-UK is delighted to partner with READ** in a programme of work, funded by Textile Recycling for Aid and Development (TRAID), aimed at *Ending the Sumangali Scheme*.



Now in its second year, READ are identifying 5 textile mills to undertake an in-depth study of the working conditions and employment practices. They are working alongside the Child Protection Committee, Trade Unions and District Collector. A Sumangali information film has been screened in over 50 villages and they are now planning to run a rights training programme for the families of vulnerable girls.

In September 2014 the DSN-UK Director attended a **state level legal redress workshop in Chennai**, organised by READ as part of the project. The meeting had several high profile speakers, including the Child specialist of UNICEF and leading Indian advocates and Trade Union leaders.

Reports on the Sumangali scheme, fact finding mission reports, legal remedies, case studies on rehabilitation and posters were all released on the day. Ten victims of camp labour schemes shared their experiences and the family of 2 dead workers were also there. Many representatives of social welfare organizations from various parts of Tamil Nadu participated and we had over 80 participants in total.

READ have completed their baseline of workers survey which is currently being edited which should give us a clearer picture of the girls and women current and ex-employees, age, working conditions and hostel conditions. The Tamil Nadu state government are soon to publish their guidelines for textile mill hostels, however they have not undertaken any kind of consultation with the civil society.

### **2.3 Lobbying the UK Companies**

In December 2014 DSN-UK Director Meena Varma presented the issue of caste discrimination to a number of blue chip organisations at a meeting in London, organised by Kingshill MC. Among the attendees were representatives from GSK, Mars, Whitbread, E.ON, Total, Simmons&Simmons and Santander.

## **3. International Work**

### **3.1 The United Nations Human Rights Council (UN HRC)**

In June 2014 a side-event addressing **violence against women and girls in cast-affected countries** took place at the United Nations in Geneva and explored with United Nations stakeholders how to take comprehensive and urgent action on this issue. Dalit women human rights defenders spoke of the reality on the ground in South Asia and preview a documentary on the Dalit women's fight for justice in India. Dalit women leaders from South Asia, representing castes that traditionally have been marginalized, and other speakers urged concrete support for the victims of caste-based violence in their fight against injustice and the need to strengthen the UN's role.



A keynote speaker was an outgoing the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, a dedicated champion of Dalit rights. She stated: *“I urge governments to fully implement all the recommendations made by international human rights mechanisms, as well as those arising from national processes. Our outrage is not enough. We must take real and focused action to mend our societies’ dramatic failure to support the rights of people of discriminated castes, particularly women and girls.”*



*Former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay and Asha Kowtal, General Secretary, All India Dalit Women's Movement*

The International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN) director Rikke Nöhrind said: *“Women suffering from caste-based violence in one of the world’s most brutal systems of oppression are asking for global solidarity in their struggle. The world that so strongly supported the fight against apartheid must now tackle caste discrimination with the same commitment.”*

Full details of the event and her speech can be found on our website: [www.dsnu.org](http://www.dsnu.org) .

### **3.2 The United Nations Business and Human Rights Forum**

DSN-UK Director Meena Varma was one of the speakers at a side event at the UN at a Business and Human Rights Forum in Geneva in December 2014, to present on the Rajasthan Stone programme. Meena was able to raise the issue of caste discrimination as a key labour and human rights issue that need to be addressed by all companies in their supply chains, especially in India. Meena stressed not only the need for companies to try and implement the ETI’s Base Code, but also to use the *Ambedkar Principles* as a tool to help them achieve greater equality and less discrimination on the basis of caste.

The side event proved to be widely popular on Twitter. Some of the tweets containing DSN-UK included: *“Important work being done by @DSNUK addressing caste discrimination & related exploitation in Indian labour market. #BizHumanRights”*.

### **3.3 The International Dalit Solidarity Network**

DSN-UK Director continues to Chair the International Dalit Solidarity Network’s (IDSN) Executive Group and a Council. Last year the Council approved a new strategy and structure.

It was generally agreed that broader governance was critical and that the EG (or Board) should include more representation from caste-affected countries (CACs), if at all possible. The structure should also allow more organisations from CACs to be members, and for membership opportunities to be widened, with up to 3 new members considered each year. Also, there is to be an ‘Affiliate’ category, which includes organisations actively engaged in the grassroots work in a caste-affected country and subscribing to the values and principles of the IDSN.

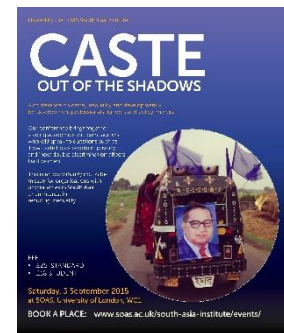
## 4. Raising Awareness

A successful *notice of motion* passed at the Methodist Conference in July 2014 to address caste discrimination as a vast international injustice occurring within the United Kingdom. **Methodist Women in Britain** held an event titled *Caste out* in Wolverhampton last October. Meena Varma presented DSN work in general as well as highlighting the programme of 'forced labour of Dalits in the textile industry'. The event was extremely well attended with some 200 plus attendees in all.

In October 2014 Meena spoke at the **National Interfaith Consultation (NIFCON)** event on Hindu - Christian relations, highlighting the numbers of Christians affected by caste discrimination and segregation in their places of worship in India.

In May 2014 **Federation of Ambedkarite Buddhist Organisations (FABO)** hosted an event at the House of Lords, chaired by Lord Harries and facilitated by the APPG for Dalits. Dr Alpa Shah, Lecturer at LSE attended the FABO event and consequently asked DSN-UK Director Meena Varma to meet a group of her post-doctoral research fellows undertaking further research in India. Meena presented DSN's work in all its guises and heard of their different projects, from Maharashtra to Tirupur.

A steering committee consisting of Christian Aid, DSN-UK, Karuna Trust, Village Services Trust and Anti Slavery International was formed to organise a conference - ***Caste out of the Shadows*** with the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) and the School of South Asian Studies. The conference is to explore the persistence of caste-based discrimination and exclusion, in relation to gender and human rights, and address the role of NGOs in the eradication of caste-based discrimination.



DSN-UK and Christian Aid **joined the Voice of Dalit International at a meeting with British Overseas NGOs for Development (BOND)** to discuss the formation of a Working Group on Discrimination with a focus on caste. The proposal was to hold an exploratory meeting with the Action Team and invite a number of BOND members who either do work on the issue of caste and Dalits or should be.

A successful **Motion at BOND's Annual General Meeting** in November 2014, proposed by *Voice of Dalit International* and seconded by Christian Aid stated:

*"This house recognises that caste and discrimination based on 'work & descent' actively contribute to the structural causes of poverty and inequalities among Dalits and other excluded communities. It calls for Bond members to express solidarity and work towards addressing this problem as appropriate."*

Meena Varma also continues to Chair the Finance and Management Committee of **the Minority Rights Group International**, sits on their Council and serves as the Vice Chair.

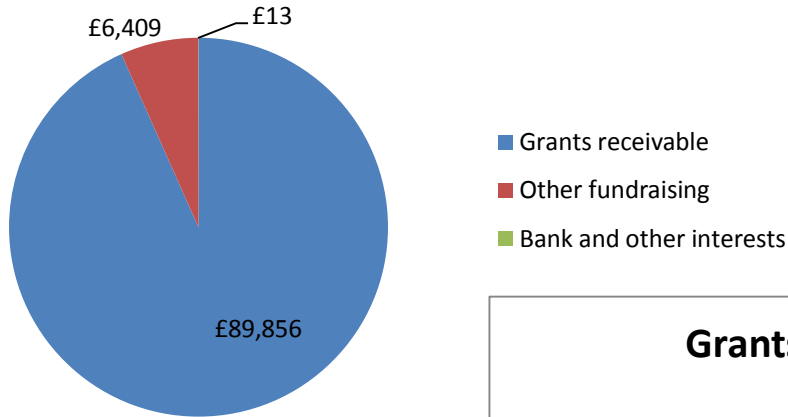
**Twitter followers** of [@DSNUK](https://twitter.com/DSNUK) increased by more than 1000 in a year counting now more than 1,480 (July 2015) 1,643 (October 2015).

## Highlights of the year

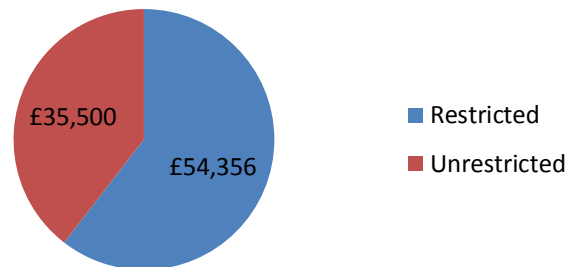
- Liberal Democrats include an implementation of caste legislation in their manifesto pledge
- Successful Motion to address caste discrimination passed at BOND AGM
- READ/DSN successfully hold a state level consultation in Chennai to address forced labour
- IDSN Council passes a new strategy and structure, including a new category of 'Affiliates'
- Lithuanian Human Rights film festival in Vilnius hosts 2 Dalit films
- ETI Board and NGO Caucus. Expert NGO lead for TNMS Advisory Group + Rajasthan Stone
- DSN-UK Director speaks at UN Human Rights Council and UN Business & Human Rights Forum
- Successful 'Notice of Motion' passed at the Methodist Conference in July 2014
- Steering Committee formed for *Caste out of the Shadows* event
- DSN Director speaks at LibDem Conference in Liverpool
- Labour publishes a policy position confirming its support for the caste discrimination legislation
- The European External Action Service confirm support for Dalits at a meeting in Brussels
- The APPG for Dalits continued to ask Parliamentary Questions and call for debates on the issue of caste discrimination both in the UK and in South Asia
- The APPG for Dalits is successfully reconstituted following the General Election
- @DSNUK Twitter followers treble in 1 year

## Accounts at a Glance

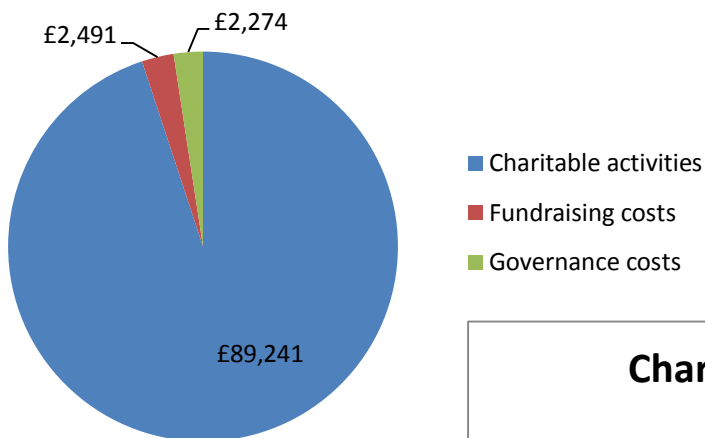
### Income 2014/15



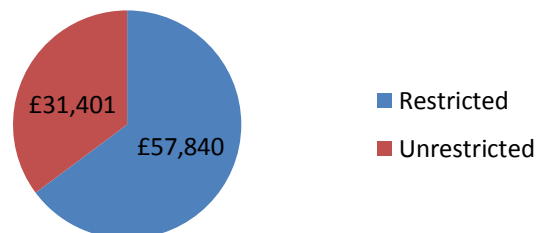
### Grants receivable



### Expenditure



### Charitable activities



## Thank you

Anti Slavery International  
CasteWatch UK  
Ethical Trading Initiative  
Evan Cornish Foundation  
Farthing Trust  
Institute of Commonwealth Studies  
International Dalit Solidarity Network  
Karuna Trust  
Minority Rights Group International  
Notting Hill Methodist Church  
School of African and Oriental Studies  
Silbury Trust  
St Clare and St Francis Trust  
Three Oaks Trust  
TRAID  
Village Services Trust  
WaterAid  
Wyndham Trust

*And a special thanks to all the members and supporters of the Network who give up their time to attend meetings, rallies and other events.*