

The ILO and Manual Scavengers in India: Paving the long way towards the elimination of discrimination based on social origin

For millions of people, contemporary India has become a land of opportunities, and the largest democracy in the world has experienced a remarkable economic growth during the last decade. Yet, as India accelerates its pace towards development, many are left behind due to long standing caste-based discrimination in employment. ILO Online reports from Rajasthan, India.

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FTR/Dalits

New Delhi, India (ILO Online) - Born in the colourful state of Rajasthan as a Dalit, the lowest of the castes in the Hindu caste hierarchy, Anita had few employment options other than what her parents had done and what her community expected her to do – manual scavenging.

This occupation consists in the removal of human excreta by hand in public streets, septic tanks or closed gutters and sewage. It is characterized by the dramatically unhealthy and unsafe working conditions, which continue to exacerbate the practice of untouchability and marginalization of Dalits.

In this setting, Anita began to work in different households, physically cleaning their dry latrines. The usual payment for her efforts was a single roti, a piece of Indian flatbread. Even after her marriage she was forced to continue with her job as her husband turned out to be heavily dependant on alcohol and unable to work.

In contemporary India, with its remarkable growth rate and corresponding investment and employment opportunities, some may find it surprising that heinous occupations like manual scavenging still persist.

The recent ILO Global Report on Discrimination, [Equality at work: The continuing challenge - Global Report under the follow-up to the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work](#), explains this with the continuation of caste-based discrimination in South Asia as a major contributing factor. The chances of a qualified applicant with a Dalit name to be invited for a job interview are only two-thirds that of a high-caste Hindu applicant. In practice, this means that many Dalits must hide their status before being offered employment.

Another explanation highlighted in the Global Report is the persistence of discrimination based on multiple grounds. Studies show that the victims of this complex form of discrimination register the highest levels of unemployment and are concentrated in the most poorly remunerated and precarious forms of employment.

Discrimination on both grounds of sex and social origin continue to trap successive generations of Dalit women like Anita in traditionally caste-based assigned occupations. Manual scavenging is one of those occupations mostly held by women. According to government estimates for 2005, 95 per cent of a total of 700,000 manual scavengers were women.

A vicious cycle of poverty and social immobility

Undermined physical capacity and the feeling of vulnerability and hopelessness associated with this form of discrimination have triggered a vicious cycle of pauperisation, low educational attainment, and social immobility for manual scavengers and their families.

Faced with this challenge, the Government of India has adopted an impressive medley of legislation and policies aimed at respecting, promoting and realizing the fundamental right of non-discrimination. Additionally, specialized organizations with a mandate on issues of equality have been active in working towards the elimination of discrimination against manual scavengers, with an ambitious deadline set by the end of 2012.

At the workers' level, the Safai Karmachi Andolan (SKA) trade union has vigorously promoted the eradication of manual scavenging through networking, policy advice, destruction of dry latrines, rehabilitation of "liberated" scavengers, campaigns denouncing violence against Dalit women, and educational advocacy.

While this legal, policy and institutional framework has contributed considerably to the elimination of manual scavenging in many states, the overall picture is one of mixed results. Until there is stricter enforcement of the relevant legislation, and fuller implementation of policies which promote equal opportunities of Dalits, it is likely that stories like Anita's will persist.

ILO project to change the life of Dalits

With this in mind, the ILO is working with the Government and social partners in India to address the discrimination of Dalits in five selected states, including Anita's home state of Rajasthan.

The main objective of the project is to support the government's efforts to improve the effectiveness of legislation and policies which pertain to the issue of manual scavenging, but also to include the scavenging community itself in that process.

According to Coen Kompier, an ILO specialist in labour standards working for the ILO office in New Delhi, "rehabilitation of manual scavengers depends on building the confidence of that community, but also on breaking definitively the caste stigma manual scavengers suffer from. Through our project activities we are therefore exploring ways to make rehabilitation effective and genuine, giving scavengers a true voice in choosing their profession or occupation. Women like Anita can serve as an example for Dalit communities. "

Anita has a dream for her children: she wants them to go to school and become doctors "so that they could give free treatment to the women in the scavenging community who suffer from disease". Meanwhile, she may have taken the first step to make her dream come true. She has left her job as a manual scavenger and, although she had to hide her status as a rehabilitated scavenger from her employer, she found alternative employment as a domestic worker.

"Initiatives like the ILO project on manual scavenging will help to pave the long way towards the elimination of discrimination based on social origin. This form of discrimination is probably one of the most difficult to tackle. Even in open societies, where social mobility is common, a number of phenomena continue to impede complete equality of opportunity for various social categories", concludes Lisa Wong, Senior Declaration Officer in the ILO's Programme to Promote the Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work.