



**International
Commission for
Dalit Rights**



Establishing Justice, Dignity, Equality and Humanity
**1st Global Conference
on Defending Dalit Rights**
March 19-21, 2015
Trinity Washington University
Washington, D.C.
Presented by the Global Conference Organizing Committee

Contact: Mikuak Rai, Global Conference Mgr.

Tel: (202) 276-3099

Email: gc.manager@icdrintl.org

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Historic Dalit Conference Endorses Global Dalit Rights Declaration and Establishes Greater Solidarity With African American Leaders and Activists

Washington, D.C. (March 24, 2015) - The International Commission for Dalit Rights (ICDR) and the Global Conference Organizing Committee convened the 1st Global Conference on Defending Dalit Rights this past week at Trinity Washington University in Washington, D.C. Dozens of Dalit advocates and allies, from India, Nepal, Bangladesh, the UK, Norway, Canada, and throughout the U.S. gathered together to develop a strategic framework designed to mitigate and bring an end to Caste-based discrimination (CDB), affecting an estimated 280 million individuals today. Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton and Dr. Cornel West participated as honored guests. Both fervently expressed their commitment and solidarity with the Dalit cause.

The term **Dalit** (meaning “oppressed, broken”) is a designation for a group of people traditionally regarded as ‘**untouchable**’ in the Indian caste system (also known as “Scheduled Castes” and “Scheduled Tribes”), now extending throughout South Asia (India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh) and the diaspora. The Dalit plight is a modern humanitarian crisis, often referred to as a ‘hidden apartheid’, with victims forced into slave and bonded labor, denied access to communal water sources, and refused service at public establishments solely on the basis of their caste or descent. Such discrimination is especially harsh for women and children born within low-caste communities, resulting in rape and murder, with countless numbers forced into sex trafficking.

The conference began on Thursday, March 19 with two thematic panel sessions. The first looked at existing international mechanisms and obligations to end CBD, and the second examined best practices and challenges to empowering Dalit civil society. The official inaugural ceremony occurred that afternoon, opening with a traditional Dalit parai drumming performance by the Dalit Arts and Culture Collective, attending from India, followed by a Native American welcoming prayer and song by Dawn Wolf, Awes Days, and Trinity professor Dr. Daryl Thorne.

Following the initial panels, ICDR President DB Sagar Bishwakarma presented Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton (D-DC) with a ceremonial scarf to honor her commitment and continued efforts to raise awareness among Americans about the Dalit plight. Just one day prior, on March 18, Norton introduced HR 158, a new bill calling on Congress to condemn discrimination against Dalit people, to which she said, “Untouchability is uniquely inhumane, but the history of nascent discrimination in our own country gives the United States a special role in helping the world end Dalit untouchability.” Also receiving honors during the ceremony were Dalit American artist Thenmozhi Soundararajan and Dalit activist Asha Kowtal, who together led the Dalit Mahila Swabhiman Yatra, a month-long pilgrimage throughout India to urge “communities to create conditions for change at the local level and strengthen Dalit women leadership,” and Nepalese leader Durga Sob, founder of the Feminist Dalit Organization (FEDO).

The second day of the conference consisted of three thematic sessions, the first discussing legislative approaches to ending CBD; the second presenting the Caste Freedom Index (CFI), an advocacy measurement framework; and the third focusing on the power of Dalit women, gender equality, and the increase of woman activist leaders emerging to educate, empower, and organize women in communities most affected by caste-based discrimination.

After two days of presenting on the five themes, the Global Conference Organizing Committee (GCOC) leadership put forth the “Global Dalit Rights Declaration,” a 30-point articulation of the self-determined perspective Dalits hold for themselves, and that they are advancing to be recognized by the UN, and globally, by 2020. During a late afternoon session, the group came to consensus and endorsed the draft document proposed by the GCOC, marking



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the first time Dalit leaders from around the world are collaboratively endeavoring to assert, ensure, and realize their human rights by the year 2020, along with the solidarity and support from a myriad of organizations and key voices of the Western world.

One such proponent is scholar and activist Dr. Cornel West, a chief guest of the conference, who arrived on Friday evening to observe the consensus process for the Dalit Rights Declaration. On Saturday, March 21, West joined conference attendees and other supporters for the “Human Chain Demonstration for Dalit Rights & Dignity,” a 3-hour demonstration and rally in front of the White House. Dr. West delivered a passionate and inspirational rallying cry declaring his solidarity with Dalits in the “common struggle” shared with African Americans and the #blacklivesmatter movement. He highlighted, to great response from demonstrators, the leadership and example of renowned Dalit scholar and legislator, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the ‘architect’ of India’s Constitution, and drew parallels between the Dalit Rights struggle and the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. March 21 is also observed as the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination.

Also participating in the March 21 rally were DC-based singer/songwriter Courtney Dowe, who shared a song whose refrain rang out, “Dalit rights are human rights!,” and author and global peace walker Audri Scott Williams, who had just attended the 50th Anniversary of the Selma-Montgomery March, commemorating Bloody Sunday and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Judge Rohulamin Quander, of the African American Legacy Families, a group who presented “The Declaration of Empathy” on behalf of Dalits, at the U.S. Capitol in January 2014, also offered deeply inspired remarks, recommitting the legacy families to supporting the Dalit cause.

During the rally, conference attendees announced their endorsement of the “Global Dalit Rights Declaration” (the updated version will be available online at ICDR’s website, [www.http://www.ICDRINTL.org](http://www.ICDRINTL.org), in the coming weeks), advocated the passing of a binding resolution by the U.S. Congress officially condemning Caste-based discrimination (based upon Congresswoman Norton’s draft), and urged member nations of the United Nations (UN) to endorse the UN “Draft Principles and Guidelines for the Effective Elimination of Discrimination Based on Work and Descent”, established by the UN Human Rights Council (A/HRC/11/CRP.3). The conference, itself, welcomed participants from notable NGOs and policy bodies including the U.S. State Department, UN, Human Rights Watch, and The World Bank, as well as several India, Nepal, and Bangladesh-based Dalit Rights organizations and offices.

Also introduced during the Global Conference was the *Dalit Civil Society Network (DCSN)*, an online resource, based around the 5 thematic areas examined during the conference, and designed to facilitate communication and connections between Dalit advocates and allies worldwide; and, the *Student FRDM (Friends of the Dalit Movement) Initiative*, an effort to engage and leverage students’ and faculty members’ participation at colleges and universities in the West in the growing efforts to bring the Dalit cause to the center stage of the world’s awareness for the purpose of effectively dismantling the attitudes and institutions that still allow the practice of ‘untouchability’ to go virtually unchecked in the contemporary world.

The 1st Global Conference on Defending Dalit Rights was the vision of the ICDR, a Washington, D.C.-based 501(c)(3) non-profit international advocacy organization dedicated to promoting the equality, justice, and rights of the world’s most marginalized groups by providing technical assistance, networking, and collaborating with local civil society, NGOs, and government agencies in caste-affected countries. The Global Conference follows the 1st Global March Against Caste-based Discrimination”, led by ICDR on June 21, 2014. For more information on the ICDR and the GCOC, please visit <http://www.ICDRINTL.org>.

The media is encouraged to bring greater exposure to this important, emerging human rights story. Please contact ICDR President DB Sagar via email at dsagar@icdrintl.org, or Mikuak Rai, Global Conference Manager and Media Coordinator for ICDR, for more information at (202) 276-3099 and by emailing gc.manager@icdrintl.org.

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