

Full Position Paper to the High-Level Political Forum 2025 by the Stakeholder Group of Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent (SG-CDWD)

This summary paper for the High-Level Political Forum 2025 provides a global overview of Descent-based Communities in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals and the 2030 Agenda. It is designed as a practical guide and tool for civil society, UN agencies, governments, and other stakeholders.

This summary analysis adopts an intersectional lens, prioritizing the experiences of women and girls of Descent Communities, thus focusing on Sustainable Development Goal 5 (Gender Equality). It underscores how progress on SDG 5 is inextricably linked to advancements in three additional goals under review in 2025 including: SDG 3 (Health & Well-being), SDG 8 (Decent Work & Economic Growth) and SDG 17 (Global Partnerships).

Grounded in findings from [17 national reports across 15 countries conducted by the Global Forum of Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent \(GFoD\) and its Rights Experts](#), this analysis reveals how systemic oppression shapes outcomes across all goals and makes specific recommendations in two dedicated sections of the report.

Descent Communities

Descent Communities, also referred to as Descent Peoples, are groups facing systemic Discrimination based on Work and Descent (DWD), which is a form of exclusion rooted in inherited social status tied to caste, lineage, ancestral occupation, or social origin. This discrimination manifests through distinctions, restrictions, or social preferences that marginalize communities across generations. Globally, these groups include, but are not limited to, Africa's Osu, Haratine, Komo, and Jongo; Europe's Roma and diaspora groups; Latin America's Quilombola and Palenque (descendants of formerly enslaved Africans); and Asia's Dalit and Burakumin. These communities endure caste-like hierarchies that bind them to stigmatized professions, such as manual scavenging, waste-picking, or ritualized roles deemed "impure," perpetuating cycles of poverty, social exclusion, and restricted access to education, healthcare, and justice. Their marginalization is uniquely systemic, transcending geography and culture, as inherited status entrenches barriers to economic mobility, political representation, and dignity. From the Dalit communities fighting caste apartheid in South Asia to the Haratine confronting slavery-linked hierarchies in Mauritania, Descent Peoples represent some of the world's most invisibilized populations, united by a shared struggle against dehumanizing structures that conflate identity with inequality.

At its core, Descent Communities are systematically excluded from basic rights and opportunities because of the social origin, often described as "caste" they were born into. However, that this isn't just some historical leftover, right now, across dozens of countries, over 270 million people are affected by this kind of exclusion, as a manifestation of continued human rights violations.

Descent Communities enjoy increased global recognition¹, most recently through a landmark development in November 2024, [Resolution 619](#) by the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR), affirms the urgent need for African-led solutions to address caste-based and analogous forms of discrimination through a continental study and other landmark proposals. This resolution offers yet another critical entry point for coordinated action and global recognition in line with SDG 17 and the implementation of the Agenda 2030.

National country reports extracts:

The Bulgarian report provides a detailed analysis of the systemic barriers faced by Romani women and girls in accessing employment. It highlights a persistent cycle of exclusion: limited access to quality education often forces many into informal and precarious work, which subsequently denies them eligibility for unemployment benefits or opportunities to acquire the qualifications needed for more secure and dignified employment.

Compounding the issue, many vocational training programs impose minimum education requirements for enrollment, even when the skills needed for the job itself do not necessitate such qualifications. This creates a bureaucratic paradox: individuals are excluded from training opportunities due to a lack of education they were systematically denied, yet without that training, they remain trapped in low-paying or informal work.

In Hungary, another report highlighted shocking statistics on menstrual poverty among Roma women. One study found that 30% of Roma women had experienced menstrual poverty. That is a staggering number, particularly in the context of a high-income, developed European country.

The inability to afford menstrual products often forces individuals to resort to using paper towels, rags, or cotton wool—methods that are not only inadequate but can pose serious health risks. This issue goes beyond affordability; it reflects broader systemic neglect of menstrual health and dignity. There's a deep sense of shame and stigma. One woman, Judit, recounted how she would ask for money under the pretense of buying cigarettes, simply to discreetly purchase tampons. She did not feel comfortable seeking support directly for her menstrual needs. Her story underscores the quiet indignities and deeply personal struggles that many women face in silence, reflecting the stigma and shame still associated with menstrual poverty.

It's not just about lacking menstrual products. Many of these women also have limited access to public restrooms, turning a natural bodily function into a barrier that affects health, dignity, mobility, and freedom. It's an everyday challenge that reinforces their exclusion from public life.

Shifting the focus to Pakistan, the picture painted by our report from Pakistan is even more troubling when viewed through the lens of structural discrimination. It documented

¹ Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination's (CERD) [General Recommendation 29 states](#); Eide, Asbjørn & Yokota, Yozo. *Discrimination based on work and descent: expanded working paper*. UN Document E/CN.4/Sub.2/2003/24. [UN Digital Library](#); Yokota, Yozo & Chung, Chin-Sung. *Final report of Yozo Yokota and Chin-Sung Chung, Special Rapporteurs on the Topic of Discrimination Based on Work and Descent*. UN Document A/HRC/11/CRP.3. [UN Digital Library](#); United Nations Network on Racial Discrimination and Protection of Minorities. (2017). *Guidance tool on descent-based discrimination: Key challenges and strategic approaches to combat caste-based and analogous forms of discrimination*. United Nations. Retrieved from <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/1301344>

harrowing patterns of systemic violence and coercion, particularly against marginalized girls and women from communities historically stigmatized by caste, descent, or occupation. An estimated 1,000 cases of forced conversions and marriages occur annually—a figure that is almost certainly an undercount due to widespread underreporting and the culture of silence surrounding such acts. Highlighting this grave issue, in its 2016 Concluding Observations on Pakistan, the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination expressed its deep concerns about ‘the de facto existence of the Scheduled Castes (Dalits) and the continuing discrimination against them, particularly in employment and education’ as well as ‘abduction of Dalit women and girls for the purpose of forced conversion and forced marriage.’²

In the second UPR Cycle of Pakistan, Austria had recommended Pakistan to take measures to “end rape, sexual exploitation and forced conversions of scheduled caste girls” - which was accepted, but no legislation on the issue of forced conversions was passed.³ However, this also raises a critical question: Can legal reform alone dismantle the structures that enable such violations? Or must we also confront and transform the underlying social and cultural norms that perpetuate inequality based on caste and descent?

The report also highlighted the case of **Saba Bucha**, a Christian woman who was arrested for sharing her beliefs. Her experience demonstrates how punitive laws—such as blasphemy provisions—can be weaponized to silence voices from historically oppressed communities. Yet what resonates most is Saba’s resilience. Her words—that she was willing to “pay the price” for standing by her truth—speak to the extraordinary strength of those who continue to resist systemic oppression every day.

Her faith is both deeply inspiring and profoundly heartbreaking. It forces us to ask: what kind of strength does it take for someone to risk so much simply to express their beliefs? Her story underscores the urgent need for both legal and social reforms to protect religious minorities. The freedom to practice one’s faith without fear of persecution should be a fundamental right, yet for many, it remains an aspiration rather than a reality.

The Pakistan report brought this into sharp focus, not only highlighting religious discrimination but also the severe economic challenges faced by Descent Communities, particularly women. It drew attention to the 6% employment quota for minorities, a policy that exists in theory but is often poorly implemented in practice. As a result, Scheduled Caste women are routinely excluded from jobs and decision-making roles. It’s a classic case of policy without enforcement, recognition without action.

One story that stood out was that of Tesla May, a 50-year-old sanitation worker who has spent 25 years in a job that is essential yet invisible. She supports a family of 12 but still lacks basic protections or benefits. Her words about being forced to compromise her dignity and well-being are a powerful indictment of the systemic exploitation women from caste-oppressed background endure. Thousands of others are engaged in essential work under exploitative conditions, denied the rights and dignity they deserve.

This raises a critical question: what will it take for societies to truly value these contributions? It’s a question that extends far beyond Pakistan.

² Concluding observations on the combined twenty-first and twenty-third periodic reports of Pakistan, October 2016, page 6, para 31 & 32.

http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CERD%2fC%2fPAK%2fCO%2f21-23&Lang=en

³UPR Info. 2017. *NGO Submission Matrix: Pakistan – 3rd Cycle*.

https://upr-info.org/sites/default/files/documents/2017-02/upr_ngo_submission_matrix_pakistan_3cycle_en.pdf.

Our India report echoed many of these themes. One statistic was especially jarring, a 45% increase in reported cases of rape of Dalit women between 2015 and 2020. It's a horrifying trend that reflects a broader culture of impunity and deeply entrenched discrimination. The report also documented incidents of wedding processions being disrupted and families threatened for breaking caste-based taboos. Such events are not just isolated acts of hostility, they're systemic reminders of social exclusion, of being denied even the basic right to celebrate life.

There are also reported incidents of trafficking and bonded labour. One such case of Rukmini, a young girl forced into prostitution at 14, and Kavita, trapped in bonded labour, represent the brutal reality of many Dalit women. Their poverty and lack of social protection make them easy targets for exploitation. The continued existence of the Devadasi system, in which young girls from Dalit communities are "dedicated" to temples and subjected to sexual exploitation, is a glaring human rights violation. Despite legal efforts to ban the practice, it persists in some regions, hidden in plain sight.

What will it take to finally dismantle these cycles of abuse? The answer lies in confronting deeply rooted power structures and addressing the social and economic inequalities that sustain them.

And yet, amidst these injustices, stories of resistance and resilience shine through. Consider the women of the Umore community in Nigeria, who are forming savings cooperatives and supporting one another's small businesses. Or Saba Buddha in Pakistan, who remains steadfast in her beliefs despite facing persecution. Or Ruth Manorama in India, whose life's work has been dedicated to dismantling caste hierarchies and empowering Dalit women.

These women are not waiting to be rescued, they are building solutions. Their strength and courage remind us of the power of individual action to spark broader transformation.

National policy recommendations:

1. In Bulgaria there's a push for more flexible vocational training that values practical skills, even without formal education. This could be a lifeline for Romani women stuck in the informal economy, offering real pathways out of poverty.
2. In Hungary, efforts are underway to combat menstrual poverty through free or subsidized products for low-income women and girls. It's a simple solution with profound implications, not just for health, but for dignity and equality. Education and awareness must accompany these efforts to break the stigma around menstruation.
3. In Pakistan, the call is clear: enforce laws against forced conversions and child marriages, and reform blasphemy laws to prevent them from being weaponized against minorities. Legal protections must be paired with economic empowerment initiatives to help women from Descent Communities gain access to education, training, and financial resources. It's about giving them the tools to participate fully in society.
4. India's report emphasized a similar point: policies only matter if they're implemented effectively. Gaps in execution are leaving the most vulnerable behind. There were strong recommendations to strengthen the justice system, improved police training, trauma-informed legal processes, and dedicated support for survivors of violence.
5. In North Macedonia, recommendations included expanding access to family planning services for Roma women, particularly in rural areas. This could significantly reduce

maternal and infant mortality while unlocking new economic opportunities. The report also called for reforms to end statelessness, ensuring every child born in the country has a right to citizenship. Recognizing and investing in underserved Roma communities, not just aiding them, but enabling them to thrive, was another major focus.

6. The Nigeria report makes a compelling case for formally acknowledging the Osu caste system and taking decisive action against the discrimination it fuels. Recognition is the first step, there can be no justice without truth. Education, awareness campaigns, and support for economic and healthcare access were all cited as necessary to uplift Osu women and girls.
7. Finally, in Mauritania, the report calls for a comprehensive law on gender-based violence, one that would define it clearly as a crime and ensure survivors receive real legal protection. This would mark a huge cultural shift in a society where domestic violence is often viewed as a private matter. Public awareness campaigns were also recommended to challenge the social norms that perpetuate violence.
8. Another urgent issue was the inclusion of the Haratine community. The report called for affirmative action policies to ensure their participation in education, employment, and political life, an essential step in correcting generations of structural exclusion.
9. Fair participation in society, sounds simple, right? But for many communities, especially women from Descent Communities, that's still not the reality. Economic empowerment programs are crucial here. Giving women access to land, credit, and training isn't just development jargon, it's how we break cycles of poverty and build a more equitable future.
10. The Colombia report offered some fascinating recommendations, particularly for *Palenque* women working in informal markets. It suggested providing legal protections, access to financial resources, and better market opportunities. It's about acknowledging their contributions to the economy, not just framing them as vulnerable populations.
11. They also addressed the systemic discrimination girls face in schools. Ensuring their safety and well-being is critical. Every child deserves to feel valued and respected in their learning environment.
12. And then there was a strong push for targeted social programs, financial aid, healthcare, tailored to the specific *needs*. It's not a one-size-fits-all approach. It's about recognising the unique challenges different communities face.
13. The Cameroon report called for the legal recognition of land rights for Descent Communities, protecting ancestral territories from encroachment. That's vital. These lands aren't just property, they're the backbone of cultural identity and survival. Losing that land means losing so much more than just a home. They also emphasised the need to invest in education and healthcare for *Pygmy* and *Mamboro* women and girls. Access to these basic resources is key to empowerment and opportunity. The report further highlighted the need to end early marriage and ensure that girls have the right to choose when and whom to marry. And let's not forget the discrimination *Maura* women face in markets, they deserve equal opportunities to succeed, regardless of their background.

Making these recommendations a reality takes sustained effort. It requires political will, cross-sector collaboration, and a genuine commitment to justice. It won't happen overnight, but that doesn't make it impossible.

Descent Communities and their experience of work and descent-based discrimination is a global issue. Millions of lives are affected by our willingness, or unwillingness, to challenge these systems. We have a shared responsibility to build a world where everyone is treated with dignity and respect. Caste identities are no longer confined to geographic regions. Dalit communities in the diaspora navigate caste in entirely new contexts. They may not face the same overt discrimination, but the social stigma often persists, just in different forms.

Intersections of caste with other identities, including religion, class, gender, and sexuality.

Even when Dalits, Roma, Haratin or Buraku achieve economic success, their perceived social standing in society can still shadow their lives. Social stigma doesn't always vanish with financial security. And for LGBTQ+ individuals from **Descent Communities**, the layers of marginalisation multiply, caste, gender identity, sexual orientation. These intersections need increased attention.

Privilege is often often unexamined: Many from dominant caste backgrounds may not actively discriminate, but still benefit from unearned advantages: better schools, better jobs, better networks. Dismantling casteism also means recognising those privileges and working to redistribute opportunity more fairly.

Global Policy Recommendations:

While caste discrimination is often framed as a “local” issue confined to villages or specific regions, this obscures the *global systemic realities* that sustain it. With an estimated 270 million individuals affected worldwide, a population larger than most nations, DWD is not an isolated struggle but a transnational crisis. It thrives within interconnected systems of power, economics, and culture that transcend borders. To dismantle these structures, we must shift from viewing DWD as a relic of the past to confronting it as a *global injustice* requiring systemic transformation.

Recommendations to States of the four pillars of systemic transformation

1. Legal and Justice Reforms

Implementing and further strengthening anti-discrimination laws and ensuring access to justice for survivors must be prioritized *globally*. Legal frameworks must explicitly recognize caste-based violence and exclusion as human rights violations, whether in national legislation or international mechanisms like the UN Human Rights Council. Survivors, often silenced by stigma and institutional apathy, need robust protections, including transnational legal aid networks and accountability for states that fail to act.

2. Educational Revolution

Education systems worldwide must teach the history of caste apartheid and its modern-day manifestations. This includes integrating caste studies into global curricula, training educators to address caste-based bullying, and fostering critical dialogue about systemic inequality. Education should empower youth to dismantle hierarchies, not replicate them.

3. **Economic Justice and Equality**

Economic liberation requires more than charity, it demands *structural redistribution*. Affirmative action policies, access to low-interest credit for marginalized entrepreneurs, and vocational training programs tailored to caste-affected communities are essential. Global financial institutions must condition aid and investment on equitable economic policies, rejecting neoliberal models that deepen caste-based labor exploitation.

Recognizing structural inequalities as drivers of disparities within and between countries is essential, including those based on descent, and social hierarchies—as systemic barriers to human rights and development. These forms of discrimination entrench poverty and exclusion. Addressing this and must be central to all development financing strategies. National governments should adopt human rights-based approaches to SDG financing, ensuring the equitable allocation of resources and prioritizing those most marginalized. Collecting disaggregated data by gender, age, caste, descent, ethnicity, and other factors is key to evidence-based budgeting and ensuring resources effectively reach excluded communities.

4. **AI & the Future of Work: Systemic Risks & Solutions**

Automated language models and advanced AI systems will redefine work, but their unchecked adoption risks entrenching inequality and exclusion. Three urgent trends demand action:

The Digital Divide as an Inequality Accelerator: Without equitable access to technology, education, and infrastructure, AI will widen gaps between tech-privileged and marginalized communities. **Recommendation:** Universal broadband access, subsidized AI-literacy programs, and public-private partnerships to democratize tools for low-income workers.

Bias and Stereotypes: AI trained on biased datasets perpetuates stigma (e.g., in HR screening, policing, or credit scoring), institutionalizing discrimination. **Recommendation:** Mandatory bias audits, transparency in training data, and regulatory frameworks to ban AI-driven exclusionary policies. Diversify AI development teams to center marginalized voices.

Exclusion from Co-Creation & Opportunity: Narrow talent pools (e.g., homogenous tech sectors) limit AI's problem-solving potential and exclude communities from shaping systems that affect them. **Recommendation:** Fund grassroots AI co-creation hubs, enforce inclusive hiring in tech, and prioritize “participatory design” models where impacted communities contribute to the system to ensure inclusive and inclusive community representation in AI models.

5. **A Cultural Shift**

Caste hierarchies persist because they are normalized in cultural practices, media narratives, and everyday interactions. Challenging these demands amplifying voices from oppressed castes in art, media, and public discourse. Families, religious institutions, and corporations must confront internalized casteism and actively celebrate diversity.