



Statement by Richard Bennett
Representative of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in Nepal
Delivered at the Conference, *Dalit Women's Participation and Representation*
in Building a New Nepal

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Dear members of the Feminist Dalit Organization (FEDO) colleagues, and distinguished guests. Thank you for inviting me here today.

I would like first to congratulate FEDO for bringing together hundreds of Dalit women from throughout Nepal for this national conference. Your presence here is itself proof that Dalit women – though historically marginalized – are far from powerless, and you will need to tap that strength in order to reach the objectives that you will begin to discuss here today. I have been impressed and inspired by the speeches of Dalit women today.

The majority of my statement is related to the next session on Dalit women's participation in the CA. I would also like to note that this conference is taking place during the *16 Days of Activism Against Gender Violence*. On Monday, OHCHR-Nepal hosted a panel discussion on the challenges that must be overcome in order to eliminate the impunity that exists for perpetrators of acts of sexual violence. Dalit women know only too well how difficult it is to access the justice system, and other State mechanisms, in order to report cases of sexual violence and then to have those reports acted upon.

The reason why you are here today is to change that situation, so that the State will promote and protect the right of Dalit women to participate in society as it must do for all other Nepali women and all members of marginalized groups. One way to make that change is to ensure the participation of Dalit women, and other historically marginalized groups, in State and non-State institutions, including in the future Constituent Assembly which will draft a new Constitution for Nepal. The current challenge to the peace process is not only to break the impasse among the largest political parties but also to promote and protect the human rights of marginalized groups who have very legitimate demands and grievances on issues of effective participation and non-discrimination. Unless all voices are heard and these principles respected, there is a genuine challenge to the sustainability of the peace process as a whole.

We all know that Dalit women face several layers of discrimination: for reasons of gender as well as of caste. When we note that Dalit groups are the least represented in decision making and state structures, we must also acknowledge that among Dalits, women are least represented. Dalits themselves have stratified their communities, so that some groups are seen as inferior to others, and the women within those groups are even further marginalized. And while the State has guaranteed 33 % of places for women in its decision-making apparatus, it is all too clear that few Dalit women would be in a position today to contest for those places.

That is why it is so important that organizations like FEDO organize programs such as this week's event to build the capacities of Dalit women from throughout Nepal, so they will be able to both lobby for the participation of Dalit women in State and non-State institutions and the peace process and also, as individuals, to begin to play the roles in the Nepali State and society that are rightfully theirs as equal citizens. The knowledge and preparations that you make here this week should be carried back to your communities to empower dozens more women like yourselves.

On behalf of OHCHR-Nepal I would like to pledge my ongoing support for your efforts and encourage FEDO and other groups to continue a dialogue with my Office about how best it can assist in ensuring that the human rights of Dalit women and all marginalized peoples are promoted and protected during this crucial peace process and beyond. I wish you every success.

Thank you for honoring me with an invitation to speak.