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CONDEMNED TO A LIFE OF IGNOMINY: DOCUMENTING THE *DALIT* COMMUNITY'S EXPERIENCES OF DISCRIMINATIONS IN DHAKA CITY

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Abstract

The term “Dalit” is a Sanskrit word that means those who have been broken and grounded down deliberately by those above them in the social hierarchy or caste. Discrimination against *Dalits* is a widespread problem in caste-affected countries. *Dalits* live at risk of discrimination, dehumanization, violence, and enslavement through human trafficking every day. This is an empirical study which aims to explore the background of *Dalit* people and explore the nature of discriminations against *Dalit* people. For the purpose of the study, both qualitative and quantitative methods have been employed and interview method is used as a technique of data collection. By using these techniques, data has been gathered from primary sources. The present study demonstrates that in Bangladesh, *Dalit* communities are deprived of and excluded from adequate housing, sanitation and employment and experiencing discrimination in all aspects of life. Finally, this study formulated a number of recommendations using priority matrix.

Keywords: Caste, Dalit, Discrimination, Priority matrix, Social hierarchy.

Statement of the Problem

260 million people worldwide continue to experience discrimination based on their caste and lower social position in the society (Islam, 2011). This discrimination remains one of the most severe and forgotten human rights abuses of the twenty-first century. It leads to extreme poverty and powerlessness which contribute to exploitation and violence against *Dalits* who were formerly known as untouchables. *Dalits* live at risk of discrimination, dehumanization, violence, and enslavement through human trafficking every day. *Dalits* constitute the largest number of people categorized as victims of modern-day slavery.

Bangladesh is a country with 140 million people and it is one of the least developed countries in the world. There is an estimated 5.5 million *Dalits* living in 63 districts in Bangladesh although the numbers vary in different sources (IDSN, 2006: 5). Caste systems and discrimination against so-called “untouchables” are traditionally regarded as part of Hindu culture and certainly originate from Hindu scriptures; but in Bangladesh, these traditions and practices have also been adopted by the Muslim majority. In addition, an unknown number of Christian *Dalits* live in Bangladesh. Members of these “low castes” have been known by terms such as “untouchables” and “scheduled castes”. However, they increasingly refer to themselves as *Dalit*, generally called “trampled people” to emphasize the fact that they have been deliberately exploited, oppressed and destroyed through generations. Since ancient times, they have held jobs such as fishermen, sweepers, barbers, washers, dyers, blacksmiths, goldsmiths, cobblers, oil-pressers, boatmen, weavers, hunters, sawyers, butchers, gardeners, tailors and drum beaters. These are all important positions for the functioning of any society but they are widely regarded as menial. Hindu and

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