

**Contemporary Slavery and Racial Discrimination:
Civil Society Support to Survivors during the Global Pandemic**

**Webinar on the International Day for the Abolition of Slavery
2 December 2020, 12:00 – 13:30**

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[MODERATOR: Reflecting on the above testimonies and your global experience, what is the role of the UN Voluntary Trust Fund on Contemporary Forms of Slavery for empowerment? How does the Fellowship Programme of the UN Humanitarian Funds provide another means of empowerment for young professionals such as yourself, formerly working in civil society organizations?]

Thank you for your question. I would like to congratulate the UN Slavery Funds grantees for their exceptional work during the pandemic.

The grantees who have just spoken have underscored that contemporary slavery is global phenomenon, with structural underpinnings.

Today, as we gather together to commemorate the International Day for the Abolition of Slavery, I would like to highlight the work of the UN Slavery Fund, which focuses on empowering frontline actors in the fight against contemporary slavery. The aim is to facilitate a bottom-up movement, led by local civil society and survivors. This movement can help the communities that are preyed on by traffickers to demand more police protection, the right to own the land they have lived on for generations, and schools that do not discriminate against their students.

I would like to start by sharing an example that is personally important to me. In India, it is estimated that around 6 million Dalits— formerly known as “untouchables”—are engaged in manual scavenging practices--this refers to the unsafe and manual removal of human excreta from buckets or other containers that are used as toilets or from pit latrines.

Before joining the Office, I worked in India with different civil society actors, activists, government bodies and international organisations to advocate for the rights and rehabilitation of people engaged in manual scavenging practices. During that time, I worked with an organization, supported by the Slavery Fund, to organize a national march in 2012 and 2013 for the eradication of manual scavenging. This march led to the liberation of 50,000 women from this practice. Later those liberated women underwent vocational training to get a meaningful employment; and some have formed their own cooperative to sew garments. I would like to illustrate this with an example, from a liberated manual scavenger who I will call Seema. She said

“I have given up this “dirty work” now for four years. I would receive 2 rupees each month from each family whose dry latrines I cleaned, a few rotis daily, and their old clothes. When I get work as an agricultural laborer, my daily wage is between 100 to 160 rupees. With the help of the “Garima Abhiyan” social movement I have been able to get real title to the land that the government had supposedly allotted me nine years ago. Today I plant my own fields. I hold my head up high.”

Empowering manual scavengers to fight for their liberation has an inter-generational impact. I would like to stress that this is a social movement led by Dalit women, who have organized themselves to challenge the caste-based occupation that pushed them into slavery like practices. By empowering survivors, the UN Slavery Fund gives voice to the voiceless.

The Slavery Fund has not only empowered survivors, but it has also empowered me and young professionals like me. As a Dalit woman, I was exposed to exclusion, marginalization and sexual abuse. At school and university, my teachers repeatedly told me “You don’t belong here”; I was expected to take up the caste-based occupation or of my future husbands menial work. I therefore realized at a young age that only through education could I effectively advocate for myself and my community.

The Fellowship programme administrated by the OHCHR Humanitarian Funds gave me an opportunity I could not have imagined as a child growing up in a 16 square meter house in a Dalit-community ghetto in Mumbai. The two-year fellowship programme provides a chance for professional staff like me, a social worker from grass-root organisations, to work with the UN at the global level. During my fellowship, I experienced true freedom. It was a liberating feeling. I was considered human without caste, class or gender boundaries. Besides me, the Slavery Fund has empowered 12 professional staff since 2009 from different regions and countries, each of whom contributed to the work of the office through their lived experience.

This fellowship not only provided me a platform, but it also reinforced the UN’s inclusion and diversity policy as I became first Dalit women to work for the UN Human Rights Office in Geneva. I am deeply grateful for this opportunity and I am often reminded of a quote by Dr. Ambedkar: “I measure the progress of a community by the degree of progress which women have achieved”. Through the UN Voluntary Trust Fund on Contemporary Forms of Slavery, we have the chance to empower more survivors and communities in the years to come.
