COMMUNITIES DISCRIMINATED ON WORK AND DESCENT

Structural Discrimination, Systemic Exclusion, and the Failure to Achieve the Goals of the Copenhagen Declaration

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GFOD
GLOBAL FORUM OF COMMUNITIES DISCRIMINATED ON WORK AND DESCENT

THE INCLUSIVITY PROJECT

The document is explicitly authored by the Global Forum of Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent (GFoD) and The Inclusivity Project (TIP) for the Second World Summit for Social Development 2025 and it aims to highlight how communities discriminated on work and descent (CDWD) lag behind in the realization of the ten commitments of the *Copenhagen Declaration* on Social Development (1995).

Scan here for the full *Structural Discrimination, Systemic Exclusion and the Failure to Achieve the Goals of the Copenhagen Declaration* input paper.

The Inclusivity Project (TIP) is a non-profit organization established to advocate for the rights of Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent (CDWD) and to raise awareness of their issues. TIP focuses on capacity building, collaboration, and research to support CDWD by enhancing their social, economic and political integration, and by increasing their visibility at national, regional and global levels. TIP also works towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly in monitoring, follow-up, and review, by generating data and evidence to support effective and inclusive program implementation by nation-states.
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Global Forum of Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent (GFoD), established in 2019, serves as a global platform to advocate for the rights and entitlements of communities across Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America and North America who face discrimination based on work and descent. GFoD strives for the full realization of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights for these communities and works to ensure their equal access to and inclusion in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
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Introduction

Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent (CDWD), often known by names such as **Dalits** (South Asia), **Roma** and **Sinti** (Europe), **Quilombolas** (Latin America), **Haratins**, Osu and others (North and West Africa), **Burakumin** (Japan), are estimated to be more than 270 million globally. These communities experience discrimination that is inherited through birth, family, community and location and tied to socially devalued occupations. Their discrimination is sustained by notions of purity and pollution, by social stratification, by lack of mobility and by legal and political neglect.

The Second World Summit for Social Development provides a crucial platform for advancing the recognition and inclusion of CDWD who continue to face systemic exclusion and marginalization. For CDWD, the Summit represents an opportunity to bring global attention to the structural discrimination inherited through birth, occupation and community, and to advocate for concrete commitments toward equality, dignity and social justice. Despite its scale and impact, this form of discrimination has not been adequately recognized as a key factor contributing to the lack of social inclusion and unequal access to public goods and services.

Discrimination based on work and descent (DWD) has not been adequately recognized as a key barrier to social inclusion and equitable access to public goods and services, in spite of its pervasive impact. Addressing this long-standing neglect is essential to achieving the Summit's goals of inclusive development, human rights protection and the realization of the 2030 Agenda's commitment to "*leave no one behind*."

As the Global Forum of Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent (GFoD), we aim through this report to highlight how our communities continue to lag behind in the realization of the ten commitments of the Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development. The report outlines the persistent challenges that hinder progress toward equality and inclusion, and presents our key recommendations for action to ensure that the rights, dignity and development priorities of CDWD are fully recognized and integrated into global and national social development agendas.

Creating an economic, political, social, cultural and legal environment that will enable people belonging to communities discriminated on work and descent achieve social development

In Brazil, there are currently 3,475 certified Quilombo communities, reflecting Black communities founded by African enslaved people. In the northeastern Minas Gerais, approximately 80 Quilombola communities face severe infrastructure deficits. Poor sanitation affects 53.61% of urban residents and 94.62% of rural residents, while access to water is limited for 11.3% in urban and 41.6% in rural areas. Only 72–75% of rural Quilombolas have a bathroom for exclusive use, and 83.37% lack adequate sewage disposal. The COVID-19 pandemic also exacerbated economic hardship and food insecurity, while the burdens of health and social care responsibilities further increased Quilombola women's exposure to health and social risks.

Across South Asia, Dalit communities are disproportionately concentrated in hazardous and informal occupations, exposing them to severe health and environmental risks. In India, about 70% of manual scavengers across 14 states are women, highlighting the intersection of caste and gender in occupational segregation. Malnutrition is also a major concern: according to NFHS-4 (2015–16), 39.1% of Dalit children are underweight, showing widespread nutritional deprivation.

Roma in Europe continue to face entrenched inequalities. Three out of four Roma (70%) remain at risk of poverty, compared with the EU average of 16% in 2024, representing a 54 percentage point gap. Housing conditions show improvement, with the share of Roma living in housing deprivation (damp, dark or lacking proper sanitation). About 17% of Roma still live without tap water inside their accommodation, a decrease from 30% in 2016. The situation remains critical for children, as 77% of Roma children aged under 18 live in households at risk of poverty. Only 53% of Roma children attend early childhood education (ECEC), which is about half the proportion observed for children in the general EU population (95%). The paid work rate for Roma aged 20–64 has increased substantially since 2016 (43%) to 54%, although this is still far below the 75% rate for the general EU population. Discrimination rates when looking for work have worsened significantly since 2016, affecting 36% of Roma in 2024.

The Haratin, a CDWD group in the Sahel region of West Africa, has historically been subjected to systems of slavery and caste-like hierarchies, resulting in social and economic marginalization. In Mauritania, forms of modern slavery, such as debt bondage and forced labour, remain prevalent, particularly in agriculture and construction, where economically vulnerable groups like the Haratin are compelled to work to repay debts. Moreover, they are severely affected by climate change and food security crises in the Sahel; as of 2024, 38 million people in the region face acute food and nutritional insecurity. Dependent on agriculture for their livelihoods, the Haratin are particularly vulnerable during crises, as resource scarcity and land degradation exacerbate their living conditions.

Recommendations

- Recognize discrimination based on work and descent in national legislation and anti-discrimination frameworks, ensuring protection consistent with international human rights standards, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, ICERD and CEDAW.
- Establish independent equality commissions with mandates to investigate, monitor and provide remedies for descent-based discrimination in employment, education, housing and justice systems.
- Ensure affirmative action and quota-based inclusion policies in public sector employment, education and political representation to overcome historical exclusion.
- Develop targeted economic empowerment programs that increase equitable access to land, credit, vocational training and social protection measures for DWD communities.
- Ensure universal access to quality education, healthcare, housing and clean water, removing discriminatory barriers in service delivery.
- Guarantee representation of CDWD in policy-making bodies, local governance and national planning processes to ensure that development policies reflect their lived experiences.
- Strengthen civil society partnerships and fund community-based organizations working to combat caste- and occupation-based discrimination.
- Promote national campaigns and curricula reforms that challenge notions of purity, pollution and inherited hierarchies, emphasizing equality, dignity and human solidarity.
- Urge UN Member States and international donors to integrate descent-based discrimination into global commitments on racial equality, social justice and sustainable development.
- Encourage international accountability through data collection, monitoring within UN treaty bodies and regular reporting under Universal Periodic Review (UPR) mechanisms.

Advancing Policy Solutions to End Poverty Everywhere, Especially among Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent

Discrimination, limited access to opportunities, economic exploitation, lack of social protection, limited mobility, lack of accessibility to education and landlessness prevent CDWD from accessing basic socio-economic rights. Many of the members of communities discriminated on work and descent live in poverty, often extreme poverty. Take the case of the **Quilombolas**, Latin America's largest CDWD with 16 million historically oppressed Afro-Brazilians. 75% of the Quilombolas live in extreme poverty, only 15$ of their homes have access to the public water network and 5 per cent have access to regular rubbish collection, 89% of Quilombola homes burn domestic waste and only two in a thousand homes are connected to the sewage and storm water networks.

According to the Fundamental Rights Agency Roma Survey 2024 an average of 70% of **Roma** across Europe are considered at risk of poverty, meaning they live in households where the equivalised income after social transfers falls below 60% of the national median income. While poverty rates have significantly declined in each individual country, a substantial gap remains between Roma and the general population—54 percentage points at the EU level. The data shows that, on average, 77% of Roma children under the age of 18 lived in households classified as being at risk of poverty. Additionally, 37% of respondents reported living in households experiencing severe material deprivation. However, the data also indicates that the youngest age group (under 15) and the eldest (60 and older) are generally more vulnerable to severe material deprivation than other age groups.

Poverty and caste-based discrimination contribute to child labour, particularly among **Dalit** families. India has many child labourers aged 5-14, accounting for 3.9 per cent of the country's total child population. These workers work in various sectors, including agriculture, household industry and others. The intersection of being a Dalit woman coupled with poverty and economic vulnerabilities means women are forced into human trafficking and forms of sexualized ritualistic slavery such as the *Devadasi* system, also known as the 'caste based temple prostitution', which has resulted in sexual exploitation of Dalit girls and women due to inadequate implementation of legislations. In Nepal, the national index of empowerment and inclusion reveal Dalit women to be the most marginalized, much worse off than men. As women, they have no control over resources such as land, housing or money. When given the opportunity, Dalit women voice their concern over being deprived of these livelihood options as well as lack of access to education for their children.

Poverty and extreme poverty continue to disproportionately affect the victims of slavery, descendants of slaves, including members of the Haratin communities. According to government data released in 2023, more than 2.3 million people in Mauritania live in multidimensional poverty, accounting for 56.9% of the population. This means they are deprived in various aspects, including education, health, living standards and employment, with an average deprivation rate of 56.3% across these indicators. **Haratin** women in Mauritania are disproportionately affected by poverty.

Poverty and gender are intertwined, and in the past decade, there has been a growing use of the term 'feminization of poverty' to describe the increasing proportion of women among those living in poverty, especially women discriminated on work and descent (such as Dalit, Roma, Quilombola, Burakumin). Where disaggregated data is available, it shows severe disparities between the different population groups. For women, caste is a multiplier that can compound their experience of poverty and discrimination. In several country contexts, poverty of DWD communities is closely interlinked with issues around land rights and land tenure systems. Due to their vulnerable position, poverty, lack of access to education, child labour, social pressure and harmful practices, many women and girls from DWD communities are forced into marriage, often as children. DWD women and girls are vulnerable to trafficking in human beings due to such factors as social exclusion and poverty. Women grappling with poverty encounter a dual risk and injustice, both based on their gender and economic status.

In conclusion, to effectively achieve the goal of eradicating poverty in the world, through decisive national actions and international cooperation it is essential to prioritise the communities furthest behind, particularly those discriminated against based on work and descent. Civil society organizations must collaborate with states and UN agencies to develop multi-pronged strategies that ensure CDWD access their rights and entitlements:

- Ensuring that CDWD are involved in the design and decision-making of budgeting and finance schemes so that the allocation of resources is targeted, accessible and designed to address unique forms of discrimination experienced by these communities including social exclusion, segregation, violence, marginalisation and modern slavery.
- Ensure Gender-responsive programs and budgets are specific to addressing issues of women and other intersectionality within these communities like people with disabilities, LGBTQI, children, etc.
- Ensure a social protection program is available for people to access to be able to cope with the emergencies and challenges that exist.
- Ensure reforms to the international financial architecture and international and domestic policy efforts to expand financing for the SDGs and climate action, are adapted to include the rights and concerns of CDWD.

Policy Levers for Full and Productive Employment for Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent

Discrimination on the basis of social origin and work persists where rigid social stratification prevails, and it denies the victim the possibility to move from one class or social category to another. CDWD women are often overrepresented in the most exploitative forms of labour including domestic work, agricultural piecework or informal service sector jobs, without protections, wages or recognition.

Workers from DWD communities can be forced to work in segregated and socially stigmatized service sectors traditionally assigned to them and may face severe difficulties in accessing employment outside of those sectors. There are DWD communities who are subjected to forced labour, often integrated into global supply chains as a source of low-cost labour. Women in slavery are at risk of being regularly beaten, intimidated, forcibly separated from their families and subjected to a range of other human rights violations, including sexual servitude and sexual assault. DWD community members who were victims of slavery, descendants of slaves and those who have recently escaped slavery may face discrimination and social exclusion.

Dalits are regularly forced into the most menial, socially degrading, dirty and hazardous jobs. In some countries, caste-based systems have institutionalized exploitative practices, such as *devadasi*, *badi*, or *jogini* systems in South Asia, where Dalit women and girls are ritually dedicated and then sexually exploited, often under the guise of tradition. In certain countries, women at the lowest rank of caste systems can even be considered “slaves” and the absence of legal prohibition of caste-based discrimination can maintain complex caste systems. Often, DWD women are forced to take up a disproportionate share of unpaid domestic, care and support responsibilities, preventing them from participating equally in the workforce and public life, as well as from having sufficient rest to maintain their well-being. In South Asia, caste dictates occupational segregation, with Dalit men and women often confined to manual scavenging, leather work, sanitation and daily wage agricultural labour. These are socially devalued yet economically indispensable roles. In West Africa, Osu communities continue to be barred from formal employment opportunities and confined to “traditional” or menial roles, while facing stigma in accessing markets and entrepreneurship.

Unemployment among Dalit women (6.1 per cent), is more than the national average of 4.5 per cent. Sanitation work in India is predominantly and historically linked to caste, with 98% of sanitation workers belonging to Dalit communities.

The work varies across urban and rural areas, with its most hazardous forms of work concentrated on removal of urban waste. Despite the ban on manual scavenging, engagement of human labour in manually handling excreta and other wastes is still prevalent in India. Nearly 5 million sanitation workers, mostly women, are employed in India, mainly in local government operated (municipal) solid waste collection, road sweeping and cleaning school toilets. The sanitation workers come from Dalit sub-castes (castes within a caste) and face further exclusion from within the Dalit community due the nature of their occupation being stigmatized as 'unclean' and 'polluting'.

This form of structural exclusion is mirrored in Europe, where Roma workers encounter persistent barriers in employment and social mobility. According to FRA's Rights of Roma and Travellers in 13 European Countries: Perspectives from the Roma Survey 2024, Roma communities in Europe continue to be underrepresented in paid employment compared to the general population. Among 20–64-year-old Roma, only around 54% are in paid work, leaving a 21-percentage-point gap compared with the general population (75%). This gap is narrower in some countries, such as Italy and North Macedonia (6 points), Romania (10 points), Hungary (12 points), Greece (13 points), and Bulgaria (14 points). Young Roma aged 16–24 face particular challenges entering the labour market, while gender disparities are also pronounced, with Roma women employed on average 31 points less than Roma men. Some countries have achieved EU-level targets for Roma women's employment, including Bulgaria (49%), Czechia (45%), Hungary (53%), and Italy (45%). Nevertheless, discrimination in job-seeking and workplace settings remains widespread: in 2024, 36% of Roma aged 16 and over reported experiencing discrimination when looking for work, with rates exceeding 80% in some countries (Ireland 84%, Portugal 70%, Italy 66%, Greece 61%). Workplace discrimination has also increased, with approximately one in five Roma employees (22%) reporting such experiences.

In Latin America, Quilombolas in Brazil, descendants of communities formed by enslaved Africans who resisted bondage, continue to face exclusion from mainstream labour markets. Many remain tied to informal, subsistence agricultural work on precarious lands, while systemic discrimination limits their access to credit, wage employment and vocational training. Despite constitutional recognition of land rights, many Quilombolas are confined to subsistence farming or precarious informal labour. Their economic marginalization is reinforced by racialized stigma and lack of infrastructure in Quilombola territories. In Colombia, Palenque communities are marginalized in employment opportunities and face spatial segregation that restricts access to education, infrastructure and formal labour markets. The legacy of slavery and entrenched racial hierarchies continue to confine these communities to informal and low-wage sectors, with women disproportionately represented in domestic and care work without labour protections.

Existing labour regulations frequently exclude informal sector workers, where CDWD are overrepresented, from protections such as minimum wages, occupational safety and social security. Even where constitutional protections exist (e.g., in South Asia or Brazil), enforcement mechanisms remain weak or absent in labour markets. Credit and land access schemes are systematically biased against CDWD, blocking entrepreneurship and decent livelihoods. Global employment strategies often treat gender, race or indigeneity, but rarely address descent-based discrimination, leaving CDWD invisible in policy frameworks.

Recommendations

To ensure inclusive growth and the realization of the right to full and productive employment, states and international organizations must act decisively through structural, legal and programmatic interventions:

- Extend minimum wage, occupational safety, maternity protection, and comprehensive social protection schemes to informal workers, including those in domestic work, agricultural piecework and feminized sectors.

- Ensure collective bargaining rights, unionization support, and pay transparency for workers discriminated on work and descent.

- Launch affirmative action and targeted public sector recruitment while incentivizing private sector inclusion of DWD communities.

- Provide childcare, gender-sensitive workplaces and prioritized access to credit, land, and entrepreneurship especially for CDWD women and youth.

- Remove barriers to education, such as segregation and bullying, and address dropout risks that block CDWD children's progression to higher education.

- Develop targeted vocational training, STEM, and digital literacy programs for CDWD youth and women, preparing them for future labour markets.

- Formalize and regulate low-status sectors to provide CDWD workers with equitable career opportunities.

- Disaggregate labour market and social data by caste, descent and occupation to expose and address hidden inequalities.

- Establish a Global Decent Work Observatory for CDWD to monitor, document and report on rights realization and policy impacts.

Designing Cohesive Societies: Inclusive Policies for Social Unity and Equity for All, Including Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent

For Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent (CDWD), including Roma, Dalits, Haratins, Quilombolas, Burakumin and others, the commitment to *promoting social integration by fostering societies that are stable, safe and just, and that are grounded in the protection of all human rights, non-discrimination, tolerance, respect for diversity, equality of opportunity, solidarity, security and participation for all people* remains an urgent and unfinished task.

Women and girls from descent-based communities are particularly vulnerable to reprisal attacks when they seek justice for crimes committed against them. It is of concern that there is a low rate of reporting of cases of discrimination by CDWD victims, including in cases of psychological and sexual violence and rape, owing to general mistrust in the protection system and State institutions with regard to the prosecution and adequate punishment of those crimes. Ongoing hate speech and discriminatory propaganda targeting Burakumin women, requires the urgent need of governments to enact legislation that prohibits and punishes such speech. There is often a culture of impunity for perpetrators committing atrocities against CDWD women. Women from CDWD often face multiple barriers in gaining access to justice, owing to legal illiteracy, lack of awareness of their rights, limited accessibility of legal aid and other structural reasons.

Recommendations

Ensuring that this commitment becomes a lived reality means embedding descent-based non-discrimination in national laws, strengthening institutions to deliver justice and protection, and promoting inclusive education and awareness that challenge deep-rooted social prejudices. True cohesion will emerge only when CDWD members—especially women and youth—can participate equally and safely in civic, economic and cultural life, contributing fully to stable, just, and democratic societies.

To address these challenges, States, in collaboration with National Human Rights Institutions, civil society organisations and human rights defenders, and women from CDWD, should undertake coordinated and sustained efforts to address and eliminate deeply embedded discriminatory ideologies and practices. These include, but are not limited to, notions of untouchability, purity and caste-based hierarchies.

Such beliefs perpetuate systemic exclusion and also serve as the basis for egregious human rights violations. A collaborative, intersectional approach that centers the voices and leadership of CDWD is essential for dismantling these normative structures, fostering inclusive social transformation and ensuring the realization of fundamental human rights and dignity for all.

Foremost, states must ratify the human rights treaties and remove any reservations that may hamper the fulfillment of their human rights obligations. They should actively utilize the normative and monitoring frameworks established such as, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) or the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) to articulate and advance specific, actionable recommendations addressing the multifaceted and intersecting human rights violations experienced by women and girls from CDWD. These international mechanisms provide critical avenues for reinforcing state accountability, fostering normative clarity and embedding intersectionality within the broader human rights discourse. Centering the lived realities of CDWD women and girls within these processes is imperative for promoting substantive equality, dismantling structural discrimination and fulfilling international legal obligations under the core human rights treaties. As a critical preliminary measure, States should undertake a methodologically rigorous and contextually grounded assessment of discrimination based on work and descent, with a particular emphasis on its intersectional impact on women and girls. It is a vital step to promote standardized terminology in terms of recognizing concepts that pertain to *work and descent based discrimination*. This process should encompass a systematic review of existing empirical research, legislative and policy instruments, and institutional practices. Moreover, the collection and analysis of disaggregated and gender-sensitive data, in full compliance with data protection and privacy standards, are essential to accurately ascertain the prevalence, patterns and structural dimensions of such discrimination. Establishing a robust evidentiary foundation is indispensable for informing equitable policy development, guiding legal and institutional reforms, and fulfilling international human rights obligations related to non-discrimination, substantive equality and social and economic justice.

States, multilateral organizations and non-governmental organizations should adopt and implement comprehensive constitutional, legislative, administrative, budgetary, judicial, educational, social and special measures to eliminate discrimination based on work and descent. These efforts must be grounded in strong anti-discrimination legal frameworks that align with international human rights standards and promote the full respect, protection and realization of the rights of affected communities.

Furthermore, states and relevant stakeholders must have actively engaged with and follow-up on the Guidance Notes developed by the UN Network on Racial Discrimination and the Protection of Minorities, which provide critical frameworks for addressing the systemic discrimination. This includes advancing concrete programmatic actions aligned with the Guidance Notes, and establishing clear timelines and accountability and measurable progress. Every action, initiative and intervention regarding the status and rights of CDWD, including women and girls, must be carried out through continuous dialogue with the affected communities, by ensuring their meaningful participation in the planning, implementation and evaluations of all laws, policies and programmes. The UN must maintain an active policy to promote and facilitate the participation of CDWD in all UN processes, including in the implementation and review of a country's UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework. For instance, establishing robust task forces, both independently and within the United Nations structures (e.g. Working groups in UNHCR, UN Women, OHCHR, CSW, etc.), and strengthening Special Rapporteur (SRs) mandates on CDWD women to directly inform policy development, implementation, and inclusion of their vital voices and experiences.

The UN agencies, member states and civil society must make participation a mandatory component to monitor and ensure equitable access to policy discussions and decision-making processes, with particular attention to the meaningful inclusion of CDWD grassroots organizations and historically marginalized voices. This includes not only supporting advocacy efforts led by collective platforms and networks, but also empowering individual advocates whose lived experiences and localized knowledge are critical to shaping responsive and inclusive policies. Ensuring transparency and accountability in participation mechanisms is fundamental to promoting genuine representation and dismantling systemic exclusion.

In contexts where such frameworks are not yet available, countries should establish dedicated structures, and oversight mechanisms to systematically monitor and address the rights, status and the lived experiences of CDWD. The mechanisms must be inclusive by design, ensuring the meaningful participation in leadership, and representation in both the formulation of policies, and governance of such structures. Embedding the participatory approaches is critical not only for ensuring context-specific responsiveness, but also for advancing substantive equality, institutional accountability, and transformative social and economic justice.

The UN, member states and civil society should prioritize the selection and implementation of strategies that not only de-escalate discrimination but also illuminate its harmful effects within institutional, legal and policy frameworks. These groups should intentionally center community-led narrative approaches and knowledge that capture the nuanced lived experiences of affected populations, thereby fostering more contextually responsive and socially just solutions.

Leveraging Gender Parity to Address Structural Inequities Affecting Women Belonging to Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent

Women and girls from descent-based communities experience discrimination and human rights abuse on multiple grounds based on their gender and descent. The intergenerational nature of descent-based discrimination often condemns women to a lifetime of exclusion, marginalization and disadvantage in every sphere of life.

Women **workers** from DWD communities can be forced to work in segregated and socially stigmatized service sectors traditionally assigned to them and may face severe difficulties in accessing employment outside of those sectors. In certain countries, women at the lowest rank of caste systems can even be considered “slaves” and the absence of legal prohibition of caste-based discrimination can maintain complex caste systems.

Women in DWD communities, such as Roma, Dom and Badi women, face difficulties in civil registration procedures and in obtaining **documents** which increases their risk of statelessness and may deprive them of access to basic services, including to healthcare and medical services. These administrative barriers discussed above intersect with deep-rooted inequalities in education, employment, housing, health, and participation in public and political life, often reinforced by discrimination based on work and descent, prejudice, dehumanization, and institutional bias.

For women, social hierarchical systems such as caste is a multiplier that can compound their experience of **poverty** and discrimination. Poverty and extreme poverty continue to disproportionately affect the victims of slavery, descendants of slaves and members of the Haratine communities. In several country contexts, poverty of DWD communities is closely interlinked with issues around land rights and land tenure systems.

The persistent and structural barriers to equitable access to **education** manifest in disproportionately high dropout rates, lower levels of literacy and educational attainment, and low levels of education, which leads to systemic exclusion from quality educational environments. Additionally, there are cases of segregation and lack of inclusive and quality education. Critically, the absence of targeted interventions, such as affirmative action policies or need-based scholarship schemes, has significantly limited CDWD women's access to secondary and tertiary education, thereby reinforcing cycles of intergenerational disadvantage.

DWD women, particularly those living in rural areas, face significant legal and social barriers to land ownership and adequate **housing**. The CEDAW highlighted the urgent need to address these inequalities, noting that many Haratin reside in impoverished areas with limited access to land and resources. Roma communities across Europe face systemic barriers to secure housing and land tenure. In many cases, Roma women and girls live in informal settlements without legal status, basic services, or protection from eviction. In certain DWD groups, such as the Quilambola, women may lack titles to their lands and face forced removals from lands traditionally occupied or used by them and the exploitation of those lands by private non-State actors, such as extractive industries and infrastructure developers, without consultation, their free, prior and informed consent or adequate benefit-sharing.

Gender based violence is often a tool used by both state and non-state actors to maintain the "low" status of descent-based communities, and may be deployed in response to their assertion of rights. There are reported cases of abductions, sexual harassment, rape and intimidation of women from DWD communities, as well as their lack of access to public services and resources. These challenges are intensified for women and girls, who face gender-based violence that further entrenches social exclusion and limits access to rights and opportunities.

CDWD women and girls may face physical, cultural and financial barriers in gaining access to gynaecological and maternal **health** services and their limited knowledge of birth registration procedures and the existence of bureaucratic obstacles and financial barriers may prevent them from registering births and obtaining birth certificates for their children. There are also cases of segregation of Roma women in hospital maternity wards, as well as verbal and physical abuse by medical staff.

CDWD women and girls are further marginalized in public spaces and face barriers in accessing political and economic decision-making bodies and processes, and they may have an extremely low representation level at high-level decision-making positions.

Ongoing hate speech and discriminatory propaganda targeting Burakumin women, requires the urgent need of governments to enact legislation that prohibits and punishes such speech. There is often a culture of impunity for perpetrators committing atrocities against CDWD women. Women from DWD communities often face multiple barriers in gaining access to justice, owing to legal illiteracy, lack of awareness of their rights, limited accessibility of legal aid and other structural reasons.

Member States must

- Undertake rigorous, context-specific assessments of discrimination based on work and descent, with an intersectional lens on women and girls.

- Develop or update comprehensive anti-discrimination CDWD laws aligned with international standards.

- Create National Action Plans (NAPs) focused on CDWD women with clear targets, baselines and monitoring mechanisms.

- Integrate CDWD women's needs into mainstream, national strategies, i.e., gender equality .

- Ratify human rights treaties and withdraw reservations that hinder full compliance (e.g., CEDAW, ICERD) and utilize human rights mechanisms (i.e.,UPR) to advance actionable recommendations addressing CDWD women's rights.

- Establish or strengthen national structures and oversight bodies to monitor the rights and needs of CDWD women.

- Ensure meaningful participation of CDWD women in policy design, implementation and evaluation.

- Guarantee the inclusion of CDWD women in UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework consultations and reviews.

- Support community-led dialogue and leadership development that challenges patriarchal norms while respecting cultural autonomy.

- Address harmful ideologies and practices such as untouchability and caste-based exclusion through coordinated national efforts.

- Promote inclusive social norms and dismantle caste hierarchies in partnership with civil society and affected communities.

Universal Access to Education for Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent through Targeted Reforms

The right to quality and equitable education is universally recognized as a foundation for human dignity, empowerment and social development. Yet for over 270 million people globally who belong to CDWD, this right remains far from realized. The persistent and structural barriers to equitable access to education cause further restrictions and inequities for CDWD, especially youth and children. These barriers manifest in disproportionately high dropout rates, lower levels of literacy and educational attainment. All of these lead to systemic exclusion from quality educational environments and are direct contributors that hinder the success of CDWD compared to the majority communities that go on to achieve higher levels of education.

Deeply rooted systemic discrimination, poverty and cultural barriers create profound obstacles that restrict the educational attainment of DWD communities globally. There are cases of **segregation** and lack of inclusive and quality education. Dalit students in India continue to suffer social exclusion, being forced to sit separately, eat separately, and use separate utensils. Schools and colleges also practice "caste-based screening" in admissions. Communities like the Roma face persistent educational segregation, with increasing concentrations of students of Roma origin in certain schools or instances of being placed in "ethnically homogeneous classes" (secondary segregation). Compounding these educational gaps, almost every second Roma child (46%) is educated in a school where all or most of the pupils are Roma, a condition that has not changed considerably in recent years (44% in 2016). This segregation is positively correlated with housing patterns, as the share of Roma children attending segregated schools is more than five times lower among those living in areas with smaller concentrations of Roma (12%) than among those living in predominantly Roma neighbourhoods (63%).

Instances of segregation and the **lack of inclusive curricula** or pedagogical approaches further marginalize these communities. Waata schools in Kenya often exclude indigenous languages from the curriculum, acting as a significant barrier to learning. CDWD pupils and students across groups face **discrimination** from educators, including low expectations, biased views, neglect, and humiliation. Roma students are sometimes directed to special schools without proper assessment. Discrimination within the educational sphere is increasing, with 14% of Roma respondents feeling discriminated against because of their ethnic origin when in contact with an educational institution, a significantly higher rate than the 7% reported in 2016.

Palenquero children in Colombia face discrimination based on skin colour, speech and culture, sometimes leading to psychological harm and suicidal ideation in girls. Teachers have been noted to omit reporting discrimination or dismiss claims as exaggeration.

Economic and structural barriers to **educational access and retention** are highly correlated with high dropout rates and low literacy are pervasive across all groups. The Dalit community in India faces particularly alarming dropout rates, with over a third of girls leaving school by age 14. Only 32% of Roma aged 20–24 have completed at least upper-secondary education, showing little change since 2016 (28%) and standing significantly below the 84% rate for the general EU-27 population. Only 53% of Roma children attend early childhood education and care (ECEC), which is approximately half the rate observed for children in the general EU population (95%). Quilombola women and girls in Brazil struggle not just with access but also permanence in universities due to insufficient preparatory courses in their communities and inadequate student assistance policies.

Due to existing **economic and structural barriers**, many CDWD girls are pushed into domestic duties, early marriage, or teenage pregnancies, severely limiting educational attainment. Dalit students seeking education funding often face delays, frivolous rejections or demands for unnecessary "extra verification" due to caste prejudice, significantly limiting access to state institutional support. For Dalit girls in India, lack of functional toilets, adequate wash facilities, and menstrual taboos lead to high rates of absenteeism and dropout. Rural Dalit girls often travel long distances, sometimes over 5 km, to reach school. The Osu community in Nigeria was relocated to a forested area, making school access nearly impossible, relying solely on community-built facilities. Lack of funds for transportation and long distances prevent Osu girls from accessing secondary education.

The **invisibility of DWD communities and the existing data gaps** severely undermine efforts to achieve equitable and inclusive education. In many countries, education statistics are not disaggregated by caste, ethnicity, or descent, masking the real scale of exclusion and preventing targeted interventions. Without accurate data, the structural discrimination that keeps CDWD learners at the margins remains unaddressed in national education plans, budgets and monitoring frameworks. This lack of visibility perpetuates a cycle where policies are designed for the “average learner,” ignoring the compounded barriers faced by children and youth from CDWD backgrounds, ranging from poverty and geographic isolation to stigma and violence in schools. For groups like the Haratin in Mauritania, the lack of birth certificates or identification documents makes accessing formal education nearly impossible. The Waata community in Kenya suffers from invisibility and underrepresentation, lacking ethnically disaggregated data, which hinders policy effectiveness. For the Pygmées and Mbororos in Cameroon, there is generally a lack of specific data on schooling and literacy rates.

Recommendations

- Mandate comprehensive training for educators, administrators and criminal justice personnel on anti-discrimination laws, inclusive practices, caste and descent based discrimination and anti-gypsyism to eliminate biases and low expectations.

- Strengthen legal controls and enforce penalties to identify and eliminate educational segregation, including ending segregated classrooms/schools and enforcing fair rezoning principles.

- Increase investment in kindergartens and ECE programs in DWD communities.

- Implement and expand scholarship programs, free transportation, and stipends, specifically targeting CDWD girls. Scholarship disbursement mechanisms must be reformed to ensure timeliness and introduce offline application options to overcome the digital divide faced by CDWD students.

- Advance legal amendments (e.g., Law on Civil Registry) to ensure every child, regardless of parental status, receives a birth certificate

- Develop educational programs tailored to CDWD, incorporating language, and other local cultural practices into the curriculum and educational materials.

- Engage community leaders to address harmful traditional norms such as child marriage. Implement measures to reduce menstrual poverty, such as allocating budgets for menstrual products for Roma girls and other girls at social risk at school.

- Implement structural support policies to facilitate the access and permanence of CDWD students in higher education.

- Invest in data collection systems that capture gender and ethnic disparities to inform effective, targeted policy interventions

Universal Access to Health for Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent through Targeted Reforms

DWD communities, due to socio-cultural discrimination, face rejection in accessing health care. Due to their poor economic status, they also face challenges to afford health care. This resulted in their mediocre performance in various health indicators. CDWD has a lower life expectancy than the national average. They also lag in infant mortality rates (IMR) and mother mortality rates (MMR). For example, in Nepal, according to the Dalit Welfare Organization study, Dalits' life expectancy is 61 years. Only 53% of Dalit households in Nepal have access to safe drinking water, compared to 83% of non-Dalit households. This lack of access to safe drinking water has severe implications for the health and well-being of Dalit communities, as it can lead to waterborne diseases such as diarrhoea, cholera and typhoid. India is among the few countries with disaggregated data on CDWD, and this data shows that there is a 27% increase among the **Dalit** communities on MMR compared to the national average. Many Dalits are engaged in sanitation work, including manual scavenging. It is characterized by the dramatically unhealthy and unsafe working conditions, which continue to exacerbate the practice of untouchability and marginalization of Dalits. Health indicators reveal Dalits to be in the poorest condition of all. Access to basic health services is sometimes blocked by health staff, who deny them proper treatment or refuse to touch their bodies. Dalit women face discrimination in healthcare, leading to poorer health outcomes.

With no access to education, housing, income, arable land, decent employment opportunities, or basic social infrastructure facilities, the **Haratin** in Mauritania and other CDWD individuals in **Africa** are trapped in a state of modern slavery. In order to survive, they are compelled to remain under the control of their masters due to their tribal affiliation. As a result, they endure a life of domestic servitude, which is often passed down by descent to their children. They continue to work without employment contracts, healthcare coverage, or social security and face various forms of discrimination, corruption and abuse.

In Colombia, there is a lack of policies with a differential ethnic approach, particularly in health care addressing the **Palenquero** communities. This results in disparities in medical treatment and a lack of budget allocation specifically addressing Palenquero women's health need. The **Quilombola** communities in Brazil experience severe lack of quality in sanitation, health, education, food security and housing services provided by the state. Such conditions prevent them from accessing proper public services, which often ignore their specificities when designing policies, requiring that the government develop additional guidelines to guarantee basic attention.

The precariousness of the debate and implementation of Quilombola health guarantees is an alarming reality in Brazil. The Quilombola population faces various difficulties in accessing health services, a reflection of the lack of structure and violations of Quilombola fundamental rights.

Roma across Europe face barriers to good health and well-being. Roma face barriers to good health and wellbeing. Romani patients increasingly report ill-treatment and violation of human rights in healthcare institutions, including denial of healthcare services, delivery of inferior medical care, abusive behavior and treatment, segregation, extortion, and deeply rooted anti-gypsyism among healthcare professionals. The FRA Roma Survey 2024 data shows that the lifespans of Roma women are 7.4 years shorter than those of women in the general population, and those of Roma men are 8.0 years shorter than men in the general population. Life expectancy for Roma women is, on average, 75.6 years , and for men, it is 69.2 years. On average, three out of four Roma (74%) have coverage for healthcare expenses. About 16% of Roma felt discriminated against because of their ethnic origin when accessing healthcare (such as seeing a doctor, nurse, or visiting a hospital) in the 12 months before the survey. Poverty and social exclusion affect children even before they are born, transmitting the cycle of disadvantage across generations from the very beginning of life. Low birth weight (under 2,500 grams) is often linked to inadequate nutrition and represents a serious concern among Roma communities in Southeast Europe. Moreover, Roma infants are nearly twice as likely to be born with low birth weight compared to other groups.

This disparity reflects the overall gap in health between Roma and non-Roma. This difference is mainly due to their poor living situations, lack of access to quality healthcare and persistent discrimination and marginalization. Although few countries have national-level Roma health data, research shows that Roma are disproportionately unvaccinated; have poorer than average nutrition; and experience a higher rate of tuberculosis. Among children between 0 and 2 years, the incidence of influenza, ear infections, intestinal infections, and viral diseases was significantly higher among the Roma than among the ethnic majority population of comparable socioeconomic status.

For Roma women, these housing conditions have direct health implications. The absence of sanitation and access to clean water increases the risk of infections and diseases, which can adversely affect maternal and child health. Environmental degradation, unregulated waste management and proximity to industrial sites expose Romani people to heightened health risks. Low health insurance coverage excludes many Romani women from essential services like prenatal and maternal care, further entrenching health inequities.

CDWD women and girls may face physical, cultural and financial barriers in gaining access to gynaecological and maternal health services and their limited knowledge of birth registration procedures and the existence of bureaucratic obstacles and financial barriers may prevent them from registering births and obtaining birth certificates for their children. There are also cases of segregation of Roma women in hospital maternity wards, as well as verbal and physical abuse by medical staff. There have been documented instances where unlawful demolitions of Romani settlements have left pregnant women and infants homeless, highlighting the urgent need for EU intervention to uphold housing rights and prevent further discrimination. While there has been progress regarding the forced sterilisation of Roma women in certain countries, in the form of apology and certain compensations schemes for victims, concerns are expressed that not all victims could obtain adequate redress. In some countries, there is no information about the investigations and reparations with regard to forced sterilisation of Roma women.

Recommendations

- Establish a culturally sensitive, differential and comprehensive healthcare model that recognizes and addresses the specific health needs of CDWD, considering their ethnic, social, and economic marginalization.
- Remove barriers to health access faced by members of CDWD, particularly in marginalized and rural areas, ensuring that all individuals have equal access to essential health services.
- Implement and enforce stronger legal protections that prevent discrimination based on work and descent in healthcare systems and other public services.
- Strengthen protection mechanisms for women and girls from CDWD who are particularly vulnerable to gender-based violence (GBV) and exploitation, ensuring they have access to legal, social, and health services.
- Strengthen social protection systems to ensure that CDWD, particularly the most vulnerable, have access to basic rights, including healthcare, housing, education and financial support.
- Ensure the active participation of CDWD in the development, implementation and monitoring of policies related to health, education, social protection, and human rights.
- Invest in research and data collection on the health needs of CDWD to inform evidence-based policymaking and better address the systemic issues they face.
- Foster international cooperation to raise awareness of the issues faced by CDWD and advocate for their rights within the context of access to health services.

Fostering Equity: Catalyzing Support for Development for Africa and the Least Developed Countries

Communities Discriminated on work and Descent in Africa are denied basic rights, including access to formal education, justice, healthcare and economic opportunities. The exclusion from social and political structures leaves them vulnerable to exploitation, including gender-based violence (GBV), and economic oppression. The lack of a voice in both political and societal matters ensures that their needs and concerns are often neglected in the formulation of policies and equity.

In Niger, the Wahaya is profoundly marginalised, deprived of land, political voice, and equitable access to public services. They are recognized through their names, their practices, and the activities they perform (hide work, butchery, jewellery making, farming, etc.). In Mali, access to justice is a major stride for the Bellah. There have been cases of violence, including murder, against people who refuse to accept discriminatory norms linked to slavery. Forced labour and debt bondage persist, despite the new penal code explicitly prohibiting slavery, slavery-like practices and servitude. In the Gambia, the Komos are not allowed to enter places of worship, schools, or other public spaces. They are restricted from inter-caste marriages or social interactions, reinforcing the social segregation. In Mauritania, Haratin often have limited access to quality education, which further perpetuates their socio-economic disadvantages.

Concrete actions in several critical areas must be taken:

- Introduce or strengthen anti-discrimination laws that specifically protect CDWD from marginalization, exploitation and violence. These laws should ensure that CDWD have access to the same rights and protections as others, including land ownership, and access to justice.
- Implement policies that allow CDWD to access formal education and vocational training. These programs should be designed to remove cultural and economic barriers, ensuring that marginalized CDWD can improve their skills and gain better employment opportunities.
- Prioritize the inclusion of CDWD in national healthcare programs. This includes access to maternal healthcare, mental health services, and public health education. Health policies must specifically address the needs of CDWD women and ensure that they are not excluded from essential services.
- CDWD must be provided with economic opportunities through programs such as microfinance, entrepreneurship training, and skills development. Policies should encourage formal employment and create legal frameworks that guarantee equal employment opportunities.
- Take strong action to prevent violence against CDWD women. This includes support services for survivors, such as shelters, legal assistance, and counseling.

Anchoring Economic Transition Policies in Universal Social Protection Systems: A Focus on Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent

For communities discriminated on work and descent, systemic barriers continue to impede equitable access to financial resources, public services and decision-making structures. Budget allocations for education, health and child protection are often inadequate, particularly in low-income countries. Resources rarely reach the most marginalized, including children from communities facing discrimination based on work and descent (DWD). DWD deeply affects young people, limiting their access to quality education and employment, harming their mental health and wellbeing, and pushing them to the margins of society, experiencing poor developmental outcomes. These injustices are not only human rights violations but also hinder economic growth by wasting potential and creating inefficiencies in the labor market. As a result, many young people are trapped in cycles of poverty with few opportunities for decent work. In Africa, these challenges are among the key factors driving youth involvement in armed conflict.

While it is encouraging that over half of the world's population is now covered by some form of social protection, more than 3.8 billion people remain entirely unprotected, primarily in low-and middle-income countries, including in Africa and South Asia. Communities discriminated on work and descent, number more than 270 million people are overrepresented in the population cohorts without social protection.

Fiscal constraints significantly limit governments' capacity to fund social protection systems. Weak tax systems, high informal work, widespread tax evasion, and debt servicing obligations reduce the fiscal space available for investment in social programs. Many countries face overwhelming debt burdens, forcing them to adopt austerity measures and cut public spending, including on social protection.

Global crises, including pandemics, climate shocks, and economic downturns, exacerbate these challenges. Governments with limited fiscal capacity cannot implement shock-responsive systems, leaving vulnerable populations even more exposed during times of crisis. For descent based communities, the impacts of these crises are not episodic but continuous, where communities yet to recover from previous shocks are hit with more.

Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent face strong barriers in access to social protection and services. This is due to:

Many face barriers to access due to the **"non-take-up" phenomenon,** where eligible individuals are unable or unwilling to claim benefits due to complex application procedures, lack of documentation or digital access, fear of discrimination, or lack of information. Legal IDs, proof of residence, and digital literacy are often prerequisites for registration, further excluding undocumented, displaced, or those employed in informal work.

Social protection systems are often created without genuine **participation** of the people they intend to serve. This lack of representation contributes to weak program design and poor implementation. Due to their marginalised status, social protection services are designed without the proper participation of CDWD. In countries where CDWD are recognised by governments in official records, such as in the case of Dalits (Scheduled Castes) in India, implementation of services is hampered by ineffective policy design due to the lack of voice and visibility.

Macro-level factors, including debt, fiscal crises, and global challenges stemming from conflict and climate change, are limiting many countries' abilities to provide citizens access to social protection and services. Existing vulnerabilities are exacerbated particularly for CDWD, many of whom live in extreme and durable forms of poverty, face rampant social exculpation due their perceived inferior status, with no social protection benefits.

Recommendations

- Urge a strong commitment by Member States to pursue with urgent priority universal social protection and essential services to all.
- Strongly encourage countries to set nationally appropriate spending targets for quality investments in essential public services for all, including health, education, energy, water and sanitation, consistent with national sustainable development strategies ensuring targeting inclusion for communities discriminated on work and descent.
- Many marginalized people are excluded due to lack of IDs—programs should simplify documentation, offer assisted registration and ensure participation of affected communities in the design of programs and services.
- Ensure their participation in decision-making spaces at all levels, including youth policy forums.
- Community-driven social audits, participatory budgeting, and inclusive policy dialogues should be institutionalized as core features of national protection frameworks. By tracking public expenditures, analyzing budget allocations, and advocating for equitable resource distribution, communities can ensure that public funds reach those who need them most.

Conclusions

The evidence confirms that discrimination based on work and descent, experienced by more than 270 million people worldwide (including Dalits, Roma, Quilombolas, Haratin and others), remains a structural impediment to global social development, equality and dignity. This form of exclusion is inherited through birth, occupation and community, sustained by concepts of purity and pollution, social stratification, and political neglect. Despite the goals set forth in the Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development, DWD communities continue to lag significantly in the realization of these commitments. Poverty, often extreme poverty, is pervasive within these groups, with discrimination being the primary driver that limits mobility, economic opportunity, and access to basic socio-economic rights.

Poverty and discrimination are profoundly intensified by intersectionality, particularly for women and girls belonging to CDWD, for whom descent acts as a multiplier of exclusion. CDWD women face lifelong marginalization based on gender and descent, condemning them to low-status, exploitative and dangerous occupations, such as manual scavenging or informal domestic work, often without legal protections or recognition. They suffer disproportionately from gender-based violence, sexual exploitation (such as the Devadasi system), trafficking, and the consequences of systemic impunity for perpetrators. Furthermore, administrative barriers, such as difficulties in civil registration and obtaining documentation, deprive them of basic services and increase the risk of statelessness. The precariousness of their position—driven by poverty, lack of land rights, and structural barriers to education—prevents their equal participation in the workforce, public life, and decision-making processes.

Systemic barriers continue to block CDWD access to essential services and entitlements, including education, employment, healthcare, and social protection. In education, discrimination manifests as pervasive school segregation (with 46% of Roma children attending segregated schools), low expectations from educators, biased views, and low attainment rates. In the labour market, CDWD face persistent occupational segregation and significant employment gaps. Healthcare systems exhibit discriminatory practices, including the denial of services, ill-treatment, and segregation in maternity wards. Crucially, CDWD are severely overrepresented in the cohort of the 3.8 billion people globally who lack any social protection coverage. The "non-take-up" of social benefits, caused by complex registration procedures, lack of documentation, and fear of discrimination, further exacerbates this exclusion. These implementation deficits demonstrate that without explicit and targeted inclusion, mainstream policies fail to reach the communities furthest behind, leading to a waste of human potential and impeding inclusive economic growth.