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ASIA/BANGLADESH - Anti-discrimination law urgently needed say Civil Society and religious communities

Dacca (Agenzia Fides) – The rights to "equal opportunities" and to equality, principles stated in the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights, are also guaranteed by the Constitution of Bangladesh. Yet, nonetheless, in Bangladesh persistent discrimination is widespread: violence for reasons of gender, no access to education, rejection for reasons of caste or religion. This is why the country urgently needs a specific "anti-discrimination law" to put an end to such practices and punish perpetrators. The petition, promoted by civil society in Bangladesh, is supported and shared by the country's religious communities and leaders, Christian and non. The statement, sent to Fides, is signed by various social organisations, including "Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust" (BLAST), "FAIR", "Bangladesh Horijon Oikko Porishod", "Manusher Jonno Foundation" and other groups which defend the rights of Dalits .

The statement denounces first of all discrimination for reason of caste: constitutional prohibition of this sort of discrimination is never applied and caste hierarchy, with connected discrimination, is widespread among Muslims and Hindus in Bangladesh. Most Dalits live well below the poverty line and have very limited access to health care and schooling. Another form is discrimination for reasons of race or ethnic origin : indigenous peoples in Bangladesh are still discriminated against, subjected to "land grabbing" and violation of rights.

Just as strong is discrimination for religious reasons: despite the fact that the country's Constitution speaks of a secular political system, the 8th amendment to the Constitution declares Islam the "state religion" and provokes, in fact, "class distinction between Muslim and non Muslim citizens ". State laws also discriminate against religious minorities taking away their land. There is still a high percentage of violence against religious minorities, Buddhists, Ahmadhi, Christians, which goes mainly unpunished.

Another most serious and widespread form is discrimination against women: women do not have the same rights as men, they are forced into marriage, they are denied the right to inherit, and denied even basic education. They suffer frequently from sexual abuse and rape, but the law offers no protection and the aggressors go unpunished . Women according to sociocultural traditions have no right to decision making in the family or in the community, they live in total subjection to men.

Other citizens discriminated against include: disabled persons, persons with AIDS, homosexuals.

The Bangladesh civil society forum is urging the government to take legislative measures to apply the principle of equality and to prevent all forms of different treatment for reasons of ethnic origin, caste, religion, gender or place of birth. (PA) (Agenzia Fides 19/2/2013)

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