

donorDistinguished Chair, Delegates, Colleagues, and Special Rapporteur,

First, I would like to thank the International Dalit Solidarity Network, especially its Executive Director, Meena Varma, for inviting me to share my thoughts in this important session in Geneva. I would also like to thank Special Rapporteur on Minority issues for asking me to speak on the topic of rethinking minority rights defenders and their roles.

I come from Nepal, a country where people of certain groups are denied their basic human rights just because they are born into certain caste-groups. I come from a country where certain people are beaten, murdered, and raped just because they touch a person of another caste, or for daring to use a public water tap or a well, or falling in love or marrying a man or woman outside of their caste group. For example, at the beginning of the pandemic, in May 2020, six young men were killed by a mob of villagers and thrown into a river just because one of them loved a girl from so-called higher or dominant caste. Again, in May 2020, a 13-year-old minor, named Angira Pasi, was raped by a ‘dominant’ caste boy. She was forced into marriage with the rapist by the village council. She was later found hanged under suspicious circumstances. And, I come from a country where all the grave human rights violations of these kinds—even murders and rapes—are rarely prosecuted. These people, whose basic human rights have been denied, are the people known as Dalits. Considered to have been at the bottom of Nepal’s caste hierarchy. Dalits are also called Untouchables or the lowest or oppressed castes.

Today, I am going to speak about my own experience as a Dalit minority and human rights defender in Nepal as well as about my collaboration with hundreds of Dalit

women. The organization I currently work with, Samata Foundation is a leading Dalit think tank in Nepal and also a champion of Dalit human rights protection in Nepal, and has especially worked in this area through multiple approaches—through publishing data and holding the state accountable for Dalit human rights violations, through capacity building of grassroots people in the defense of human rights, and through supporting victims of violence through free legal support, rehabilitation, and counseling. Samata records cases of human rights violations monthly and publishes them immediately so that the data can serve as a tool for advocacy for holding concerned authorities accountable.

At Samata Foundation, I have been working with hundreds of Dalit women, especially in enhancing their knowledge, capacity, skills, and imagination so that they can aspire to build equitable and just futures. I am a Co-Principal Investigator of an initiative called Just Futures Initiative, whose primary goal is to create a critical mass of Dalit women who can interrogate, and challenge dominant narratives surrounding caste, gender, and sexuality and can weave their own personal narratives. We are currently managing an 18-month fellowship program on caste, gender, and sexuality for Dalit women aged 20 to 40. The focus of the Just Futures Initiative is on supporting and enabling *Apan Katha Apne Bunai Chhi*, which mean *Weaving One's Own Story*. We are hopeful that collaborating with these Dalit women will help us interrogate existing knowledge and narrative as well as develop new narratives, which is crucial for fighting against caste and gender oppression in Nepal and beyond. The significance of the power of critical knowledge for Dalit women in defending their rights is immense. I am an

example of this. Born and raised in an untouchable family in a small town in eastern Nepal, I was able to get into a reputed university in Australia for my post-graduate program in Women's Studies. This formal education equipped me to critically interrogate my own life, my family, and the society, especially through the perspectives of caste, gender, and sexuality, and to become a stronger social justice activist and thinker. It has helped me to imagine how Nepal and the world look when seen through a Dalit woman's eyes.

The situation of Dalit women's human rights is far worse than that of Dalit men. Dalit women are oppressed in multiple ways, oppressed by caste, gender, class and patriarchy. Yet Dalit women are often forgotten when we talk about Dalit human rights. They are also forgotten when we talk about women's human rights. One thing I have learned from my experience of collaborating with Dalit women so far is that recognizing these multiple, layered, and intertwined oppressions of Dalit women is crucial in the promotion of the human rights of Dalit women as minorities within a minority.

The other thing I want to highlight in this forum is that as a Dalit woman myself as well as my experience of working with other Dalit women, I feel that we need more opportunities and more support to better articulate our agency and voice, better mobilize resources, and eventually protect our human rights.

Lastly, as there are donors, supporters, and well-wishers of minority issues here in this gathering, I would like to request you all to please support and invest in young Dalit

women's education and capacity strengthening, which will effectively protect and address human rights of future generations.

Thank you all for listening to me. I look forward to talking to you later after the session, to be in touch with you, and possibly collaborating with you in our joint effort for the creation of a just society. We are the future. Thank you, again!