

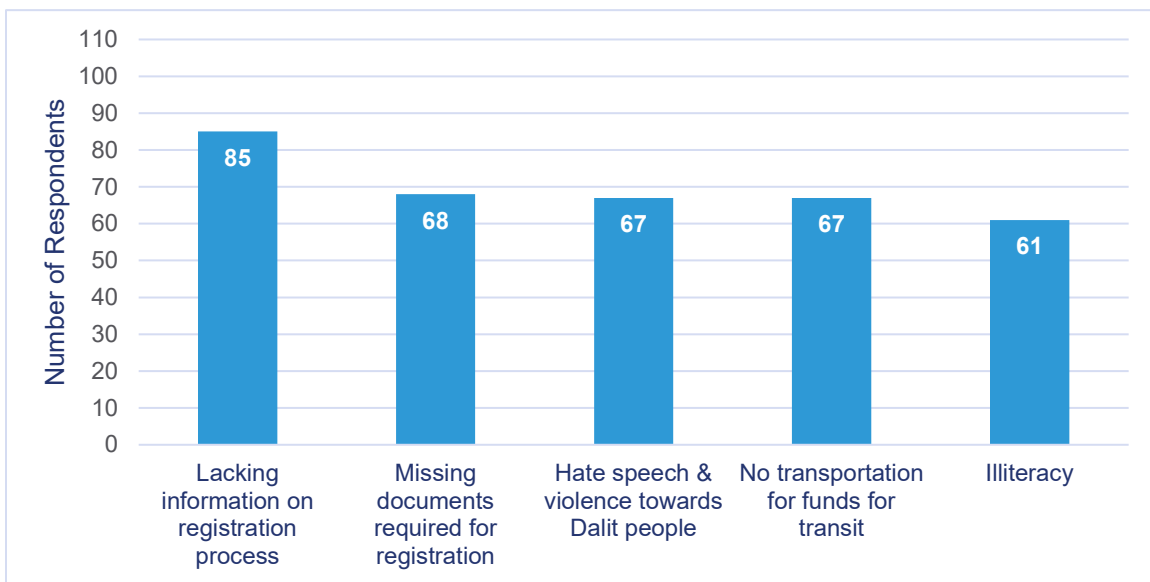
Dalit Experiences with Electoral Processes: Evidence from a Multi-National Survey

The *Survey on the Political Representation of Dalit Persons in South Asia* asked respondents about barriers faced by the Dalit community during all parts of the electoral process, from registering and voting to running for office. It also elicited participants' opinions on whether issues of importance to their community are represented in local and national politics and solicited feedback on how to make improvements.

Participation

Despite formal enfranchisement, South Asian Dalits face several barriers in registering to vote (see Figure 1). The survey asked respondents whether Dalit people faced a variety of barriers, including lack of information regarding registration processes; lack of documents required to register to vote (birth certificates, citizenship documents, and others); lack of transportation or financial resources to travel to a voter registration office; and lack of literacy, resulting in the inability to read or complete forms. Respondents commonly experienced all of these barriers. One respondent cited another barrier: people often cannot register due to seasonal migration for work.

Figure 1. Barriers to Voter Registration for Dalit People

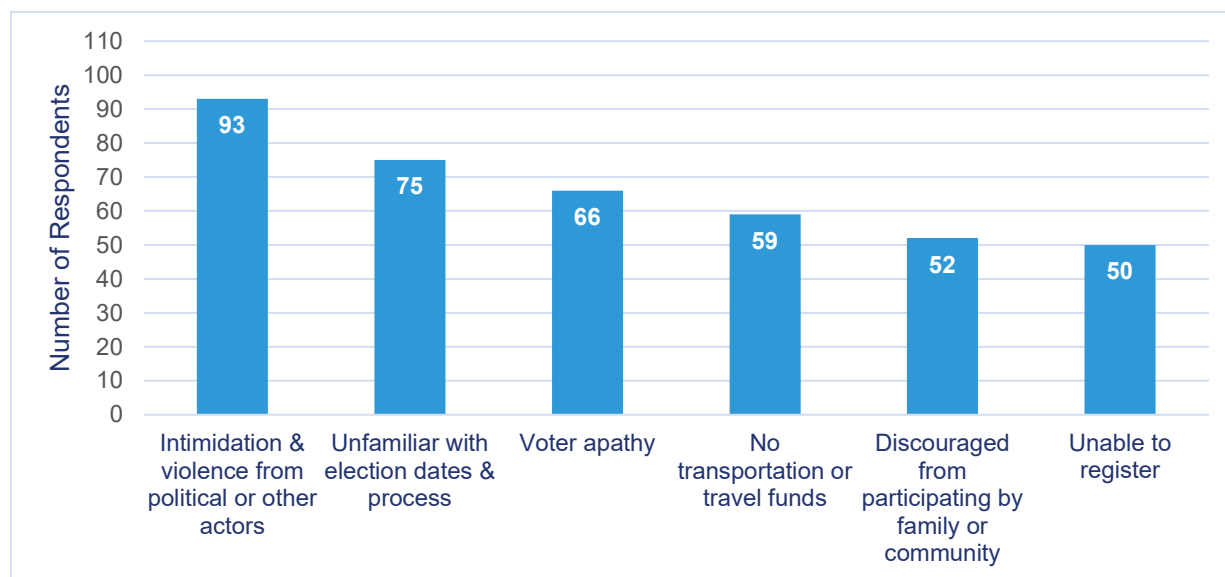


Note for Figure 1: N=114. Respondents were asked to select as many choices as were relevant.

Even when they do overcome registration barriers, Dalits face obstacles in reaching the polls. These include intimidation and violence from party representatives, candidates, or other actors; lack of accessible voter education on election dates, voting processes, and other information; apathy or a belief that their vote will not make a difference; lack of transportation or financial resources to travel to polling locations; and even discouragement from voting by family or community members (see Figure 2). As contextualized by one respondent, people sometimes cannot reach

polling stations without interrupting their working hours. Another respondent lamented the lack of polling stations in or near Dalit communities.

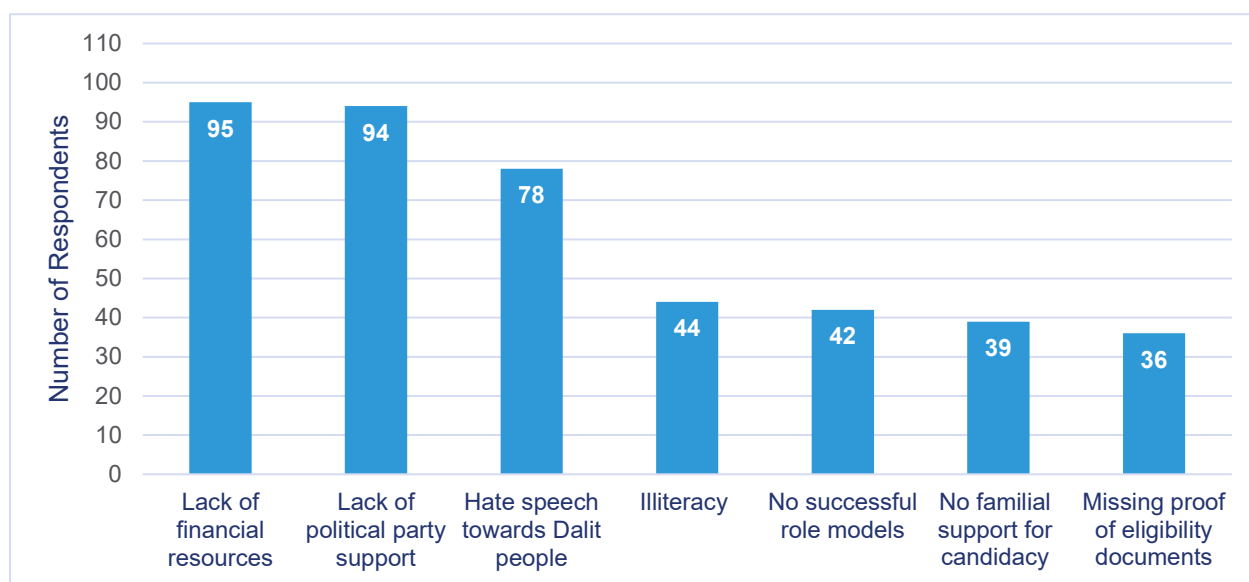
Figure 2. Barriers to Voting for Dalit People



Note for Figure 2: N=114. Respondents were asked to select as many choices as were relevant.

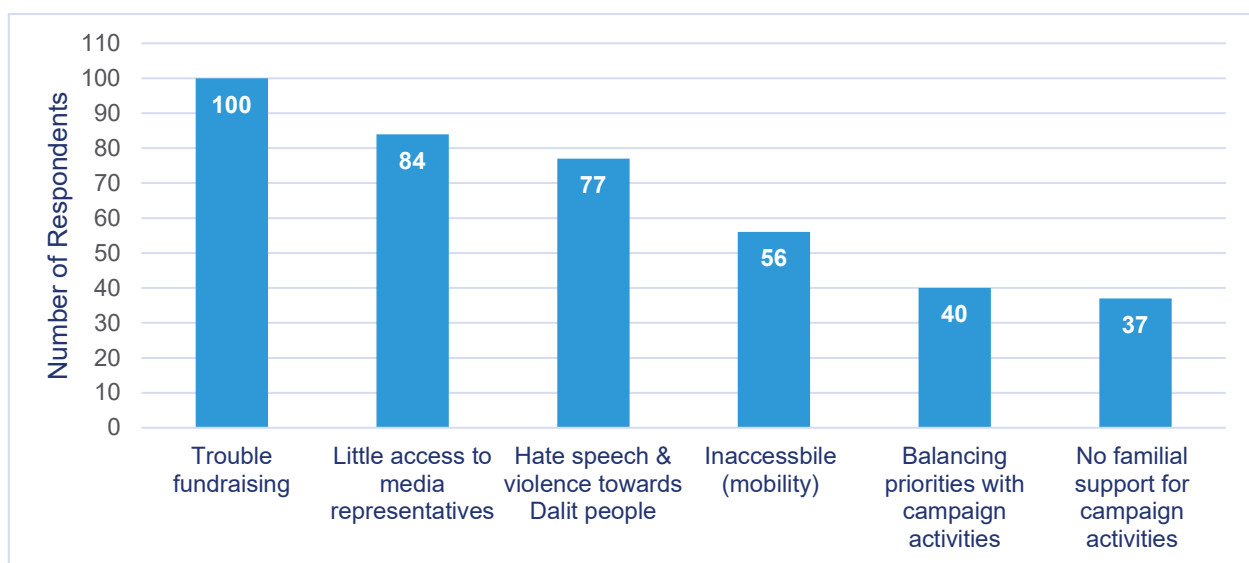
The survey also asked respondents who, in their opinion, prevents Dalit people from voting and to explain why. The “dominant caste” was most commonly identified as a person or type of person who prevents Dalit people from participating. Multiple respondents also named political parties, primarily for disregarding the needs of the Dalit community. This issue is discussed below.

As some Dalits seek election themselves, they face additional hurdles to entering the political arena. Among the factors identified as barriers to Dalit peoples’ candidacy for elected offices (see Figure 3), lack of financial resources was the foremost challenge identified by more than four out of five respondents (83 percent). Nearly as many (82 percent) mentioned a lack of support from the political party. More than half of respondents also noted hate speech toward Dalit people as a barrier to candidacy. Insufficient support from both the Dalit community and society generally makes it challenging for a Dalit person to seek elected office. One respondent commented that Dalit women face increased discrimination from within their own community when they seek candidacy, which becomes even worse if she does not win.

Figure 3. Barriers to Political Candidacy for Dalit People

Note for Figure 3: N=114. Respondents were asked to select as many choices as were relevant.

Those who seek office despite or perhaps in the face of these barriers also seem to face high hurdles during the campaign period (see Figure 4). Fundraising was far and away the most commonly identified challenge, recognized by almost every respondent (87 percent). Nearly three-quarters of respondents also identified a lack of access to media representatives (74 percent), and almost as many cited hate speech and violence toward Dalit people (68 percent) as obstacles during the campaign and election periods. One respondent elaborated that security concerns were a problem when a Dalit person campaigns, and another mentioned that the dominant class stages attacks, although it was unclear what form those attacks take.

Figure 4. Obstacles Dalit People Face While Campaigning and During Election Period

Note for Figure 4: N=114. Respondents were asked to select as many choices as were relevant.

Representation

Elected officials are expected to govern for all people. Survey respondents were asked **whether elected officials generally address issues of importance to the Dalit community** at the national and sub-national levels. At both levels, most respondents felt “Dalit issues” were poorly (38) or very poorly (59) represented. Only 17 agreed that the group was represented well or very well. At the sub-national level, 93 of the 114 respondents said Dalit community issues were poorly or very poorly represented, and only 17 thought they were well represented.

Research has shown the positive impact of having diverse voices at the decision-making table. With this in mind, survey respondents were asked **whether they feel Dalit politicians can be influential in Parliament** and to explain why or why not. Of the 94 respondents who explained their positions, 52 (55 percent) stated they *do feel* Dalit representatives influence Parliament. Many said these representatives are familiar with Dalit issues and have the capacity to bring them to Parliament. A few stated that, while they think Dalit parliamentarians can influence decision-making, they are underperforming in their roles, sometimes recognizing structural limitations on what they can accomplish.

Twenty respondents (21 percent) said Dalit parliamentarians *might* be influential but noted some critical barriers to their effectiveness. The main problem identified is party control. As Dalit politicians join existing parties, they cannot express their views fully due to formal rules and partisan pressure. One respondent proposed a Dalit party that would prioritize and truly give voice to Dalit community concerns; another suggested that a greater number of Dalit representatives would help. One respondent commented that Dalit representatives “were never allowed to reach the level of central leadership.” Others noted that Dalits still face discrimination.

The 22 respondents (23 percent) who answered no, Dalit parliamentarians are *not able* to exercise influence in their positions, offered similar explanations. Multiple people blamed party control, noting Dalit members cannot voice individual opinions. Others viewed this as personal interests getting in the way of overarching party interests.

Survey respondents were also asked to reflect on whether **Dalit representatives might be excluded** from specific processes or high-level dialogue. Most respondents agreed that Dalit representatives are excluded from at least some processes. The most commonly reported process was planning in general, with budget processes a close second. Eighty-one respondents (71 percent) agreed that Dalit representatives were excluded from drafting legislation and policies, and nearly as many suggested they were excluded from efforts to enforce that legislation.

Some countries, including India and Nepal, have attempted to rectify the exclusion of Dalits and disregard for Dalit issues by setting quotas in their Parliaments. The respondents were asked to reflect on **whether quotas are an effective way to ensure Dalit representation**. A subset (80) offered their perspectives.² About half of the respondents who answered this question (45, or 56 percent) said quotas *are* effective. Eleven (14 percent) suggested that quotas *might be* effective under certain conditions, and the remaining 24 (30 percent) said quotas *were not* effective. The respondents who thought quotas were effective tended to justify this answer by saying quotas increase

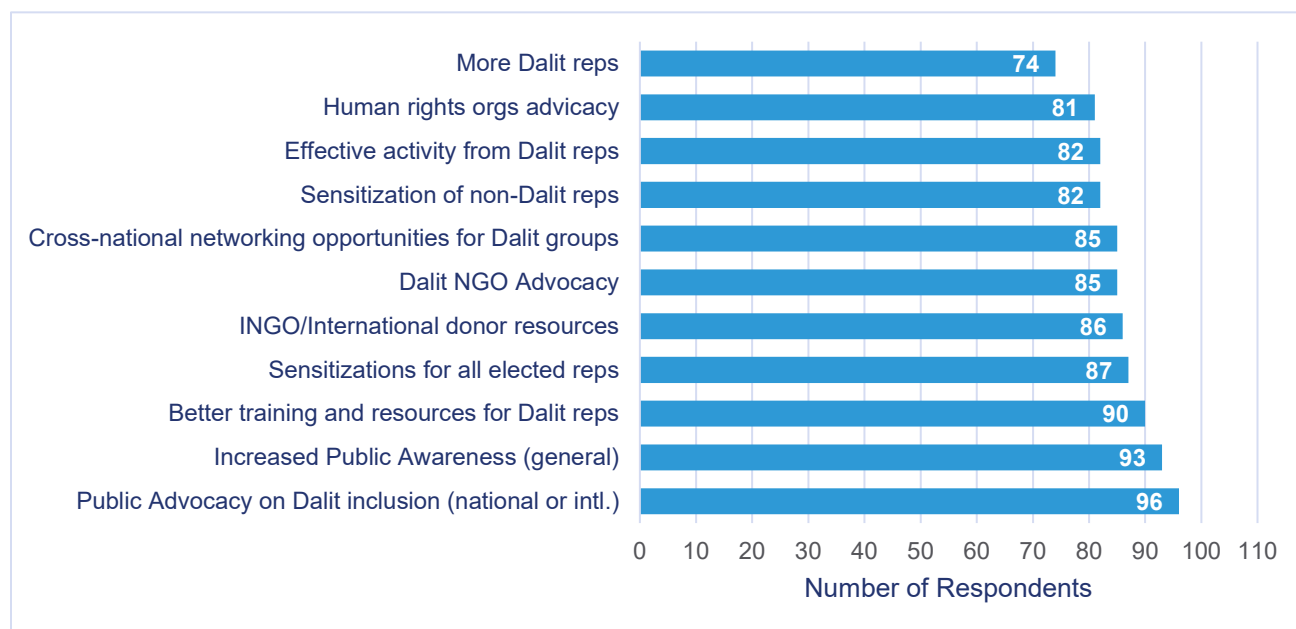
² Two partial responses in this count of 80 include responses to open-ended questions.

opportunities, ensure participation, and give voice to the Dalit community's concerns. However, among the 11 respondents who responded that quotas might be effective were caveats that the system should only be temporary. Those who said the quota system was not effective stated that it was poorly implemented and did not adequately reflect the community's concerns. One respondent noted: "The quota system gives quantitative representation but lacks the qualitative representation" of community needs. Several respondents blamed political party pressure since elected officials are still unable to give voice to Dalit community issues or truly speak their minds due to party discipline.

The survey then asked respondents to reflect upon several **possible means of improving the representation of Dalit issues** in elected bodies. Nearly all respondents agreed that public advocacy on Dalit inclusion in national or international organizations, increased public awareness, and better training and resources for Dalit representatives would improve the situation. About three-quarters of respondents (85 or more) thought resources from international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) and international donors, advocacy by Dalit NGOs (nongovernmental organizations), and sensitization of all elected representatives to Dalit issues would also be of use. More than half of the respondents also agreed that the sensitization of elected representatives to Dalit issues, and a larger number of Dalit representatives, would increase representation. Respondents also showed strong support for other possible changes (see Figure 5).

Some respondents proposed additional methods of intervention, most about political parties. One respondent suggested forming a Dalit rights political party, and two suggested advocacy and lobbying with existing political parties. Two others expressed a need for action from the state or ruling government; another said Dalit community leaders need support to build capacity, raise awareness, and advocate. One respondent specified that Dalit elected representatives need greater office and research support.

Figure 5. Support for Proposed Methods of Increasing Dalit Issue Representation



Note for Figure 5: Originally asked as two questions.

As reflected in this survey, Dalit people across the region are regularly excluded from political processes, and elected bodies often overlook issues of importance to the community. Without such representation, it is unlikely that the inequalities that prevent the actualization of political rights for Dalits and other marginalized groups will be addressed meaningfully. While many actors could take strides to support this community, questions remain about what formal legal protections exist for the Dalit communities in South Asian countries and what changes or improvements could further promote their participation and integrate them as representatives in elected bodies. The following section reviews the *de jure* rights guaranteed to Dalits under international and national legal frameworks in the South Asian nations of India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.