‘Dalits face discrimination, violence in U.S.’

Activists hold Congressional briefing on caste-linked bias in America

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A group of South Asia-focused community organisations held a Congressional briefing on caste discrimination on Wednesday. The hearing’s objectives included educating Congressional staff about how caste operates in the U.S., highlighting the damage it does to U.S. institutions, and advocating data collection, monitoring and legislation.

Central to the discussion was a survey conducted by Equality Labs, which describes itself as a “South Asian Community Technology Organization” that seeks to end discrimination in various forms. Some 1,500 people in the diaspora who identified as “South Asian” were sent a self-administered online survey with 47 questions related to caste. Of the respondents, 33% identified as ‘Brahmins’, 24% as ‘Dalits’, 7% as ‘Adivasis’ and 18% as ‘Shudras’.

Fifty two per cent of Dalit respondents feared their caste would be “outed” and 67% said they faced discrimination at the workplace. Forty one per cent of Dalits said they faced discrimination in educational establishments. Twenty six per cent of Dalits who responded said they had experienced physical assault based on their caste.

The briefing included testimony on caste discrimination and caste-based violence as well as a discussion of what is required in terms of sensitising American institutions to caste-based discrimination.

The briefing’s recommendations included a need for monitoring and reporting of caste-based discrimination at the workplace, including sensitisation to caste issues in diversity workshops.

A briefing is different from a Congressional hearing – the latter has the power to make individuals testify or face penalties for not doing so. A briefing can occur when a group wants to highlight an issue and it requires a Congressional sponsor – in this case, Congresswoman Pramila Jayapal, a Washington State Democrat.

Ms. Jayapal and several other members of Congress were represented by their Chiefs of Staff.