NWSA Statement on Caste as a Protected Category

The National Women’s Studies Association condemns casteism in colleges and universities and stands in solidarity with institutions recognizing caste as a protected category.

Casteism is a form of descent based discrimination. The effects of casteism include segregation, employment discrimination, sexual violence, police brutality, and discrimination in education. Like racism (also a form of descent based discrimination), casteism is institutionalized, systemic, and intersectional with color, class, gender, and sexuality. Casteism cuts across religions including Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, and Sikhism. Since caste is intersectional, many with caste power also have generational and accumulated wealth which aids in the ability to migrate. Thus, caste travels with the diaspora and oppressed castes experience casteism in the US. While we most often associate caste with South Asia and the South Asian diaspora, it is important to understand that casteism is a form of discrimination that can be found in other areas of the world as well.

Any group that can access caste power upholds a system which dominates caste “others.” Hence, anti-caste activists use the term “dominant caste” to refer to those with caste power and privilege. Dalit Bahujan castes, or those who experience the multiple and intersectional effects of casteism, violence, and caste apartheid, are referred to as “oppressed” in a caste stratified society.

Education is one place where we see discrimination based on caste. Professor Shailaja Paik's research has revealed the ways in which dominant castes prohibited oppressed castes from textual learning, and how Dalit activists fought and continue to fight for civil rights in education.[1] The Equality Labs survey “Caste in the United States” found that 41% of Dalit students surveyed reported facing discrimination in educational institutions in the diaspora (compared to only 3% of dominant castes). The discrimination oppressed castes face in colleges and universities includes castiest jokes and slurs, discrimination in housing, and social exclusion in social and networking groups. A recent survey on Indian Americans found that the majority of dominant caste people do not identify with a caste. This is in line with research that has shown that dominant caste peoples have the ability to and often invisibilize their caste.[2] Oppressed castes, in relation, do not have that same ability. Especially in graduate education, this invisibilization of caste by dominant caste students occurs under a discourse of “merit,” while oppressed castes are stigmatized and assumed to be beneficiaries of undergraduate affirmative action policies in South Asia.
At federal and state levels, caste does not receive protection making it difficult to recognize and name casteism, and to seek justice for oppressed castes who experience casteism in the US. Some colleges and universities have recognized caste as a protected category including Brandeis University, California State East Bay Department of Social Work, and Carleton University. Other institutions are beginning the process as well. As an academic association committed to social justice, NWSA recognizes that casteism is a form of discrimination affecting oppressed caste peoples in colleges and universities. In the words of Angela Davis: “This is a time when the world is beginning to rise together to demand justice for those who are targeted by white supremacists and casteists. Therefore, we stand with those who are issuing a global cry for an end to racism and who not only say Black lives matter but also Dalit lives matter and Muslim lives matter.” We stand in solidarity with institutions recognizing caste as a protected category in their official non-discrimination policies.

Signed,
The NWSA Executive Committee
Kaye Wise Whitehead, President (Loyola University Maryland)
Patti Duncan, Vice President (Oregon State University)
Sonja Thomas, Secretary (Colby College)
Angela Clark-Taylor, Treasurer (Case Western Reserve University)
Premilla Nadasen, Ex-Officio, NWSA President 2018-2020 (Barnard College)

Institutional affiliations are included for identification purposes only.


August 2021