

February 17, 2023

Seattle City Council
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Dear Seattle City Council Members,

My name is Thenmozhi Soundararajan. I am Executive Director of Equality Labs, a Dalit civil rights organization dedicated to ending caste apartheid, gender-based violence, white supremacy and religious intolerance through community organizing, research and training. We are a national organization with over 140,000 members with a Seattle chapter that has members who work on the issues of caste equity and gender based violence at the intergovernmental, governmental, corporate, and civil society levels.

It is in this capacity that **we write to urgently request the Seattle City Council to vote yes on the ordinance to ban caste based discrimination by listing caste as a protected category in the Seattle city non-discrimination policy.** It is a culmination of years of Dalit feminist research and organizing that has broken the silence about caste oppression in our communities and found ways to heal from this violent caste system in our diasporic networks and in our homelands.

The path to this Seattle ordinance was the result of a years' long-collaboration between my organization [Equality Labs](#), and many grassroots organizations in the city. It began in 2015 when we began engaging in [Black and Brown solidarity work with the #Dalitwomenfight tour](#) in 2015. The tour was centered on Dalit women leaders who were fighting against caste-based sexual violence to speak out and build solidarity with leaders from Black Lives Matter, worker unions, University of Washington faculty and students, as well as racial and gender justice groups in the city.

This work then spawned a collaboration between Equality Labs, [Api Chaya](#), and [Ambedkar Association of North America](#) to support caste-oppressed survivors in the city. Among our achievements was the [first congressional briefing on caste discrimination](#) with Rep. Pramila Jaypal (D-WA) held in 2019. This briefing was inspired by the many powerful survivor advocates from all of our organizations who have supported caste-oppressed workers, and survivors of domestic violence and trafficking in Washington state and across the nation who felt it was time to take our issues to U.S. congress so we could work collaboratively to find a remedy to this issue.

Now, our caste equity coalition is driven by powerful interfaith and inter-caste organizations like the [Coalition of Seattle Indians](#), [Indian American Muslim Council](#), [National Academic Coalition for Caste Equity](#), South Asians for Black Lives, as well as network of over 30 Anti-caste Ambedkarite

organizations such as [Ambedkar King Study Circle](#), [Ambedkar International center](#), [Ambedkarite Buddhist Association of Texas](#), [Boston Study Group](#), Ravidassia and Sikh gurdwaras from throughout the northwest and many more.

For these reasons, we encourage the Seattle City Council Members to ratify the ordinance to ban caste based discrimination in Seattle. Despite the legal and moral appropriateness of this decision and the momentum that institutions across the nation are building by amending policy to incorporate caste protections, a small group of opponents and allied organizations are utilizing intimidation tactics and disinformation to dismiss this legislation.

However, we assure you that there is a tremendous amount of support, both at the local, state, national, and international level that stands behind you as we all witness and write history together. Thus, we have helped mobilize letters of support from various stakeholders including many Seattle Based organizations as well as [Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance \(APALA\)](#), [AFL-CIO](#), [Alphabet Workers Union](#), [Tech Workers for Caste Equity](#), [Asian American Disinformation Table](#), [Ultraviolet](#), Indivisible, and a national collective of Dalit civil rights organizations Additionally prominent experts on caste and the law as well as a legal review prepared by our counsel [Ann Ravel](#) who's previous experience includes working as Deputy Assistant Attorney General for Torts and Consumer Litigation in the Civil Division of the United States Department of Justice. Even the prominent [South Asian Bar Association of North America](#) the voice of the South Asian legal community in North America has endorsed this resolution.

With South Asian Americans becoming one of the fastest growing immigrant groups in the United States, it is critical for us to acknowledge the need to support caste oppressed communities, who are essentially minorities within this minority group, within Seattle.

Our research has revealed that caste based discrimination is rampant across American institutions, including universities, other spaces of higher education, and workplaces in the form of microaggressions and caste slurs. Caste based discrimination is also rampant and prevalent in housing, student networks, groups, and as gender based violence in the forms of sexual harassment and assault. **1 in 4 Dalits experience physical or verbal assault, 1 in 3 experience discrimination in universities, and 2 out of 3 face discrimination in the workplaces.** These are extremely grave statistics, reflective of the realities of caste oppressed community members. We must also remind you that many of these caste oppressed community members have been at the forefront of this movement for the last few months, and have put their safety and well being at risk to mobilize and testify in the Seattle City Council meetings, as part of the democratic process of institutionalizing caste protections.

In addition, in 2022, the [National Academic Coalition for Caste Equity](#) and Equality Labs also conducted the Caste in Higher Education Conference and Survey, the preliminary analysis of which revealed that within U.S. higher education, 4 in 5 caste-oppressed students, staff, and faculty

reported experiencing caste discrimination at the hands of their dominant-caste peers. Further, 3 in 4 caste-oppressed stakeholders did not report caste-based discrimination in their universities or colleges because caste was not added as a protected category, or their Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion departments lacked caste competency due to a lack of provisions and trainings.

These are extremely grave statistics, reflecting the serious extent of caste oppression. In the face of stiff opposition from caste-privileged communities, we have also publicized such stories in mainstream outlets like [NPR](#), [CNN](#), [The Washington Post](#), [Harpers Bazaar](#), [PRI](#), [The New York Times](#), [Time](#), [Vice](#), [Wired](#), [BBC](#), [Slate](#), [The New Yorker](#), and more.

In fact there are record number of op-ed's from caste oppressed people around this issue including

[Seattle Must Ban Caste Discrimination](#)

[A Historic Ordinance Could Ban Caste Discrimination](#)

[Caste in America: Mothers Like Me are Excluded From Indian Parent Networks Because I am a Dalit](#)

[We Fled India to Escape the Nightmare of Caste Oppression. To Our Horror, We Found it in America, Too](#)

[I am a Dalit Sikh Woman. Here's an Account of My Journey to Healing in the Campaign to Ban Caste Discrimination in America](#)

[Caste Should Not Be A Part of the American Dream](#)

[How Caste Travels](#)

The reality can no longer be denied: [Caste discrimination exists, and South Asians have brought it to the U.S.](#) Like other systems of discrimination, it must be tackled through the enforcement of civil rights law.

Even now, casteist bigots are attacking our leaders with disinformation campaigns and comments, doxxing attempts, and physical and verbal threats. This is the cost of courage. Despite the severity of these attacks, our leaders are standing strong because they know that they have the tremendous foundation of civil rights law to base the request for protection.

Today, as the fate of this historic win is endangered by those acting in bad faith, we want to remind you of the bigoted nature of the opposition. By not passing the ordinance to ban caste based discrimination, it would not only cause harm to the bargaining process, but also undermine workers' rights, women and queer rights, and the rights of caste oppressed community members and stakeholders in the city of Seattle.

As a city committed to providing equitable access to a safe and enriching environment for education and growth, we hope that you firmly reject these efforts and continue to stand with caste oppressed community members in your city. Discomfort or fragility around equity cannot come in the way of protecting the rights and dignity of caste oppressed community members and stakeholders in the city of Seattle.

As caste oppressed peoples in Seattle and beyond, we are fortunate to be living in a moment when a critical mass of caste oppressed scholars, organizers, advocates, and workers have come forward asking for their rights, ushering in a civil rights movement where there cannot be caste denial, neither by dominant caste South Asians nor the institutions with which we are connected.

We urge all Councilmembers to vote YES on the ordinance proposed by Councilmember Kshama Sawant, to ban caste-based discrimination in Seattle city. For further questions on the legality of adding caste as a protected category, I am attaching our legal review prepared by our counsel.

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'tm', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Thenmozhi Soundararajan
Executive Director, Equality Labs