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Deteriorating Labor Market Exclusion of the Dalit Community in Bangladesh

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Abstract

Social inclusion, a key objective of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), seeks to empower all individuals regardless of their identities. Yet, caste-based discrimination affecting approximately 260 million Dalit individuals globally remains absent in global agendas. In Bangladesh, the ethnic identification of the Dalit community is absent from national censuses, reflecting the complex nature of their marginalization. Constrained by hereditary occupations, the Dalit community faces limited economic prospects, societal biases, and numerous barriers that hinder their economic participation. This study evaluates the effectiveness of the government initiatives and policies and examines the employment status through interviews and household surveys in the three Dalit communities. The findings reveal significant challenges, including

inadequate enforcement of government directives and persistent exclusionary practices despite meeting educational requirements. This study recommends formally including the Dalit ethnicity in national census and employment documents to ensure policy implementation and foster social inclusion by recognizing socio-economic and cultural diversity.

Keywords: Dalit community, Ethnic identity, Employment scenario, Social inclusion/exclusion, Sustainable development.

1. Introduction

Nowadays, the global community has made intensive efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), of which social inclusion is one of the major goals. The emphasis on “inclusion” in SDGs, in particular, Goal 10 to “empower and promote the social, economic, and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion, or economic or other status” compels us to specify what social inclusion is and how to accomplish it.¹ Social inclusion can be identified through its counterpart, “social exclusion,” and often goes hand in hand.² The concept of social exclusion/inclusion originated in France and was later adopted by the European Union as a key concept in social policy and, in many instances, replaced the concept of poverty.³ According to the World Bank (2013), social inclusion is essential because it is the foundation for shared prosperity and because exclusion has a progressive impact on social, economic, and political factors, which are often intertwined. Individuals or groups with certain distinguishing characteristics consistently failed to benefit from a nation’s progress, and they are often but not consistently the poorest. They are distinguished by the notion that they are members of excluded groups.⁴

Caste is one of the social systems that explicitly identifies the lower class in a hierarchical stratification,⁵ yet it is not explicitly mentioned in the SDGs.⁶ It is a rigid social institution that determines hereditary social hierarchical groups at birth and cannot be changed.⁷ Caste operates through interconnected systems of *varna* (social classes rooted in duties and responsibilities in Hindu philosophy, i. e., Rigveda) and *jati* (hereditary, endogamous social groups).⁸ The *varna* system in Hinduism divides society into four main classes: Brahmins as the highest, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas, and Sudras.⁹ The *jatis* are associated with specific occupations, social rules, and cultural identities, and are often linked to the *varna* system—for instance, Brahmins as priests and teachers, Kshatriyas as warriors and rulers, Vaisyas as farmers and merchants, and Sudras as laborers though these associations can vary regionally and are not always settled. The actual social organization is more complex and encompasses thousands of *jatis* with specific occupational roles and cultural identities across different regions.¹⁰ The Dalit people, considered untouchable and outcaste, fall outside and beneath the *varna* system altogether.¹¹ This marginalized status has historically restricted their access to resources and occupational opportunities, forcing them into work deemed unclean.¹² In India, the subject of exclusion experienced by the Dalit community, along with Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST), has garnered widespread discussion among scholars and human rights organizations at both national and international levels, gaining prominence in research and policy formulation.¹³ However, an estimated 260 million Dalit people globally face discrimination based on caste, work, and descent that is entrenched in traditional ideas of purity and pollution.¹⁴ Despite this fact, caste-based discrimination has not been a global social inclusion agenda. This may be largely due to the international human rights law, which prohibits governments from including caste or “work and descent”-based discrimination as the

agenda of intergovernmental negotiations, and thus the issue is regarded as an internal matter rather than a global agenda.¹⁵

In the chronicles of Indian history, the community known today as Dalits has been referred to by various terms such as Chandalas, Harijans, Avarnas, Achuta, Depressed Castes, Untouchable, Parihas, Adi-Dravida, Ad-Dharmis, each reflecting the evolving social context of those times.¹⁶ However, they wanted to be referred to as the Dalit, particularly after the Dalit Panthers movement between the 1970s and 1980s, spearheaded by Dalit civil society activists who sought to internationalize their problems as human rights issues affecting India and the South Asian diaspora.¹⁷ Caste is associated with descent-based work, and the Dalit have historically dedicated to filthy, dehumanizing, and unprotected occupations based on the caste notion of ritual purity and pollution.¹⁸ Despite the effort of national and international NGOs and activists to draw attention to caste-based discrimination and multiple deprivations, social perceptions of the Dalit are still shaped by the concept of unclean and polluting occupations.¹⁹ For centuries, the Dalit people have faced oppression, social discrimination, and denial by Hindus of higher castes.²⁰

The challenges and issues faced by the Dalit community may not be necessarily limited to Hindu-majority countries. During the British colonial regime in the 1830s, the progenitors of the Dalit were brought from South India to other South Asian countries to provide menial services, in particular scavenging.²¹ Since then, the Dalit communities have been residing in other South Asian countries. However, the ethnic classification of the Dalit is not included in the national censuses of other South Asian countries except the Hindu-majority countries, India and Nepal. Therefore, the entire population is yet unknown in the region.²² As such, the Dalit's status is underrepresented, and there is still a need for a well-informed narrative inside Dalit circles, as well as a deeper awareness of the Dalit-related issues in non-Hindu majority countries where Hindus are the

minority, making the Dalit a double minority. They might be better off, for example, because caste is not a dominant perspective in these countries in principle, so social and economic mobility is unlikely prohibited in Muslim countries,²³ as the caste system does.²⁴ Alternatively, they might be worse off due to their double minority status. This paper examines these aspects within the framework of the Bangladeshi setting as a case study.

In Bangladesh, similar to other non-Hindu majority countries in South Asia, the Dalit identification is not included in the national census, so the exact number of the Dalit communities is not formally known; however, an estimated 5.5 million Dalit people live in Bangladesh based on previous studies.²⁵ Their primary occupation in Bangladesh is sweeping and cleaning within the government sectors such as city corporations, railways, and hospitals; where they have been working for generations.²⁶ At least in the 2000s, almost all government sweeping posts used to be occupied by the Dalit, but several recent studies pointed out that Dalit people are losing the government sweeping job due to their lower caste identity;²⁷ due to fierce competition and social denial.²⁸ However, these reports contradict the recent social inclusion actions by the Bangladesh government. In 2012, the Dalit rights movement organizations, Dalit community leaders, and NGO activists petitioned for their rights, and in response to the movement, the government set the directives to reserve 80% of sweeping or cleaning jobs in all the government autonomous and non-government institutions for the Dalit community.²⁹ As such, the situation faced by the Dalit community in Bangladesh cannot be explained by a one-dimensional picture of higher castes versus untouchables. The colonial conditions, rather than religious ideology, may be responsible for their situations.³⁰ Due to their hereditary occupation, restricted economic prospects, societal prejudice, and other restraints to engage in economic activities, the urban Dalits are considered highly vulnerable among the marginalized population in Bangladesh.³¹

This study aims to assess the employment status of the Dalit community in relation to government-reserved positions for sweepers and cleaners in Bangladesh; how effectively the government initiatives and policies have been implemented; and what factors hindered social inclusion promotion. Specifically, we collect quantitative data through the questionnaire survey, addressing the gap in existing literature that predominantly relies on qualitative information from interviews and offers fragmented, descriptive findings.³² Quantitative evidence has been scarce.³³ This study argues that despite apparent policy advances, the Dalit community in Bangladesh continues to experience profound social and economic marginalization. While government directives and international development goals emphasize inclusion, the persistent absence of Dalit ethnic identification in national censuses, combined with entrenched societal prejudices and inadequate policy enforcement, perpetuates a cycle of systemic exclusion. We present the current situations of the Dalit, providing solid quantitative evidence of their employment status in Bangladesh as a case study. Additionally, we discuss the complex interplay of policy attitudes among international communities and the country. The emancipation of Dalits from entrenched practices of exclusion, including hereditary occupations, remains an area that requires further scrutiny. This study's examination—specifically focused on revealing implementation gaps in existing policy frameworks designed to ensure economic security within the context of the SDGs—could offer perspectives that contribute to broader discussions on this larger agenda.

2. Literature Review: The Dalit Community Situation among the South Asian Countries

For centuries in South Asia, the caste system and its practice significantly impacted a large part of society.³⁴ While most South Asian countries have either outlawed or are trying to move away from the caste system, regional variations persist.³⁵ We compare the Dalit community's situations across

South Asian countries through an extensive literature review, aiming to show how social inclusion has been advocated in these countries. The review encompasses a diverse range of challenges faced by the Dalit community, with a comprehensive comparison presented in Table 1.

Except for Sri Lanka, four other South Asian countries maintain strict caste systems among the Hindu community, as well as the Dalit community itself and caste has been a major foundation in Nepal and Indian social structure since ancient times.³⁶ In these countries, Dalits mainly live on the edges of villages, often in rural areas, or are segregated inside an urban colony. In terms of demographics, India holds the largest Dalit population, followed by Nepal, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. As for Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, there is no official enumeration. The Dalit situation in the non-Hindu majority countries remains understudied due to the absence of caste recognition in population data. In terms of education, Sri Lanka has the highest literacy rate, followed by India, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Pakistan.

Table 1 highlights that, outside Sri Lanka, Dalits are confined to specific occupations and face employment opportunities; whereas Sri Lanka offers more inclusive employment opportunities. Nepal and India legally abolished discrimination based on caste in 2011 and 1950, respectively,³⁷ and implemented quota system and special reservation policy in the education and employment sector to address exclusionary practices.³⁸ However, Dalit individuals encounter challenges in accessing reservation benefits.³⁹ Bangladesh prohibits discrimination based on caste or religion and provides 80 percent quota in government sweeping jobs since 2012.⁴⁰ Pakistan denies the presence of any kind of discrimination in the social and economic life of the country since the state follows Islamic identity and ideology.⁴¹ Consequently, the country has no specific initiative for the Dalit community's education or any particular development program for its Dalit population.⁴² From an institutional standpoint, the situation of the Dalit in Bangladesh can be viewed as

relatively favorable because the government formally recognizes the Dalit as a marginalized community, introduced a reservation policy, and formulated a Dalit manual in 2013 in order to improve the living standard of this community.

3. Materials and Methods

This study first administered six key informant interviews to the relevant stakeholders, including officials from Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC), the Department of Social Services (DSS), the Dalit rights organization, Bangladesh Dalit Excluded Rights Movement (BDERM), and the Dalit community leaders. Later, a household questionnaire survey was conducted to quantitatively assess the employment status of the Dalit and investigate what factors affect it the most.

3.1. Key Informant Interview

Key informant interviews (KII) were performed online from December 2020 to February 2021, prior to the household questionnaire survey. Informants were chosen based on their authority and involvement in the community's decision-making process. They were asked about the Dalit employment in government sweeping position, recruitment process for the job in city corporations, also, and policy development and implementation with the Department of Social Services (DSS). The list of interviewees for the KII is provided in Table 2. The interviews were performed in a semi-structured approach, with open-ended questions which allowed participants to express their opinions freely.

3.2. Study Area

A household questionnaire survey was carried out in three Dalit colonies, Mironjilla Harijan city colony, Ganaktuli city colony, and Wari city colony in Dhaka city, Bangladesh. Figure 1 shows the location of the three study sites. The study sites were selected due to the employment of

sweepers from these colonies in various cleaning roles, including positions with the city corporation, railway, other commercial companies, and NGOs. Dalit colonies, which are informally designated for the Dalit community by the local government, are subject to eviction orders at any time.⁴³ Obtaining access to these colonies and conducting research is often challenging. In this study, an executive member of the Bangladesh Dalit Excluded Rights Movement (BDERM) facilitated contact with community leaders, securing permission to conduct the survey.

The city colony of Mironjilla is located in Nazira Bazaar on Dhaka's Central Aga Sadek Road. The colony is heavily inhabited, with tightly packed structures. Even though the number of the Dalit people has increased over time, neither the number of colonies nor the size of communities has increased.⁴⁴ Approximately 350 households are in the Mironjilla colony (KII, Community Leader), although there is no official data that provides the total population living in this colony. Ganaktuli city colony is located in the city's Hazaribagh area. According to the community leaders, over 2,000 Dalit households used to live in this area. There are currently about 150 households residing in this colony. The rest of the families were temporally relocated from this colony to Bosila in 2018 due to the DSCC's new development project, which includes two sets of three six-story residential structures for the Dalit community (KII, DSCC). In Doyagonj's Wari city colony, there are approximately 250 households. The DSCC has developed a ten-story building with 325 square feet on average and features running water and sanitary facilities.

3.3 Household Survey

The household survey was conducted from March 10, 2021, to March 20, 2021, in the three studied colonies. One hundred randomly selected households from each colony, that is, a total of 300 samples from three colonies, formed the study. The purpose of conducting the household survey

is to acquire data about the Dalit community's employment status, economic conditions, demographics, level of education, and other key characteristics. Furthermore, we asked how the COVID-19 pandemic affected their employment status.

In our survey methodology, we asked respondents, "Who in your family is currently employed?" and "When did each employed family member start their current job?" We specifically focused on determining the employment status of the Dalit community at the time of the survey and examined the timing of their involvement within three distinct timeframes: "before December 2010," "January 2011 to December 2019," and "after January 2020 to December 2020." The reasons for choosing these timeframes are as follows. Since 2011, the city corporation has started following the formal recruitment process (previously, they did not) (KII, DSCC, BDERM and Community leaders), which requires public job announcements in national and local newspapers, minimum educational attainment of the Junior School Certificate (JSC), and an oral examination (KII, DSCC and BDERM).⁴⁵ The JSC is an eighth-grade annual examination that certifies completion of junior secondary education, which has been administered every year since 2010.⁴⁶ No educational qualification was required before then.⁴⁷ In the following year, 2012, the government preserved an 80 percent quota in the government sweeping jobs in response to the petition made by the Dalit rights movement organizations, Dalit community leaders, and NGO activists in the previous year.⁴⁸ The aim of the analysis here is to investigate how these changes affected the Dalit employment status by comparing the situations "before December 2010" and from "January 2011 to December 2019." Also, separate data for the time frame of "after January 2020 to December 2020" were collected to investigate the impact of one year of COVID-19 on the labor market of the Dalit community.

As a research ethics protocol, the research aims, the importance of the study, confidentiality regulations, potential risks and benefits, and the participants' ability to withdraw from the interviews at any time during the session were all addressed before obtaining consent. Personal and household information was gathered, including age, sex, education, occupation, and family income. However, all participants' personal identity (ID) confidentiality was carefully maintained, and the researchers only utilized these details. Only the participant ID number was used to examine the data.

4. Results

4.1 Summary of Key Informant Interviews

This section provides a summary of key informant interviews carried out with city corporation authorities and other pertinent stakeholders. According to the city corporation authorities, two categories of cleaners they employ: one is a government sweeping position which is considered as a formal job with fixed salaries and benefits; and the other is a daily wage-based informal job with no additional benefits and job security. The government sweeping job of the Dalit provided fixed salaries, utility benefits, provident funds, pensions, and other social protection. Without violating the law, it is unusual for the employees to lose their government job. Conversely, the daily wage-based informal job is based on verbal agreements without any economic or social security (KII, DSCC and BDERM).

During the interviews, we confirmed that there is no place to mark the ethnic status of the Dalit in the official employee registration form for the formal job prepared by the government. Therefore, no official statistics were available on the exact number of Dalit people working in the city corporation; however, the city corporation officials estimated approximately 5,500 cleaners were working in the city corporation, with about 1,500 belonging to the Dalit community (KII, DSCC

and BDERM). Contrary to the government directives set in 2012 reserving 80% of sweeping/cleaning jobs for the Dalit community,⁴⁹ it appeared that this directive might not have been followed in the city corporation.

Earlier practices in the city corporation involved a hereditary form of employment for the sweeping position, passed down through generations. However, since 2011, they have followed a formal recruitment procedure, requiring public job announcements, minimum educational attainment of the JSC, and an oral examination (KII, DSCC and BDERM).⁵⁰

Officials from both the city corporation and BDERM shared the same view regarding the recent changing tendency in the sweeping job labor market. These shifts are characterized by an increase in salaries, improved social security, and other benefits. This positive change, initiated in 2015, has been most substantial for the lower-level positions, with the lowest rungs receiving the highest raises, resulting in salaries that have more than doubled according to the 2015 National Pay Scale.⁵¹ Additionally, the shift in the terminology from the "sweeper" into the "cleaner" —the terms called in Bengali “Sweeper” refer to “Methor” and “Cleaner” refer to “Porichonnata Kormi,” respectively— may be another factor that non-Dalit people are interested in government sweeping jobs (KII, DSCC and BDERM). The term “sweeper” is often associated with menial labor and conveys a sense of disrespect for the work involved (KII, DSCC), traditionally performed by the Dalit, thereby deterring non-Dalit people from these roles. In contrast, the term “cleaner” carries a more neutral connotation, which could explain the shift in job preference.

4.2 Results of Questionnaire Survey

The questionnaire results are elaborated in five subsections. These include employment status, associations between employment and education status, perceptions of reasons for reduced

employment opportunities, perceptions of social inclusion policies, and initiatives to improve the livelihood of the Dalit community.

4.2.1 Employment status

The employment status includes the total number of the Dalit individuals from the survey population engaged in various categories of work at the time of the survey such as government sweeping jobs, daily basis, independent scavengers, cleaners in private sectors, and other professions. A total of 426 Dalit people among the surveyed households were employed at the time of the survey. The working population categorized into three distinct timeframes is shown in Table 3. In order to classify the working age population (≥ 15 to ≤ 59), we subtracted 9 to 1 years from the current age (as of 2020) to derive the accurate age for the "January 2011 to December 2019" timeframe. Similarly, we subtracted 10 years to determine the appropriate age for the "before December 2010" period. Thus, the total numbers of the working-age population in the surveyed households "before December 2010," "January 2011 to December 2019," and "after January 2020 to December 2020" were 824, 1087, and 1094, respectively. During these three distinct timeframes, the employment numbers for the Dalit individuals in various occupations, including government sweeping and daily basis jobs, were 241 (29.3%), 415 (48.6%), and 426 (39%), respectively. In each of the three timeframes, we observe a considerable disparity in the number of male and female employees, with the female-employee ratio gradually decreasing, and in the last timeframe, "after January 2020 to December 2020," 18.5% of the total employees are female, while 81.5% are male.

A comparison of household income with and without a government sweeping job on a monthly basis is provided in Table 4. A household with a government sweeping job earned 19,580 Bangladeshi takas (BDT) (1USD=84.06 BDT, in 2021) per month on average. In comparison, the

average monthly household income for those who did not have a government sweeping job was 16,122 BDT, which is lower than that with the government sweeping jobs. In contrast, Dhaka's average monthly family income is 55,086 BDT,⁵² about three times higher than that of the Dalit population's monthly household income.

Table 5 enumerates the Dalits' employment status for various job types and the timing of involvement. According to Table 5, a total of 241 Dalit individuals were employed "before December 2010," of whom 172 were employed in government-sweeping jobs, 34 on a daily basis, and 35 in other job categories, including independent scavengers and cleaners in private organizations, but not limited to the cleaning jobs. In the second timeframe, "January 2011 to December 2019," a total of 174 were newly employed in all categories of jobs, of whom only 29 were employed in the government sweeping jobs, 88 on a daily basis, and 57 in other job categories. The data show that the Dalit people were increasingly missing out on opportunities for government sweeping jobs. Possibly as a result, there was a rise in the number of Dalits newly employed in daily-wage positions and other job categories. Notably, in the last timeframe, no Dalit individuals secured new government sweeping positions, while 8 and 3 Dalit individuals were newly employed on a daily basis and in other job categories, respectively.

Our survey result revealed that the majority of individuals employed at the time of the survey were found to be those who had been in their respective jobs since the first timeframe, 'before December 2010,' and the Dalit community is not getting their designated government sweeping job in recent years. However, this situation may not be limited to only the Dalit community but it may apply to the entire government job market due to the economic conditions. Therefore, we collected the job announcement information of the government cleaner positions made by DSCC and some other government organizations and confirmed that the number of recruited cleaner positions did not

change significantly. Hence, it deters that the number of Dalit people employed in the government has decreased.

4.2.2 Associations between employment and education status

Figure 2 depicts the educational qualifications of the studied population according to their age group. A notable finding is the absence of no responses in the “no schooling” category for the age group 6-14 years, indicating that there are no children out of school among the studied Dalit population. In contrast, individuals aged 15 to over 60 years were predominantly fall into the “no schooling” category, with the majority in the above 60 age group. This suggests a gradual improvement in the educational levels of the Dalit community. Approximately 45% of the 15-39 age group, which constitutes a significant portion of the studied population, attained a junior secondary to tertiary level of education, meeting the education criteria for applying for a government sweeping job—a requirement set by the city corporation since 2011. The finding is particularly striking considering the financial burden associated with education. The national education policy of 2010 extended primary education (grades I-V) to class eight (now, I-VIII), with the government directives to ensure free and compulsory primary education for all children by 2018, regardless of socio-economic conditions and ethnicity.⁵³ However, this initiative has yet to be fully implemented, resulting in parents bearing the educational cost of their children in grades five to eight. Therefore, the result suggests that although the eight-year compulsory education is not entirely free, many Dalit people have managed to navigate the situation and acquired the eighth-grade certificate.

Table 6 demonstrates the associations between employment trends and the education level of employed Dalit individuals across the three timeframes. In the first timeframe, a significant number of the respondents (more than 65%) with no schooling and primary level of educational

qualifications were employed in the government sweeping job, whereas 11% were informally employed on a daily basis job with a similar academic qualification. This indicates that, during this timeframe no educational qualification was required for the government sweeping jobs, and the education qualification did not differentiate the job opportunities, which is consistent with the prior studies.⁵⁴ In comparison, the job scenario for the Dalit community changed significantly in the second timeframe. Less than 20% of the Dalit were employed in the government sweeping jobs, with mostly secondary or higher education qualifications. None were employed with no schooling and those with the primary education level. In contrast, approximately 50% of the respondents who found new employment during this period were engaged in informal daily basis jobs, although most of them had educational qualifications of the junior secondary or upper level. These positions lacked fixed salaries, job security, provident funds, or social protection. In the last timeframe, the impact of COVID-19 on the employment status is evident; none from the studied population were employed in the government jobs, and around 72% were informally employed in daily basis jobs. This occurred despite their educational qualifications remaining consistent with those documented in the second timeframe.

4.2.3 Perceptions of the reasons for the reduced employment opportunity

The respondents were asked to rank nine reasons for the reduced employment opportunity of getting the government sweeping job from one (1) to nine (9) where (1) is defined as the most important reason, and (9) is the least important.

Figure 3 depicts that the majority ranked “an employer asks extra money to join the job” followed by the “requirement of the eighth-grade certificate.” Conversely, when accumulating the ranks from 1 to 3, the majority opined that “due to increase of salary and benefits in a sweeping job, non-Dalits are taking the sweeping job”, followed by “employer asks extra money to join the job” and

“requirement of the eighth-grade certificate” respectively, were recognized as the most significant reasons for the reduced job opportunity. Similarly, when accumulating the ranking from 4 to 9, the majority selected “since the job became to be called cleaner instead of sweeper, non-Dalits are willing to do this job”, followed by “due to less social connection” and “requirement of the eighth-grade certificate.” None of the respondents choose the options “I am not feeling to work” and “Dalit’s lack of skills to use of modern technology” as the reason.

4.2.4 Perceptions of the social inclusion policies

In 2012, the government issued directives reserving 80% of sweeping positions for the Dalit community in all government, autonomous, and non-government entities. To assess the awareness of this policy among the Dalit community, respondents were asked if they knew about the government reservation policy. Table 7, which illustrates answers to the yes/no questions about policy and ethnicity, demonstrates that majority of respondents, 223 (74%), were aware of these directives. It is challenging to determine whether the city corporation adheres to the recruitment policy as information from KII indicated that there is no designated space to mark the Dalit ethnic identity in the employee recruitment form. However, if employees can inform their employer of their Dalit ethnic identity, it should be easier to track the number of employed Dalit people and determine the effectiveness of the recruitment policy. Therefore, we asked the respondents if their Dalit ethnic identity was documented as additional information on the employee recruitment form. Of those asked, 289 (96%) responded that their ethnic status was not recorded by employers. In contrast, among the respondents, 284 (98%) expressed their willingness to include the Dalit ethnic status in the employment recruitment form.

4.2.5 Initiatives to improve the Dalit livelihood

In examining the impact of NGO initiatives on the socio-economic conditions of the Dalit community, we specifically inquired about training programs offered, apart from money lending. Among 300 respondents, 295 (98%) indicated that they had not received any empowerment training, whereas only three respondents mentioned receiving empowerment training, including alternate employment opportunities and financial assistance for students.

In a subsequent inquiry, we asked respondents to rank four potential initiatives to improve the lives of the Dalit community. A notable finding from Figure 4, which illustrates demands on initiatives to improve the lives of the Dalit community, is that none of the respondents choose “create awareness to accept the Dalit in mainstream society” as their first rank. This finding indicates that the Dalit community may not feel discriminated against, or believed that securing their government sweeping job eliminates the need for acceptance in mainstream society. In contrast, a majority of respondents (181) ranked “ensure government sweeping jobs of Dalits” as their top priority. When accumulating both rank 1 and 2 answers as well as responses from rank 1 to 4, the majority expressed “ensure government sweeping jobs of Dalits” followed by “include the Dalit ethnic identity in the employment form” and “Dalit representative in the employment recruitment board” as key measures for improving their lives.

5. Discussion

5.1 Institutional Drawbacks

The results underscore a substantial shift in the current employment scenario for the government sweeping position. Table 6, which presents employment trends in association with the level of education, reveals that in the first timeframe, around 71% of the Dalit were employed in the government sweeping jobs, whereas in the second timeframe, nearly 17% of the Dalit were newly

employed in these positions. This suggests that the authority does not adhere to the reservation policy, which mandates reserving 80% of cleaning jobs for the Dalit community. Indeed, the employment form provides no section or category for listing their ethnic status, suggesting their reluctance towards meticulous enforcement of these directives. This is noteworthy given the fact that approximately 98% of respondents are willing to include their Dalit ethnicity, as shown in Table 7. The directives allow the replacement of reserved Dalit positions with general candidates (non-Dalit) if the Dalit candidates are unavailable. This leaves room for government employers to use the loophole of laws and potentially employ more than 20% non-Dalits in government sweeping positions. Correspondingly, survey results reveal excessive bribe demands, almost equivalent to the annual income of the government sweeping job or more on average. This disproportionately disadvantages the Dalit compared to generally wealthier non-Dalits, who are increasingly attracted to this job market. As such, despite the formulation of the Dalit Manual in 2013, prioritizing the accurate counting of the Dalit population to ensure accountability and transparency in improving living standards, its enactment has not occurred.⁵⁵ Addressing such policy violations is crucial to mitigating exclusionary practices against the Dalit community. The stagnant plight of the Dalit will persist until these policies are effectively implemented.

The survey results align with prior studies, indicating that no educational qualifications were initially required to get the government sweeping jobs.⁵⁶ Table 6 illustrates, employment scenarios in association with education levels, demonstrates a significant number of the Dalit population were employed in the government sweeping jobs irrespective of their educational qualification in the first timeframe. However, in more recent times, they are predominantly informally employed in daily basis jobs. Factors such as less social connection, inadequate monitoring, and insufficient

government enforcement, identified in previous studies are also observed in the present study and may have contributed to this shift in employment patterns.⁵⁷

The study also uncovers dissimilarities with the previous study findings. Equity Watch (2014) indicates that exclusion from education and the requirements of the eighth-grade certificate (JSC) could be a reason for excluding the Dalit from their government sweeping job. However, our survey results shown in Figure 2 reveal that approximately 45% of the 15-39 age group, which constitutes the working-age population and potential workforce for government sweeping jobs, possesses junior secondary to tertiary level of education, meeting the educational criteria for applying for these positions. This piece of evidence indicates that the Dalit individuals are eligible to accomplish the official recruitment process requiring the eighth-grade education certificate, but the sufficient educational qualification is not helping the Dalit people to get their government sweeping jobs. Therefore, it has become clear that the Dalit community is not excluded from their government-sweeping jobs due to their lower education.

A significant gap with the previous study concerns the role of NGOs. Earlier studies emphasized the necessity of NGO interventions to create alternative income-generating activities and remove the Dalit community's stigma;⁵⁸ however, our survey results reveal that, apart from money lending, 98% of respondents did not receive any empowerment training from NGOs. Therefore, it is fair to say that so far, NGOs have not played a significant role in creating alternative income-generating activities for the Dalit community.

5.2 Policy Implications and Pathways to Inclusion

The Bangladesh government does not admit the existence of caste-based discrimination in the country. Instead, they acknowledge that the Dalit people have been historically stigmatized due to work and descent discrimination.⁵⁹ This stance by the government can be attributed to two

potential reasons. First, the government may avoid explicit discussion of caste-based discrimination by framing it as work and descent-based discrimination, potentially minimizing their responsibilities under international human rights law, where such discrimination is recognized as a serious violation of laws.⁶⁰ This approach might lead to the avoidance of including ethnic status on the job registration form. Second, the government might be apprehensive about potential criticism from Dalit activists and increased pressure from development partners and international organizations if explicit statistics on the Dalit community are revealed. Disclosing detailed information about the situation of the Dalit population in the country could draw scrutiny and demands for action from these entities.⁶¹

While the government has acknowledged the historical stigmatization faced by the Dalit community, their narratives have gained global recognition, and their identity has become a focal point in social inclusion discourses and actions, especially in South Asian countries.⁶² However, in Bangladesh, consistent reduction in social inequality remains elusive despite its recent economic growth and efforts to address marginalization, poverty, and exclusion. A recent World Bank research on the Asia-Pacific region reported that Bangladesh is failing to get the maximum benefits out of its high social safety net budget allocations due to inadequate targeting and unplanned deployment, where only 11% of people in urban areas have access to social protection, whereas 19% of the population is poor.⁶³ The policies and initiatives undertaken have not been well implemented, which is often the case for any kind of policies and programs in Bangladesh. These are the possible explanations for the government's drifted administration and implementation of the Dalit inclusion policy.

In an attempt to reduce exclusion, India and Nepal both countries provided central reservations and created institutional opportunities for the benefit of the Dalit community.⁶⁴ Although there is

evidence of not fill-up the allotted quotas in India and Nepal, there is specific data/census of the number of Dalit representatives in the central service.⁶⁵ In contrast, the situation in Bangladesh is being handled with negligence, as discussed above.

Our argument is not that the government has failed to make a significant change in the lives of the Dalit community; rather, the question is why the state machinery failed to implement the policies; such as the case where the Dalit ethnic identification was not included in the employment form from the beginning. The Dalit individuals are not part of the decision-making process nor the implementation of those policies. As mentioned earlier, Dalit people are socially isolated from non-Dalits who make up the workforce in charge of enforcing policies on behalf of the Dalit. Hence, the undertaken policies remain unaccomplished due to the absence of a representative of the Dalit community in the decision-making body.

Thus far, the government's existing policy initiatives towards the Dalit community have been insufficient. Therefore, a practical solution to ensure better policy implementation and track the progress of the Dalit community is to include their ethnic status in the national census and employment forms. This would provide explicit data on the Dalit population, enabling better monitoring and targeted interventions. International organizations, national Dalit rights movements, and NGOs could create external pressure on the government to adopt this measure. While resource constraints may influence the government's actions, the key message is the need for explicit recognition and transparency. With advancements in and the lowered cost of IT technologies, comprehensive data collection can be achieved far more easily and with less effort than a decade ago. This approach would foster effective policy commitments aimed at addressing long-standing marginalization.

6. Conclusions

This study aimed to assess the employment status of the Dalit community and to identify the reasons behind the exclusion of Dalit individuals from obtaining their secured government sweeper or cleaner jobs. It utilized the key informant interviews and the questionnaire surveys, involving 300 households across three Dalit communities of Dhaka city, Bangladesh.

The findings are patent evidence that the government directives of 80% of reservations in cleaner positions were not followed, indicating that affirmative actions towards the Dalit community are poorly implemented and have had minimal impact. Despite continuous job announcements against the sweeper or cleaner positions and the successful attainment of the eighth-grade certificate by the Dalit individuals, the Dalit community is being excluded from their formally reserved cleaner jobs, and their employment prospects in government-sweeping jobs appear to be diminishing.

This situation can be attributed to various factors, particularly, the non-fulfilment to recognize the ethnic status of the Dalit, which is considered the root of exclusion from employment and the deprived state of the Dalit communities in Bangladesh. Additionally, the country's highly corrupted environment disadvantages the Dalit over the largely wealthier non-Dalit, and other underlying issues include a lack of social connection, poor monitoring, and insufficient enforcement by government authorities. Although there has been a significant rise in education among the Dalit population surveyed, failure to implement reservations in government employment might discourage the Dalit returns to education in the future.

While securing equal access to reserved government positions is crucial for immediate economic security, we acknowledge that true liberation for the Dalit community ultimately requires breaking free from restrictions based on occupation entirely. The current challenges in accessing even traditionally associated positions suggest that addressing reserved employment exclusion is a necessary first step, but should not be seen as the final goal. Further research is needed to examine

barriers to and opportunities for the Dalit individual entry into other occupations as a pathway to greater social mobility and emancipation. International human rights frameworks, as well as donor-driven civil society engagement, will be ineffective as long as the state and society refuse to recognize socio-economic and cultural diversity and take steps to address the injustices that structural disparities in society cause.⁶⁶ Hence, monitoring and transparency should come first as the government action on the issue. Including the Dalit ethnic status in the national census as well as government official documents intended to reserve the Dalit's rights, such as an employment recruitment form, could be a feasible method in order to bring accountability and transparency to activities and keep track of the Dalit employment to ensure policy implementation as well as formulate reasonable action plans for social inclusion, which is not limited to the Dalit. Furthermore, a Dalit representative within the political system is much needed to ensure the Dalit community is given their due rights as a minority. Despite the visible economic growth, the progress of the SDGs and building an inclusive society is yet to be achieved. Without “empowering and promoting the social, economic and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other status,” assuming development could occur, even if per capita income has doubled, would be baseless.⁶⁷

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7. Author Contributions

SB conceptualized the study, carried out interviews, analyzed data, and wrote the initial draft of the manuscript. TA provided guidance on data interpretation and reviewed the manuscript. MS supervised the overall study, was a major contributor in reviewing and revising the manuscript, and provided editing.

8. Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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Tables

Table 1. A comparison of Dalit situation among South Asian countries

Country	Nepal	India	Bangladesh	Pakistan	Sri Lanka
Caste System	Present among the higher-level caste and the Dalit community itself (Lovett and Pariyar, 2016)	Present among the higher-level caste and the Dalit community itself with Strict social distance (ADRF, nd)	Marginalized within the Hindu community due to the lower caste identity (Islam and Parvez, 2013)	Marginalized within Hindu community and maintain caste within Dalit community itself (Javid and Martin, 2020)	Caste systems in Sri Lanka have relied more on a kind of secular ranking upheld by the state (Jodhka and Shah, 2010)
Official Denial of Caste	Apart from India, Nepal is the only country that recognizes the reality of caste (Jodhka and Shah, 2010)	Caste became a metaphor of tradition and rigidity and officially recognizes the reality of caste (Jodhka and Shah, 2010)	Discriminated based on the traditional menial job, no official recognition on caste-based discrimination (TIB, 2019)	Pakistan uses Islamic identity and ideology to completely deny the presence of caste in the social and economic life of the country (Jodhka and Shah, 2010)	Caste is less significant and less visible in Sri Lanka. (Rao, 2010)
Nature of Discrimination	Discriminated on the ground of caste status (Lovett and Pariyar, 2016)	Discriminated on the ground of caste status (European Union, 2013)	Descent based discrimination based on traditional menial job (European Union, 2013)	Discriminated on the basis of caste and religion (IIDS, 2008)	Caste is not a large part of society and no discrimination based on caste (Rao, 2010)
Caste Demographics	As per the 2001 Census, Nepal had 12.8% Dalits in its total population of 22.3 million (Dhakal, 2018)	Dalits constitute 201 million people and make up 16 percent of India's population (population census, 2011)	Dalit community representing 4.5-5.5 million of the country's population (Islam and Parvez, 2013)	As per 1998 Census, the SCs constituted 13.6% of its 2.44 million Hindu minority population (Jodhka and Shah, 2010)	Caste is not included as a demographic category and thus there is no official enumeration of it (Jodhka and Shah, 2010)

Cont. Table 1

Country	Nepal	India	Bangladesh	Pakistan	Sri Lanka
Social Separation	Lives in the rural areas and is separated from the village areas (Jodhka and Shah, 2010)	mostly separated from the village areas and specified areas in cities (Jodhka and Shah, 2010)	Lives in separate colonies in urban areas (Kabir et al., 2015)	Dalit groups live on the outskirts of the village or town (IDSN, 2008)	No specific areas for Dalit (Rao, 2010)
Traditional Occupations	Artisan, Bonded Labor, Waste collection, Blacksmith and Goldsmith (Lovett and Pariyar, 2016)	Skinning Carcasses, Collecting Garbage, Cleaning Latrines, Cobbling, Artisans and Bonded Laborers (ADRF, nd)	Sweeping and Cleaning, Solid Waste Collection, and Disposal/Recycling of Waste Materials (Kabir et al., 2015)	Sweeping and Cleaning, Bonded labor, Artisan, Cobblers, Waste Collection and Disposal (Javid and Martin, 2020)	Employment opportunities are not restricted to certain castes (Rao, 2010)
Education and Literacy	The overall literacy rate is 54.1% whereas Dalit's literacy rate is 35% (Dhakal, 2018)	As per the 2011 census, the Dalit literacy level is 66.1 percent as compared to the all-India level of 73 percent.	Average literacy rate 53.7%. No official census for Dalit. Based on (Equity Watch, 2014) almost half of the Dalit never attended school	Average literacy rate 56%. (Rehman et al., 2015) No official census of Dalit. Based on (IDSN, 2008) Dalit literacy rate is less than 25%	Country average literacy rate 95.7% (population census, 2012)
Quota system in Education	Quotas and scholarships for Dalits in a range of aspects of governance (Lovett and Pariyar, 2016)	15% Quotas for Dalits to access to Universities (Ovichegan, 2014)	One public university introduced quota for Dalit students (Rahman, 2016)	No initiatives for Dalit education (IDSN, 2008)	N/A

Cont. Table 1

Country	Nepal	India	Bangladesh	Pakistan	Sri Lanka
Reservation Policy	Govt. has special quotas for Dalit's employment (Lovett and Pariyar, 2016)	Constitution allows special provisions for Dalits in terms of reserving a certain proportion of govt. jobs (Rao, 2010)	Govt. set a directive to provide 80% of cleaning and sweeping jobs to Dalits (TIB, 2019)	No special development schemes for Dalit (Jodhka and Shah, 2010)	Employment opportunities are not restricted to certain castes (Rao, 2010)
National Commission	National Dalit Commission (NDC) was formed in 2002, to identify and protect Dalit rights (Jodhka and Shah, 2010)	National Commission for Scheduled Castes was formed in 2004 to protect social, educational, economic and cultural interest (Jodhka and Shah, 2010)	No official commission for Dalit	No official commission for Dalit	N/A
Social and Legislative Policies	The Government has expressed support from the UN principles and guidelines to end caste discrimination (European Union, 2013)	Constitutional safeguards and special legislation for the protection of the country's lower-caste population (European Union, 2013)	Constitution prohibits discrimination against any citizen on grounds of religion, race, ethnicity, and all citizens are entitled to equal protection (TIB, 2019)	Discrimination is not officially recognized and no legislation against it (Jodhka and Shah, 2010)	Constitution prohibits discrimination against any persons by reason of caste, work, or decent with regard to access public and religious places (Silva, 2009)
Policy Gaps	Dalits sometimes refused for jobs because their name did not match with the list of Dalit castes mentioned in the govt. document (Lovett and Pariyar, 2016)	Quota system has not been fully applied. Despite constitutional safeguards of Dalit fundamental human rights continue on a massive scale (Ovichegan, 2014)	Govt. officials have less understanding about the Dalit which creates difficulties in selecting beneficiaries of safety net schemes (TIB, 2019)	No special policy was taken for Dalit (IIDS, 2008)	N/A

N/A "not applicable"

Table 2. List of Interviewees for the Key Informant Interviews (KII)

Stakeholder Organization/Area	Position of Informants
Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC)	Chief Waste Management officer
Security Branch for Backward Classes, Department of Social Services (DSS)	Additional Director
Bangladesh Dalit Excluded Rights Movement (BDERM)	Organizing Member
Community leader of Wari Cleaners Staff Quarters	President
Community leader of Ganaktuli City Colony	President
Community leader of Mironjillah Sweeper Colony	President

Table 3. Working age (≥ 15 to ≤ 59 years) population and employment across three distinct timeframes.

Time Frame	Working Age Population			Employed Population		
	Male	Female	Cumulative	Male	Female	Cumulative
Before December 2010	435 (51.7%) ^a	406 (48.3%) ^a	841	188 (78%) ^b	53 (22%) ^b	241 (29.2%) ^c
January 2011 to December 2019	553 (50.9%) ^a	534 (49.1%) ^a	1087	335 (80.7%) ^b	80 (19.3%) ^b	415 (38.2%) ^c
After January 2020 to December 2020	561 (51.3%) ^a	533 (48.7%) ^a	1094	347 (81.5%) ^b	79 (18.5%) ^b	426 (38.9%) ^c

a) ratio of male and female has been calculated from the total working age population categorized into distinct timeframes;

b) ratio of male and female has been calculated from the total number of employees categorized into distinct timeframes;

c) the number of employee percentage has been calculated based on the working age population categorized into distinct timeframes.

Table 4. Household income of the surveyed population.

Monthly household income (in BDT) of with and without the govt. sweeping job					
	Min.	Median	Max.	Avg.	Per Capita
With govt. job	15,000	18,000	40,000	19,580	3,545
Without govt. job	8,000	15,000	32,000	16,122	3,331

Table 5. Job Types and Employment Timing for Occupations as of 2021.

Types of Jobs	Before December 2010	January 2011 to December 2019	Cumulative employees up to December 2019^a	January 2020 to December 2020	Total employees as of 2021^b
Govt. sweeping	172	29	201	0	201
Daily basis	34	88	122	8	130
Others	35	57	92	3	95
Total	241	174	415	11	426

a. The sum of employees for each job category during the first and second timeframes “Before December 2010” and “January 2011 to December 2019.”

b. The aggregate number of employees across all three timeframes: “Before December 2010,” “January 2011 to December 2019,” and “January 2020 to December 2020”, categorized by job type.

Table 6. Employment trends of the Dalit individuals in association with the level of education categorized into three distinct timeframes.

Time frame	Job category	No Schooling	Primary	Junior Secondary	Secondary	Higher Secondary	Tertiary	Subtotal employees of each job category	Sum of Employees (for three distinct timeframes)	Sum of Employees (across all the timeframes)
Before December 2010	Govt. sweeping	72 (29.9)	93 (38.6)	5 (2.1)	1 (0.4)	1 (0.4)	0	172 (71.4)	241	426
	Daily basis	7 (2.9)	20 (8.3)	6 (2.5)	1 (0.4)	0	0	34 (14.1)		
	Independent scavenger	1 (0.4)	7 (2.9)	2 (0.8)	1 (0.4)	0	0	11 (4.5)		
	Cleaners in private sector	1 (0.4)	13 (5.4)	4 (1.7)	5 (2.1)	0	0	23 (9.6)		
	Others	0	0	0	1 (0.4)	0	0	1 (0.4)		
January 2011 to December 2019	Govt. sweeping	0	0	5 (2.9)	16 (9.2)	5 (2.9)	3 (1.7)	29 (16.7)	174	426
	Daily basis	0	2 (1.1)	52 (29.9)	27 (15.5)	6 (3.4)	1 (0.6)	88 (50.5)		
	Independent scavenger	0	6 (3.4)	6 (3.4)	3 (1.7)	0	0	15 (8.5)		
	Cleaners in private sector	0	1 (0.6)	19 (10.9)	16 (9.2)	4 (2.3)	1 (0.6)	41 (23.6)		
	Others	0	0	0	0	0	1 (0.6)	1 (0.6)		
After January 2020 to December 2020	Govt. sweeping	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	11	426
	Daily basis	0	0	4 (36.4)	2 (18.2)	1 (9.1)	1 (9.1)	8 (72.8)		
	Independent scavenger	0	1 (9.1)	1 (9.1)	0	0	0	2 (18.2)		
	Cleaners in private sector	0	0	0	0	1 (9.1)	0	1 (9.1)		
	Others	0	0	0	0	0	0	0		

*The percentage has been calculated based on the total number of employees in each time frame and shown in the brackets

Table 7. Answers to yes/no questions.

Question	Sample Size	Yes	No	No Response
Government Directives				
Do you know Govt. directives to provide 80% sweeping job to the Dalit?	300	223	76	1
Dalit Ethnic Status				
Do employers inform Dalit ethnic status in the employment form?	300	9	289	2
Are you willing to include Dalit ethnic status in the employment form?	289	284	5	0

Figure legends

Figure 1. The study location map shows Thana's (thanas functioned as a form of the administrative and geographic region) of Dhaka city. Dayaganj and Mironjillah city colony is under Katawali thana and Ganaktuli city colony is under Hazaribag thana.

Figure 2. Overview of the educational qualifications of the surveyed population by different age groups.

Figure 3. The reasons for not getting the sweeping job of the Dalit community. Asterisks (*) indicate that none of the respondents choose the options.

Figure 4. Demands on initiatives to improve the lives of the Dalit community.

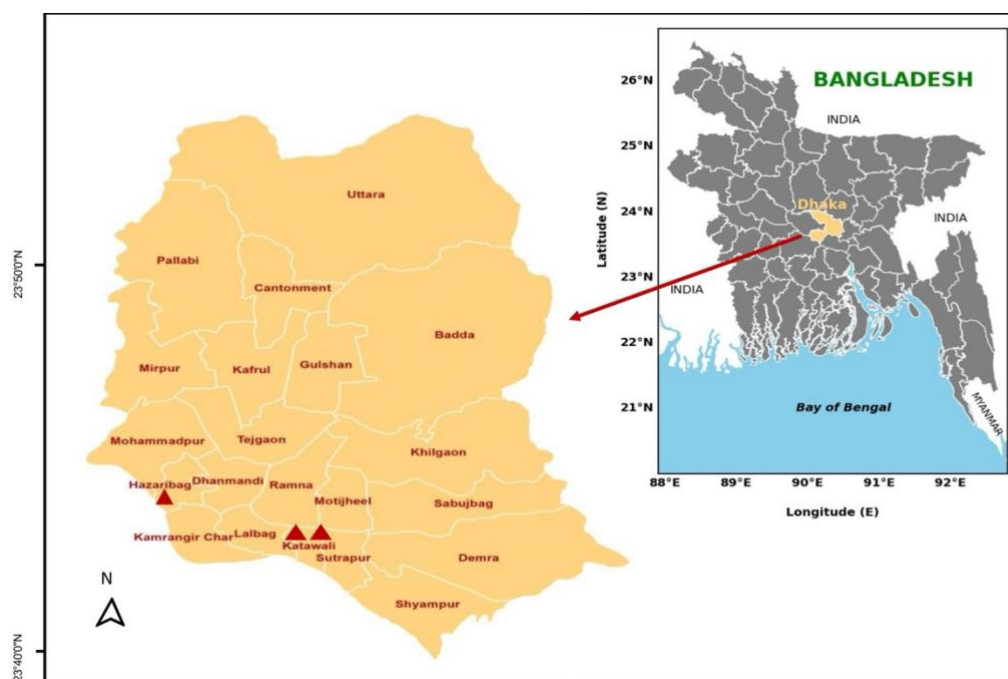


Figure 1.

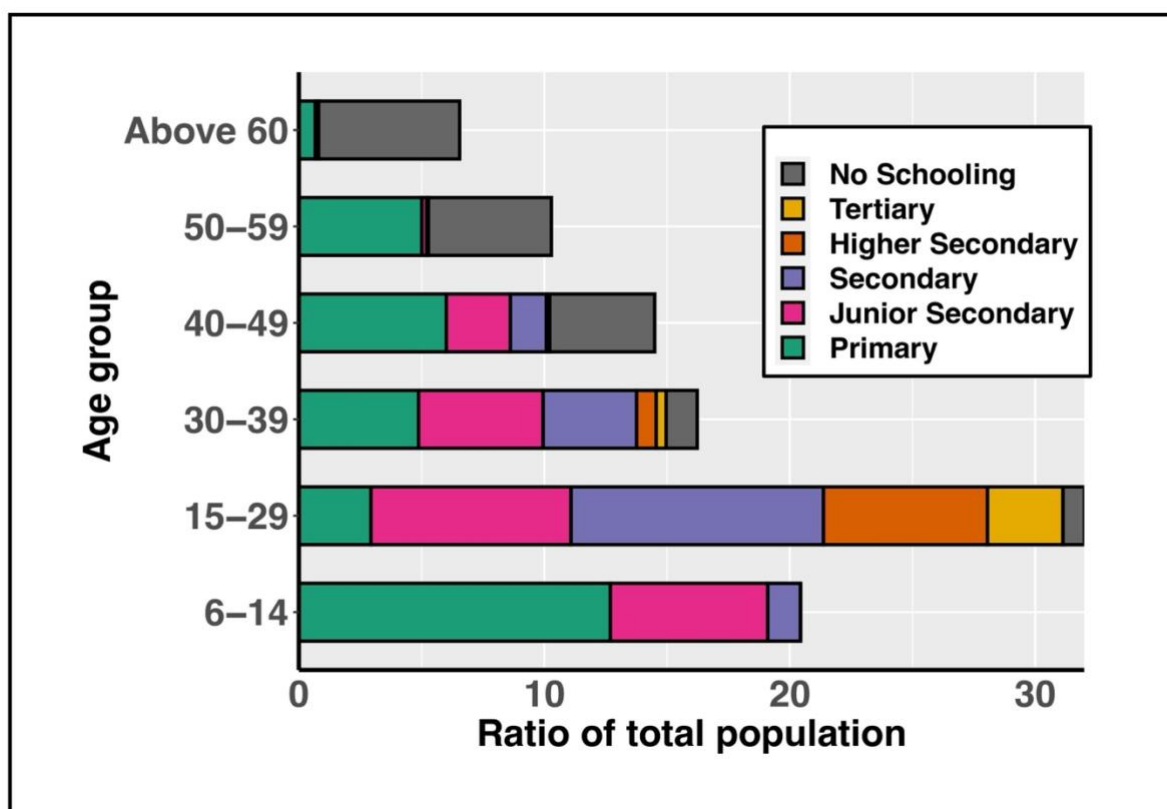


Figure 2.

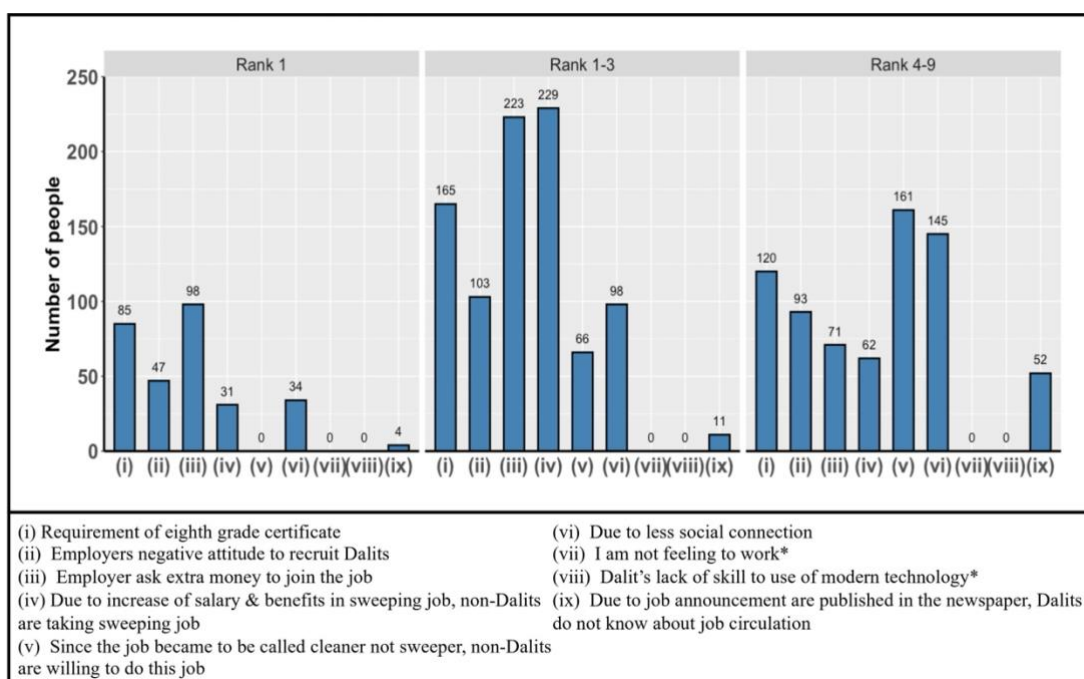


Figure 3.

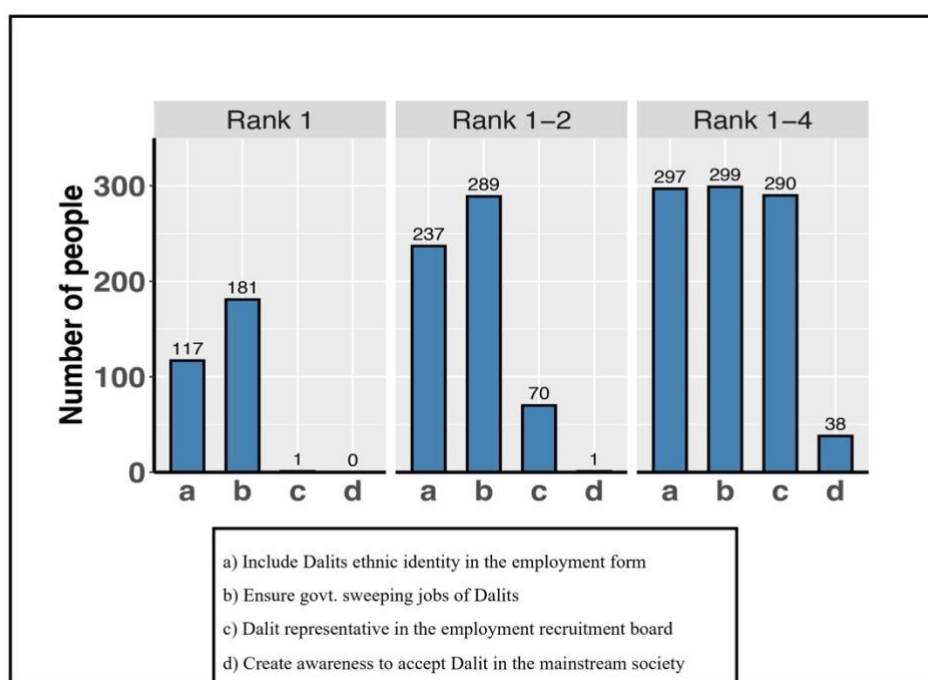


Figure 4.