

Livelihood Challenges of the Dalit Community: A Case Study in Jhenaidah

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this paper is to explore the livelihood challenges that the Dalit communities in Bangladesh face. To understand livelihood challenges, it is essential to listen to and learn from the lived experiences of the people directly affected. Therefore, this study employed a qualitative approach, using a case study design to delve deeply into the issue. The study selected 20 diverse cases and explored them in depth, collecting data through face-to-face, in-depth interviews with each participant. The findings of the study show that social exclusion due to untouchability, which stems from their caste-based identity, limits their access to livelihood assets. Their identity as untouchable or filthy not only bars them from entering white-colour jobs but also from accessing various resources known as livelihood assets, such as natural, human, financial, physical, and social capital and forces them into low-paying, menial jobs. As a result, their options for a stable livelihood are limited. Therefore, there is an urgent need to address the structural barriers Dalit communities face and ensure their equitable access to livelihood opportunities.

Introduction

Although ensuring equal opportunities in public employment and prohibiting discrimination on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth for all citizens is a constitutional obligation in Bangladesh (Ministry of Law, Justice, and Parliamentary Affairs, 2021), the state is failing to fulfil this obligation by ensuring public employment for several marginalised groups, including Dalits (Hossain, 2017), thereby depriving them of various constitutional rights (Dyrhagen & Islam, 2006). This has resulted in a grim reality for 3.5 million to 5.5 million Dalits in Bangladesh, representing 3 to 5 percent of the population (Chowdhury, 2009; Ali, 2015), who lead deplorable lives. They continue to suffer daily discrimination, making them among the most vulnerable groups in

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Bangladesh (Rowshan & Khan, 2016). One significant form of such discrimination is the limited access to employment opportunities (Khatun et al., 2020). Historically, caste-based discrimination has confined Dalits to low-paid, stigmatised work, reinforcing long-standing poverty and disadvantage (Rowshan & Khan, 2016). Many continue to work in occupations such as street and household cleaning—roles often passed down across generations (Kabir et al., 2018; Rasheed, 2014; Kabir et al., 2016). They are socially restricted from seeking employment outside their traditional occupation of cleaning and sweeping (International Labor Organization [ILO], 2011; Rahman, 2016). They are socially excluded, stigmatised, and isolated from mainstream society (Rowshan & Khan, 2016) and experience severe discrimination in accessing livelihoods (Bangladesh Dalit and Excluded Rights Movement [BDERM] & Nagorik Uddyog, 2018). Therefore, they can rarely ensure enough income to support their families or send their children to school (Hossain, 2022). As a result, most Dalits are illiterate and poor.

Despite the severity of their situation, the government, donors, and civil society have failed to address the issues faced by the Dalit community (Rowshan & Khan, 2016). However, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aim to promote socio-economic inclusion and eliminate discrimination in laws and policies, calling for equal opportunity for all disadvantaged groups (Mosse, 2018). Sustainable Development Goals one and eight focus on eradicating poverty and promoting decent work for all. Bangladesh's commitment to the SDGs demands equal participation from all groups in the development process. In line with this commitment, the government of Bangladesh introduced Vision 2041 to eradicate extreme poverty, reduce income inequality, and develop a skilled workforce through education and training (Husain & Kamruzzaman, 2020; Ministry of Planning, 2020). Despite these initiatives, the literature highlights that Dalits continue to face various forms of discrimination in accessing livelihood assets (Chowdhury, 2009; Hossain, 2016). In this context, research on Dalits' livelihoods is imperative to fill this gap in the literature and inform policy formulation in this field.

Historical Background of Dalits in Bangladesh

The concept and existence of Dalits are rooted in the caste system practiced in the South Asian region and have a direct link to the Hindu religion (Islam & Parvez, 2013; Hossain, 2016). Caste is a hierarchical social grouping based on heredity distinguished by degrees of purity, social status, and exclusiveness. The Hindu caste system, known as *varna*, divides Hindus into four social groups: *Brahmins* (priests), *Kshatriyas* (rulers/warriors), *Vaisyas* (traders/agriculturists), and *Shudras* (laborers/service providers) (Baul et al., 2016). Dalits are not formally included in this scheme; they are considered *avarna* (without caste) or

Panchama (the fifth varna) (Mehta, 2013). These groups of people, destined for menial jobs, are considered impure, dirty, and therefore ‘untouchable’ (Rowshan & Khan, 2016; Kabir et al., 2015). Dalit, a Sanskrit-derived concept meaning “suppressed, downtrodden, grounded, broken, or crushed” (Islam & Parvez, 2013), refers to these untouchable people. Jyotirao Phule, an anti-caste social reformer, first used it in the nineteenth century to describe the oppression faced by lower castes in India (Naher & Hasan, 2017). Dr. Ambedkar also used this term in 1928 to describe one who had experienced degradation and deprivation (Mehta, 2013). Mahatma Gandhi gave Dalits the euphemistic name ‘Harijan’ (Children of God Vishnu) (Chowdhury, 2009). However, the naming of Dalits as Harijans did not foster a positive attitude towards them (Chowdhury, 2011).

Although the term ‘Dalit’ originated within the Hindu community, it is not tied to any religious group; instead, it refers to low-caste professional groups among Muslims and Hindus in Bangladesh (Chowdhury, 2009). Bangladesh has two Dalit groups: Bengali Dalit and Non-Bengali Dalit. Among the untouchable sections of Bengali-speaking populations, commonly referred to as “Bengali Dalits” or “Bangalee Dalits,” various occupational groups are included. These groups are historically associated with hereditary and stigmatised occupations such as cobbling (Charmokar), pottery (Kumar), and fishing (Malo), among others. Non-Bengali Dalits were first brought to Bangladesh during the Mughal period in 1608 for cleaning activities (Chowdhury, 2009). Many Dalits were brought to Bangladesh from Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Orissa, and Madras during British rule to work as cleaners, tea gardeners, jungle cleaners, and in other cleaning jobs. Following the establishment of Dhaka Municipality in 1864, sanitation became one of its key responsibilities, leading to the employment of Dalit communities in cleaning and other menial municipal services. Dalits are currently employed in Bangladesh as occupational groups, and they are frequently associated with jobs viewed as filthy and impure, such as sweeping, cleaning sewage systems, burying dead bodies, etc. (Dyrhagen & Islam, 2006). They are socially restricted from seeking employment opportunities outside their traditional occupation of cleaning and sweeping (Rahman, 2016). These menial jobs are maintained as hereditary and passed down from generation to generation (Rasheed, 2014). These jobs rarely ensure enough income to support their families or send their children to school (Hossain, 2022). As a result, most Dalits are illiterate and poor. Social perceptions regarding lower castes restrict their employment opportunities and cause humiliation in their daily lives and work (ILO, 2011). They are socially excluded, stigmatized, and isolated from mainstream society (Rowshan & Khan, 2016) and experience severe discrimination in accessing livelihoods (BDERM & Nagorik Uddyog, 2018).

Objectives of the study

The objective of this study is to explore the livelihood challenges faced by the Dalit community, one of the most socially excluded groups in Bangladesh.

Theoretical Framework

Social exclusion

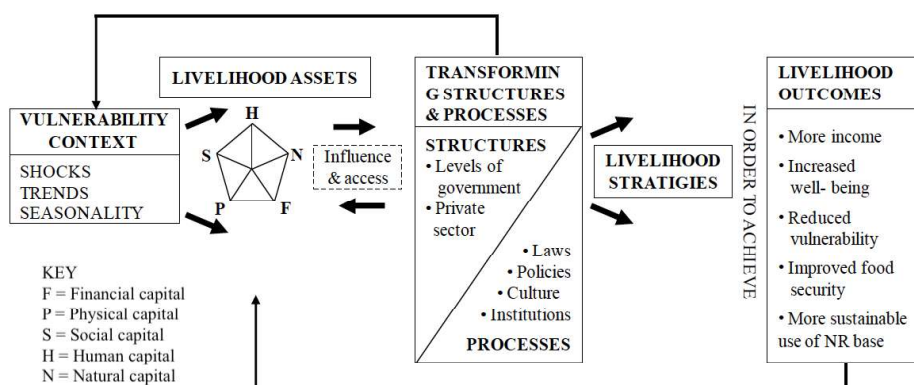
Social exclusion refers to the condition in which individuals are unable to fully participate in the economic, social, political, or cultural aspects of life. (UN, 2016). It is a process where some groups are systematically disadvantaged and discriminated against based on their ethnicity, race, religion, sexual orientation, caste, gender, age, disability, migratory status, or where they reside (The Department for International Development [DFID], 2005). Social exclusion is the process by which individuals or groups are completely or partially deprived of the opportunity to fully engage in the society in which they reside (Deakin et al., 1995). Sen (2000) argued that the concept of social exclusion is conceptually linked to that of poverty and deprivation. Economic inequality, unemployment, lack of access to education, improper healthcare facilities, and inadequate housing circumstances are all factors that contribute to social exclusion (Aranguiz, 2022). However, the idea of social exclusion emphasises deprivation, highlighting how individuals are frequently deprived of many things simultaneously (De Haan, 1999).

Sustainable Livelihood Framework

The DIFD (1999) proposed a Sustainable Livelihood Framework (SLF) to accelerate development activities, alleviate poverty, meet human needs, create opportunities, access resources, and obtain essential facilities. A sustainable livelihood is a holistic approach that puts people at the center of the development process, increasing the sustainability of people's livelihoods by accessing and strengthening natural, social, physical, and financial assets and minimizing vulnerability (Foresti & Ludi, 2007). A livelihood consists of the capabilities, resources (stores, funds, claims, access), and activities required for subsistence (Chambers & Conway, 1991). A sustainable livelihood is one that effectively manages and recovers from challenges and unexpected disruptions while preserving and strengthening its resources and capabilities (ibid). The sustainable livelihood approach focuses on human well-being and on sustainability rather than on economic growth alone (Foresti & Ludi, 2007). Livelihood approaches can improve the quality and focus of welfare programs,

social policies, and the overall strategic coherence of interventions for poverty reduction by different donor agencies and the government (Conway et al., 2002).

Figure 1
Sustainable Livelihood Framework



DFID (1999) identified five types of capital: natural, human, financial, physical, and social. The following table presents an elaborate account of the five capitals provided by the DFID.

DFID (1999) identified five types of capital: natural, human, financial, physical, and social. The following table provides an in-depth account of the five capitals provided by DFID.

Table 1
Capitals involved in sustainable livelihoods.

Types of Capital	Definition
Financial	Encompasses assets and resources within a household, including finances, savings, loans, and property (Scoones, 1998; Mendoza et al., 2015; Kumar et al., 2019).
Physical	Encompasses assets such as machinery and technology used in the production of raw materials and processed products, as well as in the management of enterprises (Rebotier, 2012; Gutierrez et al., 2021).
Human	Refers to the acquired skills and knowledge to perform tasks effectively (Chambers & Conway, 1991; Scoones, 1998; Mendoza et al., 2015).

Social	Relates to the formal and informal networks that influence social collaboration (Apine et al., 2019; Gutierrez et al., 2021).
Natural	Denotes natural resources encompassing land, water, air, living organisms, and ecosystems (Ellis, 2000; Cohen et al., 2019).

SLF posits that people require access to multiple resources to achieve positive livelihood outcomes, and no single asset category can fulfil people's demands (Globalisation and Livelihood Option of People Living in Poverty [GLOPP], 2008). This framework also emphasizes the livelihood outcomes that fulfill fundamental human needs such as food, clothing, shelter, health care, and sanitation, to ensure quality of life and a better future for the next generation (Food and Agriculture Organization [FAO] & International Labor Organization [ILO], 2009).

This paper employed the social exclusion and sustainable livelihoods frameworks to assess the livelihood challenges of the Dalit community. People who are socially excluded are frequently denied opportunities to access the sustainable livelihoods they need for survival (DFID, 2005). Dalits are one of the socially excluded groups in Bangladesh with very limited access to livelihood assets. The researchers used this approach to understand and describe Dalits' access to various livelihood assets, economic conditions, financial-sector vulnerability, and the nature of the shocks they experience.

Methodology

This study used a qualitative approach to examine the livelihood challenges faced by Dalit communities in Bangladesh. A qualitative design was appropriate for addressing the research objectives, as it enables an in-depth examination of socially embedded experiences within specific cultural settings (Tracy, 2024). A case study design was adopted to generate contextualized and subtle insights, and a diverse case selection strategy was used to capture variations in livelihood opportunities and constraints inside the Dalit community (Gerring, 2007).

Data were collected from the Sheikhpara Sweeper Colony in Shailkupa, Jhenaidah, Bangladesh. In-person, one-on-one interviews were conducted with 20 participants, comprising 9 women and 11 men. Male participants slightly outnumbered female participants, indicating the relatively low level of women's involvement in income-generating activities within the community. Diversity was ensured by including participants with a range of characteristics, such as age, gender, occupation, education, asset ownership, and financial status. However, none of the participants was under 18.

Primary data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews (Boyce & Neale, 2006) conducted in Bangla and guided by a semi-structured interview

guide. Before the formal interviews, two pilot interviews were conducted with eligible participants, and the interview guide was revised accordingly. Before each interview, participants were informed about the study, its potential benefits and risks, and written informed consent was obtained. Each interview lasted about an hour and was digitally recorded with the participants' prior consent. The recordings were transcribed verbatim and translated into English. On going review and iterative reading of the transcripts informed assessments of data saturation and facilitated systematic coding and categorization. The analysis process employed the SLF (DFID, 1999) to understand the structural and circumstantial factors influencing Dalit livelihood challenges.

Findings

As outlined above, the SLF highlights five vital categories of livelihood assets: human, natural, financial, physical, and social capital, which are important for achieving sustainable livelihoods (DFID, 1999). Together, these assets enable individuals and households to develop livelihood strategies, build resilience, and reach their goals. However, reliance on a single asset category is insufficient, as sustainable livelihoods depend on the interaction and balance among multiple livelihood assets. The findings reveal that for socially excluded groups, access to these assets is often unequal and limited, which affects their livelihood prospects and vulnerabilities. Drawing on the SLF, the study's results have been presented to demonstrate that the challenges of the target group are readily understood within the study's context.

Physical Capital

The findings show that Dalit communities face persistent obstacles to accessing physical assets. They mostly live in dilapidated, torn-out housing, often in poor condition and in segregated areas called '*methorpotti*' or sweeper colonies. These densely populated zones lack proper sanitation and feature houses made of wood, bamboo, tin, and brick, offering limited space for family members. Barriers such as untouchability restrict land ownership, preventing Dalits from owning land and building their own homes. Renting outside their colonies is also difficult. Poor waste management, sanitation, and drainage contribute to unhygienic conditions, and inadequate or broken toilets compound the problem. The only source of drinking water is tube wells, which are also not enough in number. Near garbage dumps, colonies face health risks, including diarrhoea, pneumonia, and respiratory infections. Despite these hardships, Dalits remain confined to these dirty, crowded, and unhealthy colonies, where they have lived for generations. One participant narrated,

We live in a very unhygienic environment. All the garbage in the area is dumped near our house. It produces a foul smell and attracts many flies and mosquitoes. This condition worsens during the rainy season when water accumulates around the house. Tell me, how can people live here?

Human Capital

Dalit children encounter considerable barriers in accessing education, with low enrolment and high dropout rates, worsened by widespread discrimination. Children from the mainstream community frequently tease, insult, and behave rudely towards Dalit children, often targeting their parents' professions and their living place. Discriminatory practices, such as making Dalit students clean school facilities or sit separately, create unwelcoming environments for Dalit children at school that hinder their learning and growth. One participant narrated their plight,

I sent my son to the local government primary school. After a few days, he began to face bullying and teasing from his friends. They insulted him by calling him 'son of a sweeper.' Even teachers occasionally discriminated against him. He became upset and decided not to go to school.

There are no government or NGO training programs in the study area, and most technical schools are in cities, making them difficult for the Dalit community to reach. Many people are also not fully aware of the value of technical education. On top of that, financial constraints make it difficult to afford training fees, limiting opportunities to build useful skills. This situation sustains a cycle of restricted access to technical education and training opportunities.

Social Capital

Dalits are socially excluded and politically subjugated. As a result, their social capital is limited. They have limited or no scope to represent themselves in labor unions, which play a key role in employment, wage increases, bonuses, and job security. They have no political connections or good relationships with any influential political parties. Consequently, they have the least power in politics and in decision-making. During elections, political parties use them as a vote bank. They have limited capacity to choose their own leaders for personal benefit, to cast their votes for the candidate of their choice, to participate in political rallies, and to run as candidates in national and local elections.

Due to untouchability, they experience severe social exclusion. They do not effectively connect with the high-caste Hindu community or other communities.

Therefore, they lack the social relationships required to enter the labor market. One of the participants reported,

Upper-caste Hindus hate us more than Muslims. They treat us very badly because we are doing the dirty work. Is it my fault that I was born into a lower caste? Why should we live with this negligence for our whole lives?

Natural Capital

Untouchability significantly restricts Dalits' access to land, rivers, ponds, public spaces, and other communal resources. Most Dalits are landless and reside in marginalised settlements, often located on abandoned fields or government-owned (khash) land near roads or pastures. When someone from the Dalit community, with improved economic status, attempts to relocate, they are often prevented by non-Dalit groups from settling nearby, limiting their residential mobility. They also experience sustainable resistance to purchasing agricultural land, undermining their food security and livelihood opportunities. Additionally, land grabbing by dominant groups further worsens their vulnerability. Due to their restricted political influence, Dalits often cannot resist encroachment or forced eviction, including displacement from government-leased land on which many reside. One participant reported,

Once, I went out to observe Puja (a religious festival) with my children. My house was set on fire by outsiders. Everything in the room was destroyed. Then I went to the chairman and asked for help, but the chairman did not help me.

Financial Capital

Dalits are among the lowest-income groups in Bangladesh. Their average household income was approximately TK. 9,800/-, significantly lower than the national average monthly household income. According to the 2016 household income and expenditure survey, the national average monthly household income was TK. 15,988/-, while the average for rural areas was TK. 13,998/- (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics [BBS], 2016). These results indicate that Dalits struggle to earn enough to maintain an adequate standard of living. The economic conditions of Dalits who work as sweepers in government and private organizations are comparatively better than those of casual sweepers. They receive fixed monthly salaries along with other benefits. However, casual sweepers' economic conditions can be unfavourable due to uncertain income opportunities and variable earnings. Their earnings are usually inadequate to survive, pushing them below the poverty line. As a result, they are forced to seek

additional sources of income. However, finding other jobs is difficult due to discrimination in the labour market. One participant narrated,

The prices of goods are rising daily. However, our income has remained the same. Instead, our workload is decreasing. It is becoming difficult for me to meet children's education expenses, the medical costs of older adults, and family expenses. Every month, I struggle to cover all my costs and cannot save any money.

Vulnerability Context

The livelihoods of Dalit sweepers are adversely affected by the vulnerability context. Vulnerability arises when people face harmful threats or shocks, including seasonal shocks, and have an inadequate capacity to respond effectively. It is defined as a feeling of uncertainty about the welfare of individuals, households, and communities amid shifts in their external environment (Scoones, 1998).

Labor Market Exclusion and its Impacts on Livelihoods

For generations, Dalits have been employed in their traditional cleaning occupation, leading to their categorization as '*Jaat*' Sweepers. Unfortunately, because of this ascribed occupation, they remain in the same profession for their entire lives. Many Dalits work as cleaners in the public and private sectors but earn meager salaries. Dalits face mistreatment and a lack of wage regulations in the labor market. They also face severe discrimination and restrictions in other economic sectors, including farming, cultivation, marketing, and the operation of independent businesses. One of the participants reported,

I want to be involved in other work instead of the sweeping job. However, nobody in society has a positive attitude towards us. For example, if I start a business or open a shop in the market, no one will buy my products. Establishing a restaurant is only possible if everyone comes to eat there, even though I need more money to go to another place and start a business by hiding my identity. So, what can I do except for a cleaning job?

Many educated young Dalits wish to forgo their traditional profession of sweeping and pursue more promising occupations. Despite their forebears' involvement in the cleaning trade, they seek to break with this tradition and pursue alternative career paths. Another participant recounted his experience,

My parents wanted to involve me in other professions from a young age. After I grew up, when I tried to take on other jobs, no one let me do

different work. Despite many efforts, I could not take on any other position. Now I am sweeping.

In the past, Dalits had no choice but to work in their traditional occupation of sweeping because they lacked the education and qualifications for other jobs. However, the situation has changed, with more Dalits participating in education and completing higher education. Nevertheless, opportunities for white-collar jobs are limited, and they commonly experience discrimination during recruitment.

Loss of the Traditional Sweeping Occupation

Livelihood opportunities for Dalits are limited and declining over time. At present, *Jaat* sweepers experience obstacles as more mainstream individuals enter the field. Due to population growth and competition, many capable candidates from the mainstream community remain unemployed. However, it is difficult for Dalits to move out of their cleaning profession and into other occupations, even when they are educated and qualified, due to their Dalit identity. Moreover, many Dalits need more education and training for alternative employment. Consequently, non-Dalit individuals are taking advantage of this situation and seizing cleaning jobs traditionally assigned to Dalits. One of the participants reported,

Mainstream Muslims are taking away the cleaning jobs from us. They get these jobs because of their excellent economic standing and political connections. However, we are supposed to get the job. It is a serious threat to our sweeping profession.

Not only the dominant Muslim community but also other castes within the Hindu religion are engaged in this cleaning job. One of the participants is Rishi (cobbler), a member of another lower caste, who works as a sweeper in a government office. He narrated,

I used to work as a cobbler. I have been working in cleaning for the past six years. Many government officers always come to me to have their shoes polished. Over time, a good relationship developed between us. They then asked me to apply for a cleaning job in their office. I applied and, based on their recommendation, got the job. I did not have to pay any bribe for it.

Bribe Practice in Securing the Cleaning Job

Dalits have been engaged in sweeping activities for generations, but due to a lack of proper education, they face difficulties in accessing their inherited jobs. In contrast, members of dominant communities are increasingly attempting to take

over these jobs, leading to a job crisis for Dalits. Competition for these jobs is based on unfair practices, and malpractice, such as bribery during the recruitment process, is common. Non-Dalit individuals may pay bribes to the authorities to secure these jobs, which further disadvantages Dalits. One of the participants shared his experiences,

I interviewed for cleaner jobs in Dhaka, Rajshahi, and Jashore. Nevertheless, these jobs were given to someone else. Because I could not afford to pay the bribe they demanded, many others took the jobs in exchange for money. No matter the cleaner's position, it is a government job. So, others are ready to pay bribes to get this job.

Offering bribes in the job market has harmful effects, sustaining a cycle of corruption that compels others to adopt the practice. Even Dalits resort to bribery to secure their traditional jobs. Unethical recruitment agencies might ask for bribes from job seekers, forcing Dalits to comply. This ongoing cycle of corruption illustrates the importance of promoting fair and equal employment opportunities for everyone. Another participant narrated,

I got the job 22 years ago by bribing TK with 20000/-. My elder brother works as a sweeper in a government office. He contacted the higher-ups in his office and arranged everything to get me the job there.

Caste-based discrimination hinders Dalits' participation in alternative professions. With sweeping as their only reliable source of livelihood, they face a threat as the mainstream community gradually replaces them in this occupation. Dalits are compelled to pay bribes to maintain their job security and economic security.

Transforming Structures and Processes

Transforming structures and processes within the livelihoods framework refers to the government and private institutions, organizations, policies, and legislation that determine livelihood parameters (DFID, 1999). Institutions and policies are directly related to access to different assets (Scoones, 1998). However, the lack of proper structures and processes impedes improvements in Dalits' livelihoods in Bangladesh. The quota system in higher education (Naheer & Hasan, 2017) is considered an important step the government has taken to eliminate discrimination against Dalits. Various educational institutions have recently introduced quota systems for Dalits in their admission tests. Again, quotas for sweeping jobs (Rasheed, 2014) serve as a safeguard for their livelihoods. However, the system needs to be adequately enforced, as individuals from major groups take up cleaning jobs instead of Dalits. Bribery during the recruitment process also compromises the quota system. Moreover, the quota

system applies only to the post of a sweeper, while many educated Dalits aspire to work in other, better-paying sectors without reservation. Consequently, to eliminate untouchability and discrimination based on decent work and profession, the law commission has drafted the “*Boishammya Bilope Ain 2014*” (Elimination of Discrimination Act 2014). To improve their quality of life, it is necessary to protect their human rights, address their needs and priorities by removing harmful laws and policies, and ensure that caste-based discrimination is properly addressed and eliminated.

Livelihood Strategies of the Dalit Community

Livelihood strategies encompass the range and integration of people's actions and choices to achieve their livelihood objectives (GLOPP, 2008). These strategies intend to produce livelihood outcomes (Serrat, 2008). The livelihood approach seeks to foster diversity, potential, and opportunity (DFID, 1999). Dalits have limited career choices. Social exclusion, arising from untouchability, bars their access to multiple livelihood assets (Hossain, 2016). Therefore, they need access to alternative livelihoods beyond their nonviable traditional livelihoods, such as cleaning jobs. They must be better educated and more skilled to engage easily in other jobs and businesses. The recruitment agency's outlook should change to ensure that eligible Dalit candidates are appointed to any job. The income security of Dalit people ought to be ensured by involving them in various income-generating activities. They must participate in various training programmes arranged by the government and NGOs. They need to be well trained in computer and ICT, electrical mechanics, mobile repair, dressmaking and tailoring, motor driving, etc., to engage in different occupations and ensure their food security. Some technical programmes must be arranged to build their entrepreneurial capacities.

Livelihood Outcomes

Livelihood outcomes are the achievements or progress of livelihood strategies (DFID, 1999). Potential livelihood outcomes include higher income, enhanced well-being, reduced vulnerability, enhanced food security, and effective utilisation of the natural resource base (GLOPP, 2008). If the 80% reservation quota (Rasheed, 2014) for the sweeping profession is implemented, Dalits will obtain sweeping jobs without paying bribes. The government needs to monitor the recruitment process for sweepers and ensure the proper use of quotas for cleaning jobs. Special stipend programmes should be introduced for Dalit students to encourage parents to send their children to school. The barrier to buying land should be removed by changing attitudes and abolishing the stigma attached to it. Then Dalits can have the opportunity to buy land and build their houses within mainstream society. Buying agricultural land can help them

engage in cultivation. It will be another source of income and guarantee food security. A law needs to be enacted to remove all forms of discrimination based on caste and untouchability. The government should focus on this issue through new laws to eradicate the different forms of discrimination that Dalits face in their everyday life.

Discussion and Policy Implication

The educational backwardness of the Dalit community is generally attributed to poverty and exclusion. Dalits are constrained in their career options and tend to follow their inherited professions. However, despite being qualified for cleaning jobs, many cannot secure employment in the government and private sectors due to intense competition and insufficient education. As a result, some people occupy these roles, stripping Dalits of their traditional jobs and causing economic instability. These conditions represent a serious threat to their livelihoods, making it difficult for them to switch to other careers. Additionally, their low income, restricted land access, and discrimination in education directly affect their economic well-being.

The study shows that Dalits experience daily economic exclusion and discrimination. They face limited income sources, restricted access to land, and are often excluded from employment and educational opportunities. Rao's (2010) research on Dalits in India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka shows they are shut out of the job market and denied various rights, causing poverty. Similarly, untouchability and caste-based discrimination obstruct their access to work, and social and economic marginalization force them to continue their traditional, low-wage sweeping jobs. Studies by Saracini and Shanmugavelan (2019), Jodhka and Shah (2010), and Selvin (2018) also support these conclusions, indicating that caste is a barrier to Dalits' choice of profession and to the enjoyment of rights to free occupation and representation in South Asia. Islam and Parvez (2013) suggest that the traditional sweeping jobs of Dalits are usually in the informal sector, where they are low-paid or exploited, causing inadequate income and extreme poverty.

Regarding education, Hossain (2016), Hossain (2022), and Kahali and Sagarika (2021) found that Dalit children face discrimination from teachers and peers based on caste, ancestral occupation, and place of residence. Quota systems for Dalits in admission tests at various educational institutions have been introduced to address this issue. Khanal (2015) found that Dalit children in Nepal face severe discrimination in accessing education. In Nepal, Bhattachan et al. (2009) found that most Dalits are landless. Narula's (2008) study demonstrated the negative impact of limited land access on housing, the economy, livelihoods, and lifestyles in India. Similarly, Rahman's (2016) study revealed that Dalits in

Bangladesh face an identity crisis and are required to hide their caste identity to access various services. Hossain (2016) also argues that social exclusion prevents the Dalit community from accessing most livelihood assets.

The findings clearly indicate that social exclusion stemming from caste identity systematically limits Dalits' access to livelihood capital. Despite some policy efforts being in place, structural barriers force many Dalits into precarious, low-wage traditional jobs, curtailing their upward mobility. Achieving sustainable improvements in Dalit livelihoods requires tackling the firmly established social and institutional inequalities that keep them marginalized.

The findings indicate significant implications for policy, practice, and research. The strict enforcement of anti-discrimination laws and improvements in transparency in public-sector hiring to prevent corruption and exclusion from reserved roles are to be ensured. Effective monitoring of the quota systems, combined with investments in vocational training, entrepreneurship, educational stipends, land rights, and better housing, is important for reducing vulnerability and encouraging livelihood diversification.

Non-governmental organizations should broaden rights-based advocacy, legal support, and community awareness programs to combat caste stigma. Skills training and market linkage initiatives, especially for Dalit women and youth, are important for boosting income security and social inclusion.

Educational institutions should adopt inclusive practices and anti-discrimination policies and build community partnerships to improve academic access and career advancement. Future research should focus on collecting disaggregated data, conducting longitudinal studies, and evaluating policies to better understand and address structural inequalities. These efforts will help formulate evidence-based strategies to promote sustainable, fair livelihoods for Dalit communities.

Conclusion

Using the SLF, this study explored the livelihood challenges faced by Dalit communities in Bangladesh. The findings show that social exclusion stemming from caste identity systematically limits Dalit communities' access to all five types of livelihood assets: physical, human, social, natural, and financial. Poor housing and sanitation, limited education, restricted land ownership, weak political representation, and unstable income sources reinforce cycles of marginalization and poverty. Labor market exclusion is a key structural barrier. Although sweeping has traditionally been Dalits' main livelihood, rising competition, corruption in hiring, and weak enforcement of quota policies have increased employment insecurity. Restricted access to education and skills

training further hampers occupational mobility, preventing Dalits from shifting to other professions. These interconnected barriers reveal how vulnerabilities are rooted in broader social and structural processes that sustain inequality. The study emphasizes that Dalits' livelihood insecurity is not just economic but also a consequence of deep-rooted social stratification and institutional discrimination. Achieving sustainable livelihoods requires reforms that eliminate caste-based exclusion, improve legal protections, broaden access to diverse income opportunities, and promote inclusive development. Without systemic change, Dalit communities will remain trapped in unstable livelihood paths with limited upward mobility.

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