

Exclusionary Geographies: The Nature of Stigma Associated with Domestic Sweepers (Balmiki Women) in District Yamuna Nagar, Haryana (India)

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Abstract: This study investigates the stigma experienced by Balmiki women engaged in domestic sweeping in Yamuna Nagar district, Haryana, within the intersecting contexts of caste, class, and gender. Dalit communities remain disproportionately represented in this occupation, reinforcing caste hierarchies and perpetuating notions of “pollution” that devalue their labor. Such stigma manifests through social exclusion, restricted mobility, and limited opportunities for advancement. Gendered expectations intensify these challenges, as women balance domestic responsibilities while facing workplace harassment and systemic neglect. Despite urbanization and economic development, Balmiki women in District Yamuna Nagar, Haryana continue to encounter both overt and subtle forms of discrimination across rural and urban settings. Using qualitative methods — focus group discussions to highlights how caste and gender intersect to sustain occupational stigma and marginalization. Findings underscore the need for stronger legal protections, awareness campaigns, and community-driven initiatives that promote the dignity of labor and challenge entrenched biases. Addressing these issues is essential for fostering equity, inclusion, and social justice in rapidly transforming urban-industrial contexts.

Keywords: exclusionary geographies; women; Dalits; discrimination; sexual harassment; labor; Dalit women

1 Introduction

The stigma associated with women working as domestic sweepers in Yamuna Nagar, Haryana, reflects deeply entrenched societal hierarchies shaped by caste, class, and gender dynamics. Historically, domestic sweeping has been linked to marginalized communities, particularly Dalits, reinforcing notions of “pollution” and “social exclusion” (Dandapat and Tripathi 2025). Despite urbanization and economic development, these women continue to face discrimination, both overt and subtle, in their workplaces and communities (Haman 2025). Gendered expectations further exacerbate their challenges, as they are often undervalued and subjected to exploitative working conditions (Mahanta and Gupta 2019). This study aims to explore the roots of this stigma, its impact on the lives of these women, and the measures needed to promote dignity and equality in their profession. The Dalits women in India experiences a unique and compounded form of marginalization where caste, class and gender intersect – producing layered discrimination that cannot be understood in isolation (Saha 2026). Their struggles highlight how caste oppression, economic exclusion, and patriarchal norms reinforce each other, shaping everyday vulnerabilities and resistance (Kanak and Kachhway 2025).

The complex interplay of caste, gender, and occupational stigma associated with domestic sweepers, particularly Balmiki women, in India has deep historical roots (Kumar 2009; Ahmad

and Shah 2022; Arora 2023). The Balmiki community has historically been associated with manual scavenging and sanitation work, which are considered "polluting" tasks under the caste hierarchy which led to their marginalization and stigmatization (Chauhan and Dadwal 2021; Raj et al. 2022; Ziyauddin 2022). Though started in Ancient India and continued through medieval times, it was during the British rule, that the caste system was institutionalized in administrative practices, reinforcing the association of certain communities with specific occupations (Sharma 2017; Mosse 2018; Zwart 2000; Sophan et al. 2023). Traditional beliefs about purity and pollution have perpetuated the idea that sanitation work is degrading, further entrenching stigma (Gatade 2015; Mosse 2018; Sanil 2023). Historically, caste-based stigmatized jobs occupations of marginalized communities have perpetuated their social status were hereditary, leaving little room for individuals to escape the stigma associated with their work (Noronha 2021; Saldanha et al. 2022; Pathania et al. 2023).

Complexity is not a hindrance but a necessary lens for understanding and addressing the lived realities of marginalized women in India (Sunita et al. 2024). The intersection of caste, class, and gender demands intersectional feminist solidarities that confront privilege, embrace difference, and build coalitions to resist layered exclusions and structural inequalities (Kumar 2026). Similarly, community-based resilience frameworks gain strength when they integrate indigenous knowledge, recognize structural vulnerabilities, and respond to overlapping crises of caste violence, economic precarity, and climate shocks (Govindharaj 2025). Embracing complexity, therefore, is essential for crafting inclusive policies, nurturing transformative feminist solidarities, and fostering resilience that empowers rather than erases marginalized women's voices (Yadav 2026).

This study examines the experiences of women engaged in domestic sweeping, situating their labor within the intersecting dynamics of caste, class, and gender. Drawing on intersectional feminist theory, the analysis foregrounds how multiple axes of identity converge to produce compounded forms of marginalization (Crenshaw 1989). In the Indian context, Dalit feminist scholarship has emphasized that caste cannot be separated from gendered oppression, and that the voices of Dalit women must be articulated distinctly within feminist discourse (Runa and Rahman 2023). Similarly, subaltern studies highlighted how structural hierarchies silence marginalized groups, reinforcing their invisibility in mainstream narratives (Saha 2026). By aligning the study's objectives with these theoretical foundations, the present study demonstrate how domestic sweeping is not merely an economic activity but a site where caste-based exclusion, patriarchal control, and class exploitation intersect, shaping the everyday realities of marginalized women.

Historical factors have created a cycle of discrimination and exclusion that continues to affect Balmiki women today. The caste system, a historically entrenched social hierarchy in India, plays a central role in reinforcing stigma, especially for those engaged in sanitation work specially Balmiki women (Dandapat and Tripathi 2024). The caste system classifies certain communities, like the Balmiki, as "Dalits" or historically "Untouchables" (Akhtar 2020). Occupations deemed impure, such as manual scavenging or domestic sweeping, are associated with these communities, resulting in social ostracism (Chawla 2024). The caste system traditionally tied individuals to their caste-based occupations by birth, without the possibility of changing professions which forced to sustain stigmatized identities across generations (Subedi 2013; Mosse 2018). Deep-seated cultural and religious norms around purity and pollution dictate that certain tasks, like waste management or sanitation are impure or dirty (Kikon 2020; Nagla 2020; Kapur 2022). This belief system legitimizes the discrimination faced

by those who perform these roles. The caste system enforces physical and social separation. Historically, Dalits were excluded from public spaces, temples, schools, and water sources (Mosse 2018; Rao 2021; Malik 2022). This isolation still manifests in various forms, perpetuating stigma. Even though untouchability was officially abolished by the Indian Constitution in 1950, caste-based biases remain entrenched in institutional practices like education, employment, and access to public services (Waughray 2009; Sharma 2015; Biswas 2023; Anthony 2024). Marginalized communities often remain economically dependent on the very occupations that stigmatize them, creating a vicious cycle of poverty and exclusion (Pohlan 2019; Choudhary 2024). The caste system's rigid framework and cultural influence make escaping this stigma an uphill battle for communities like the Balmiki (Alam et al. 2023; Suzuki 2023). Over time, movements and policies have aimed to dismantle these barriers, but the journey toward true equality continues.

Caste-based discrimination in modern India are mostly observed in rural areas where Dalits are still denied access to common water sources, temples, and other public spaces (Adagale 2020; Kumar et al. 2023). There are enough evidences of discrimination against Dalits in market, both rural and market (Thorat et al. 2010). This segregation reinforces the stigma associated with the Dalits caste. There have been numerous cases of violence against Dalits, such as the burning of Dalit homes or physical assaults for perceived transgressions like sitting on a chair in the presence of upper-caste individuals (Agarwal and Mahawar 2017; Sarim 2024). Despite constitutional safeguard, Dalit students continue to face systemic exclusion in education spaces, manifested in practices of enforced separation within classroom and denied of basic provision like mid-day meals (Shah 2017; Chetty 2021; Kumar et al. 2022). Despite affirmative action policies, Dalit man and women often face discrimination in hiring practices and workplace environments (Thorat and Attewell 2007). They are frequently relegated to menial jobs. The conviction rates for crimes against Dalits are significantly lower than the national average, reflecting systemic bias in the judicial process (Ahmad and Siddique 2017; Jalki and Pathan 2017; Pal 2018).

The ongoing challenge faced by Dalits communities in India mainly in education sector is a persistent issue, deeply rooted in historical and social biases (Arora 2023). Teachers harbor prejudices against Dalit students, leading to neglect, verbal abuse, or lower expectations, which can hinder their academic growth. Due to discrimination and economic hardships, Dalit children have higher dropout rates, especially at the primary and secondary levels (Rai and Ghimire 2025). Dalit students often lack access to quality educational resources, such as books, technology, and extracurricular opportunities, compared to their peers. Dalit students frequently face bullying and harassment from classmates and even school staff, creating a hostile learning environment. Despite affirmative action policies, Dalits remain underrepresented in universities and professional courses, due to systemic barriers like financial constraints and discrimination in the name of merit (Pradhan and Jurow 2025).

The social context of Balmiki women—shaped by caste stigma, economic precarity, and patriarchal norms—profoundly structures their everyday lives. Their identity as Dalits, historically tied to sanitation work, reinforces exclusion and vulnerability across both public and private spheres (Thorat and Newman 2007; Lone 2026). This caste-based stigma manifests in schools, workplaces, and neighborhoods, where Balmiki women experience a double burden: marginalized as Dalits and subordinated as women. Such practices of untouchability perpetuate segregation and invisibility, restricting their participation in mainstream society. Economically, most Balmiki women are concentrated in the unorganised sector, particularly in domestic

sweeping, sanitation, and other informal labor (Panda 2022). These occupations are characterized by low wages, lack of job security, and exclusion from social protections such as maternity benefits and pensions. Economic dependence further heightens their vulnerability to exploitation and harassment. In addition, Balmiki women are disproportionately exposed to sexual harassment and violence, both within workplaces and communities (Lone 2025). Domestic violence and substance abuse in households compound these vulnerabilities, undermining their overall well-being. Limited access to healthcare and nutrition perpetuates cycles of ill health and poverty, while systemic discrimination in schools restricts educational opportunities for their children, reinforcing intergenerational marginalization. Their voices remain largely absent in mainstream feminist and labor movements, and the absence of adequate safety nets leaves them exposed to persistent exploitation. Taken together, these intersecting challenges illustrate how caste, class, and gender dynamics converge to shape the structural exclusion of Balmiki women, perpetuating cycles of disadvantage across generations (Hebert et al. 2019).

Exploring the stigma associated with domestic sweepers, particularly Balmiki women, in district Yamuna Nagar, Haryana delves into the intersection of caste and sanitation work, highlighting the systemic issues faced by sanitation workers. This paper examining the experiences of women sanitation workers in Indian cities, shedding light on the socio-economic and cultural challenges they face and studies focuses on the Balmiki community, exploring their experiences, which could provide insights into similar dynamics in Yamuna Nagar. The stigma associated with women working as domestic sweepers in Yamuna Nagar is deeply rooted in societal hierarchies and cultural perceptions (Rajni and Karwal 2024). Here are some key aspects:

- **Caste and Class Dynamics:** Domestic sweepers of Yamuna Nagar often belong to marginalized communities, and their work is seen as "dirty" due to caste-based prejudices. This reinforces their social exclusion and limits their opportunities for upward mobility.
- **Gendered Expectations:** Balmiki Women engaged in these roles faced additional stigma because their work challenges traditional gender norms. While their labor is essential, it is undervalued and often invisible.
- **Lack of Legal Protections:** The absence of robust labor laws for domestic workers exacerbates their vulnerability. Many women in Yamuna Nagar worked in this sector without contracts, fair wages, or social security.
- **Cultural Perceptions:** Domestic work is often not recognized as "real work," leading to a lack of respect for those who perform it. This perception is tied to patriarchal and classist attitudes.

Efforts to address this stigma include advocating for legal recognition of domestic work, raising awareness about the dignity of labor, and challenging societal norms that devalue these essential roles. The caste system has historically assigned certain communities, especially Dalits formerly referred to as "Untouchables", to perform tasks considered "polluting" or menial, such as cleaning and sweeping (Pais 2021). These roles are passed down generations, creating a rigid social hierarchy that reinforces discrimination. The work of domestic sweepers is often stigmatized due to cultural notions of purity and pollution (Mendonca et al. 2022). People from

marginalized castes engaged in such labor are unfairly associated with the "polluting" nature of the work, perpetuating their exclusion and devaluation in society (Pais 2021). Dalit women in particular face compounded discrimination due to their caste, gender, and economic status (Sabharwal and Sonalkar 2015). They are often subjected to exploitative working conditions and harassment while simultaneously being denied recognition for their labor.

The caste system also impacts access to education and economic opportunities (Thorat 2009). Women from lower castes, with limited alternatives, are often forced into domestic sweeping or similar jobs, which further entrenches caste-based hierarchies (Nida 2026). Even in urban settings, domestic sweepers are often treated as "invisible" or "lesser" individuals (Lone 2026). They may face restrictions like separate drinking cups or being excluded from certain spaces within households. To dismantle these dynamics include enforcing anti-discrimination laws, promoting caste awareness, and empowering marginalized communities through education and economic opportunities (Ahanger and Sofal 2026). Yet, the legacy of these historical hierarchies remains deeply ingrained and requires persistent societal and policy-level changes (Thorat 2009). Caste dynamics in urban and rural areas differ in their visibility, manifestation, and impact due to the varying social, economic, and cultural environments (Thorat 2009).

1.1 Rural Areas:

- **Rigid Caste Hierarchies:** In rural regions, caste-based divisions are more pronounced and strictly adhered to. The social fabric of villages often revolves around caste, with segregated living spaces, distinct occupations, and restricted social interactions between castes.
- **Occupation-Based Discrimination:** Traditional caste roles persist more strongly in rural areas. Women working as domestic sweepers might face greater stigma due to entrenched perceptions of "polluting" work and untouchability.
- **Lack of Anonymity:** In villages, everyone knows each other's caste, making it difficult for individuals to escape their ascribed identities. This can lead to overt discrimination and social exclusion.
- **Limited Access to Resources:** Marginalized castes in rural areas often have less access to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities, reinforcing their dependence on menial jobs.

1.2 Urban Areas:

- **Relatively Fluid Caste Dynamics:** Cities offer a degree of anonymity, which can blur caste boundaries to some extent. People from marginalized castes may find opportunities for social and economic mobility that are less accessible in rural areas.
- **Persistence of Subtle Discrimination:** While outright caste-based segregation may be less visible in urban areas, subtler forms of discrimination persist. For instance, domestic sweepers may still face prejudice in the form of separate utensils or being treated as "lesser."
- **Economic and Educational Opportunities:** Urban areas often provide better access to education and diverse employment. However, women from marginalized castes may

still encounter barriers to entering formal sectors, often being relegated to low-paying domestic or sanitation work.

- **Inter-sectionality with Class:** In cities, caste discrimination increasingly intersects with class disparities. While caste may not always be overtly acknowledged, socio-economic status often becomes a proxy for maintaining exclusionary practices.

Despite these differences, the overarching stigma tied to caste and certain occupations persists, albeit expressed differently in rural and urban settings (Jaspal 2011). Efforts to address these dynamics need to be context-specific, addressing the unique challenges faced in each environment. Caste and class dynamics both influence social hierarchies and opportunities, but they operate differently in Indian society.

2 Study Area

District Yamuna Nagar, located in the northeastern part of Haryana, is an important industrial and agricultural hub with a diverse socio-cultural landscape. Spread across approximately 1,756 square kilometers, the district is bounded by Himachal Pradesh to the north and Uttar Pradesh to the east, with the Yamuna River flowing along its boundary and shaping its fertile alluvial plains. The district headquarters is at Yamunanagar town, which, along with Jagadhri, forms a major urban and industrial center known especially for plywood, paper, and metal industries. According to Census 2011, Yamuna Nagar has a population of over 1.2 million, with a literacy rate of nearly 78 percent, though gender disparities persist as reflected in its sex ratio of 862 females per 1,000 males. The area experiences relatively high rainfall compared to other parts of Haryana, supporting agriculture alongside industrial growth. Socially, Yamuna Nagar is home to diverse caste and community groups, including Balmiki communities who are traditionally engaged in sanitation and sweeping work. This mix of industrial modernization and entrenched caste hierarchies makes Yamuna Nagar a significant site for examining stigma, particularly the intersection of caste, gender, and occupation among Balmiki women domestic sweepers.

3 Methodology

To study the nature of stigma associated with domestic sweepers, specifically Balmiki women in Yamuna Nagar district, Haryana, a qualitative methodology is used. The research begins with preparatory work such as reviewing literature on caste-based stigma followed by community entry and rapport building to establish trust. Focus group discussions carried out to capture the collective narratives, key informant interviews with employers and officials, and direct observation of workplace and community settings. Narrative analysis has been used to interpret the data. Ethical considerations such as informed consent, anonymity, and cultural sensitivity would be prioritized throughout. The study would culminate in policy briefs, community reports, and academic outputs, with measurable outcomes including documentation of stigma, insights into caste-gender intersections, and recommendations for interventions and sensitization programs. The study employed a qualitative, exploratory research design with purposive sampling. The sample consisted of Balmiki women domestic sweepers from District Yamuna Nagar, selected to capture diverse experiences of stigma.

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) are a valuable qualitative method for studying stigma among Balmiki women domestic sweepers in Yamuna Nagar, as it allows collective voices and shared experiences to emerge in a safe, dialogic space (Mishra 2016). In this context, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) has brought together a small group of women to discuss their daily

realities, perceptions of discrimination, coping strategies, and aspirations. Guided by me (author) through semi-structured prompts, the discussions encouraged participants to articulate both personal and community-level experiences of stigma, while simultaneously revealing group dynamics and collective narratives. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) highlighted how stigma is reinforced through social interactions, workplace practices, and community attitudes, also uncovering resilience strategies and solidarity networks among Balmiki women.

The role of the first author would be central to ensuring that focus group discussions are conducted with integrity and sensitivity. Guided by me through carefully designed semi-structured prompts, the discussions would encourage Balmiki women participants to share both personal and community-level experiences of stigma. The first author's facilitation would involve balancing the conversation so that all voices are heard, while remaining attentive to cultural nuances and power dynamics that may affect openness. By maintaining confidentiality and creating a respectful environment, I would help participants feel safe to articulate their narratives without fear of judgment or repercussions. This approach not only allows for the emergence of rich collective narratives and group dynamics but also ensures that the process itself is empowering, positioning me not just as an observer but as a responsible facilitator committed to ethical and inclusive research practice. The insights generated from Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), provide a nuanced understanding of the intersection of caste, gender, and occupation in shaping stigma.

4 Caste Dynamics

While caste is a rigid, identity-based system, class offers a more fluid, economically driven hierarchy. Marginalized caste groups often remain trapped in lower economic classes, showing how caste perpetuates economic inequality (Pathania et al. 2023). Urbanization and globalization have somewhat reduced the overt influence of caste but have not erased its effects, as caste often becomes a "silent" determinant within class systems (Saha 2026). In essence, caste often predetermines one's starting point in life, while class determines the economic opportunities and social privileges they might or might not access (Sharma 2015). Together, they form a complex web of inequality that requires both cultural and economic reforms to untangle. The stigma associated with women working as domestic sweepers in India is deeply rooted in societal hierarchies and cultural perceptions ((Rajni and Karwal 2024).

Domestic sweepers often belong to marginalized communities especially Balmiki community in North India, and their work is seen as "dirty" (Pais 2021). This reinforces their social exclusion and limits their opportunities for upward mobility. Women in these roles face additional stigma because their work challenges traditional gender norms (Arora, A. 2023). While their labor is essential, it is undervalued and often invisible. The absence of robust labor laws for domestic workers exacerbates their vulnerability. Many women in this sector work without contracts, fair wages, or social security. Domestic work is often not recognized as "real work," leading to a lack of respect for those who perform it. This perception is tied to patriarchal and classist attitudes (Ahanger and Sofal 2026).

4.1 Caste-Based Disparities:

- Historically marginalized groups, like Dalits, Adivasis, Muslims and women have faced exclusion from formal education (Thorat and Pai 2022). Although affirmative action policies like reservation quotas have improved access, these groups still experience issues like discrimination in schools, lack of resources, and lower enrollment rates.

Caste bias also manifests through unequal treatment in educational institutions, leading to higher dropout rates, especially among girls.

4.2 Caste-Based Inequalities:

- Caste discrimination persists in the job market, with marginalized groups often confined to low-paying, menial jobs, such as domestic sweeping or sanitation work (Mahanta and Gupta 2019). Social networks, which heavily influence employment opportunities in India, are often segregated by caste, limiting access for underprivileged groups to better-paying jobs. Even in professional fields, individuals from marginalized castes may encounter bias in hiring practices or workplace discrimination.

5 Intersection of Caste and Class: Policies and Initiatives

Caste and class often reinforce each other. For example, marginalized caste groups frequently belong to lower economic classes, making them doubly disadvantaged in accessing education and employment (Thorat 2009; Ahanger and Sofal 2026). While urbanization and globalization have provided some opportunities for social mobility, deeply ingrained biases remain significant hurdles. Efforts like reservation quotas in education and government jobs, skill development programs, and anti-discrimination laws aim to bridge these gaps (Thorat 2023). However, implementation challenges and social prejudices continue to limit their effectiveness. Addressing caste and class inequalities in India requires a combination of legal, social, and economic measures.

5.1 Reservation Policies:

- The Indian Constitution provides reservation quotas for Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in education, employment, and political representation. In addition, women get reservation in local bodies, both rural and urban. These policies aim to level the playing field for historically marginalized groups. Sadly, there is no reservation for religious minorities, despite their continued experience of discrimination, and this absence undermines the very foundations of democracy (Thorat and Pai, 2022; Husain 2025).

5.2 Anti-Discrimination Laws:

- Laws like the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act are designed to protect marginalized communities from discrimination and violence.

5.3 Educational Reforms:

- Initiatives like the Right to Education (RTE) Act ensure free and compulsory education for children aged 6 to 14, with a focus on inclusivity.
- Scholarships and financial aid programs for economically and socially disadvantaged students help bridge the gap in access to quality education.

5.4 Skill Development Programs:

- Government schemes like the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY) provide vocational training to enhance employability among marginalized groups.

5.5 Economic Empowerment:

- Microfinance initiatives and self-help groups empower women and marginalized communities by providing access to credit and entrepreneurial opportunities.

5.6 Awareness Campaigns:

- Public awareness campaigns challenge societal prejudices and promote the dignity of labor, aiming to reduce stigma associated with certain occupations.

5.7 Affirmative Action in the Private Sector:

- Encouraging diversity and inclusion policies in private companies can complement government efforts to address inequalities.

While these policies have made significant strides, challenges remain in their implementation and effectiveness. Continuous monitoring, community participation, and addressing systemic biases are crucial for sustained progress (Alam et al. 2024). Societal views on domestic work in India are shaped by a complex interplay of caste, class, gender, and regional factors.

- **Caste-Based Perceptions:**

- Domestic sweepers from marginalized castes often face stigma due to historical associations of their work with "polluting" tasks (Pais 2021). This stigma is more pronounced in rural areas, where caste hierarchies are rigid. In urban settings, while caste-based discrimination may be less overt, it persists subtly, such as through differential treatment or exclusion from certain spaces.

- **Class Dynamics:**

- Domestic sweepers from economically disadvantaged backgrounds are often viewed through a classist lens, with their work undervalued and their labor seen as replaceable. Wealthier households may treat domestic workers as "invisible," reinforcing class divides.

- **Gendered Expectations:**

- Women domestic sweepers face additional challenges due to societal norms that undervalue women's labor (Kumar 2026). They are often expected to balance their work with unpaid domestic responsibilities at home. Gendered stereotypes also influence how their work is perceived, with tasks like sweeping and cleaning being seen as "natural" for women.

- **Regional Variations:**

- In some regions, domestic work is more socially accepted and even organized through unions or cooperatives, which can improve working conditions and societal perceptions. In other areas, domestic sweepers may face severe exploitation and lack of recognition, reflecting regional disparities in labor rights and social attitudes.

- **Urban vs. Rural Divide:**

- In urban areas, domestic sweepers may benefit from anonymity and access to better opportunities, but they still encounter class-based discrimination. In rural areas, the intertwining of caste and class dynamics often leads to more overt forms of exclusion and stigma.

Efforts to improve societal views include awareness campaigns, legal protections, and initiatives to recognize the dignity of labor. These measures aim to challenge deep-seated biases and promote equality (Ahanger and Sofal 2026). In Yamuna Nagar, like many urban centers in India, domestic sweeping work is often carried out by women from Dalit communities. Their labor is essential for maintaining cleanliness and hygiene, but it is largely undervalued and accompanied by societal biases.

- **Workplace Challenges:** Domestic sweepers in households or public spaces frequently report being subjected to differential treatment, such as being asked to use separate utensils or not being allowed into certain parts of the house.
- **Economic Exploitation:** Many women receive low wages with no job security or benefits, further entrenching their financial vulnerability.
- **Social Exclusion:** In community settings, these women often face social ostracism due to caste-based prejudices, with their work being viewed as "polluting."
- **Lack of Recognition:** Despite performing critical services, there is little acknowledgment or dignity attached to their labor, which exacerbates the stigma.

6 Challenges faced by the Balmiki women:

However, many of these women also show remarkable resilience, pride in their labor, and a desire for better opportunities for their families (Haman 2025). Domestic women sweepers in Yamuna Nagar, Haryana, face a range of challenges in their work, shaped by societal, economic, and health-related factors. Women engaged in sweeping and sanitation work are often employed in urban areas across India, as well as in rural settings, depending on the demand for such services (Mahanta and Gupta 2019). These roles are typically found in homes, schools, offices, public spaces, and municipal services.

Women sweepers are primarily engaged in cleaning public spaces, households, and offices. Their work is physically demanding and often involves exposure to dust, waste, and hazardous materials (Yadav 2026). Poor working conditions including exposure to health hazards without adequate protective gear (Kannan et al. 2025). The lack of protective gear exposes them to respiratory problems, skin infections, and other health hazards. Limited access to healthcare exacerbates these risks, leaving many women to bear the burden of medical expenses. Despite the essential nature of their labor, it is undervalued and often invisible to society. Many women sweepers work on a contractual or informal basis, receiving low wages with no job security or benefits like health insurance or pensions are common issues. Low wages, limited job security, payment delays and exploitation by contractors despite the essential nature of their work. As women, they face additional challenges, including balancing their work with unpaid domestic responsibilities. Harassment and exploitation at work place are significant concerns, with limited avenues for redress (Lalrempui and Elizabeth 2020).

Social stigma tied to caste and class, especially if they come from marginalized communities (Jaspal 2011). Women sweepers often belong to marginalized communities and face caste-based discrimination. Their work is associated with notions of "pollution," leading to social exclusion. They are frequently treated as "invisible" or "lesser" individuals, both in their workplaces and communities. Women from marginalized community faced discrimination and exclusion treated as "untouchable" or restricted from certain spaces (Mosse 2018). Their contributions are rarely acknowledged, and they are excluded from discussions about labor rights and workplace improvements.

7 Efforts to Address Challenges

The stigma include advocating for legal recognition of domestic work, raising awareness about the dignity of labor, and challenging societal norms that devalue these essential roles (Karthikeyan 2026). At the same time, some organizations and initiatives have emerged to support domestic workers in India including Yamuna Nagar (Haryana) and beyond are working to improve the lives of the domestic women sweepers and providing training, securing fair wages, and advocating for labor rights (NCSC Annual Report 2017-18, GOI; Karunagaran et al. 2024). Training initiatives aim to provide alternative employment opportunities. Advocacy for better implementation of labor laws to ensure fair wages and safe working conditions an effort to challenge societal biases and promote the dignity of labors (Gupta 2023). These efforts are crucial for addressing the systemic issues faced by women sweepers and ensuring their dignity and well-being. Specific initiatives and policies aimed at improving the lives of women sweepers in India and addressing their challenges:

7.1 Legal Protections:

- **The Unorganized Workers' Social Security Act, 2008:** This law aims to provide social security benefits to workers in the unorganized sector, including domestic sweepers. It includes provisions for health insurance, maternity benefits, and pension schemes.
- **Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989:** This act protects marginalized communities, including women sweepers, from discrimination, harassment, and violence due to their caste.

7.2 Skill Development and Training Programs:

- **Deen Dayal Antyodaya Yojana - National Urban Livelihoods Mission (DAY-NULM):** This initiative provides skill training and support for self-employment to workers in the unorganized sector, enabling them to transition to better-paying jobs.
- **Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY):** Women sweepers can access vocational training under this program to learn new skills and improve their employability.

7.3 Awareness Campaigns:

- **Dignity of Labor Campaigns:** Several NGOs run campaigns to challenge societal biases and promote the dignity of labor, ensuring domestic sweepers and sanitation workers are respected for their contributions.

- **Community Engagement Initiatives:** Programs are designed to educate communities about caste and class prejudices, fostering a more inclusive and equitable environment for women workers.

7.4 Healthcare and Social Welfare:

- **Ayushman Bharat Scheme:** This health insurance scheme provides access to free healthcare services for low-income families, which can significantly benefit women sweepers facing health risks in their work.
- **Local Municipal Support:** In some cities, municipal corporations provide women sweepers with protective gear, healthcare support, and advocacy for better working conditions.

These efforts collectively aim to address the stigma and challenges faced by women sweepers, but the success of these initiatives depends on their effective implementation and the involvement of the communities they serve.

8 Discussion

Efforts to address these issues through legal protections, awareness campaigns, skill development programs, and community support initiatives have shown promise but require more robust implementation and societal participation (Joshi 2017). Tackling these systemic inequalities demands persistent advocacy, policy reforms, and a cultural shift towards recognizing the dignity of labor and the rights of marginalized communities (Dash 2025). This study underscores the urgent need for a multi-faceted approach to dismantle the stigma associated with such labor and to empower the Balmiki women who perform it, enabling them to live with dignity and equality in society.

Earlier research on caste-based occupations in India has consistently highlighted the persistence of stigma attached to sanitation work, particularly among Dalit communities, and emphasized how notions of “pollution” reinforce social exclusion (Raghavendra and Kumar 2022). This present study aligns with those findings but adds depth by focusing specifically on Balmiki women in Yamuna Nagar, thereby foregrounding the intersection of caste, class, and gender. Unlike some prior studies that concentrated primarily on occupational stigma in rural contexts, this paper demonstrates that discrimination persists even in urban-industrial settings despite modernization and economic growth. Moreover, while earlier scholarship often emphasized structural barriers, this study brings out the lived experiences of women through focus group discussions and interviews, revealing how gendered expectations—such as balancing domestic responsibilities and enduring workplace harassment—compound caste-based stigma (Mosse 2018).

Specifically, earlier studies on caste-based sanitation work emphasized occupational stigma and structural barriers in rural contexts (Jassal and Karwal 2024). This paper corroborates those insights but extends them by focusing on Balmiki women in Yamuna Nagar, highlighting the intersection of caste, class, and gender. Unlike prior research, which often overlooked gendered dimensions, this study demonstrates how women’s dual responsibilities and workplace harassment compound caste-based discrimination. Methodologically, the inclusion of focus group discussions (FGDs) adds depth to the analysis; capturing collective narratives and resilience strategies that earlier study tended to overlook (Alam et al. 2025). Thus, the present study affirms the conclusions of previous work, it advances the discourse by documenting the

lived experiences of Balmiki women and offering policy-oriented recommendations to challenge entrenched biases.

9 Conclusion:

The study on the stigma, discrimination, and exclusion faced by domestic sweeper women and the Balmiki community in Yamuna Nagar, Haryana, highlights the deeply entrenched societal hierarchies that perpetuate their marginalization. Despite their essential contributions to maintaining hygiene and cleanliness, these women continue to grapple with caste-based prejudices, economic exploitation, and gendered inequality (Lone 2025). The intersecting challenges of caste and class further limit their access to education, dignified employment, and social inclusion.

Stronger enforcement of anti-discrimination laws combined with inclusive educational practices creates a powerful foundation for equity and social justice (Suarez et al. 2024). Laws provide the necessary framework to protect individuals from bias and ensure accountability across institutions, but their impact depends on consistent monitoring, accessible complaint mechanisms, and recognition of intersectional identities. At the same time, inclusive education transforms culture by reshaping curricula to reflect diverse histories, training teachers to recognize and counter bias, and ensuring accessibility for learners of all abilities (Onyebuchi et al. 2024). Together, these approaches move society beyond reactive measures—punishing discrimination after it occurs—toward proactive transformation, where awareness, representation, and fairness are embedded in everyday learning and institutional behavior. This synergy not only reduces discrimination but also fosters long-term resilience, trust, and inclusivity across communities.

The findings of this study underscore the urgent need to address the entrenched stigma faced by Balmiki women engaged in domestic sweeping in Yamuna Nagar. By situating their experiences within the intersecting frameworks of caste, class, and gender, the research highlights how discrimination persists despite urbanization and economic development. For students, the study offers a critical lens to understand intersectionality, ethical engagement, and the dignity of labor, encouraging them to challenge biases in both academic and everyday contexts. For researchers, it demonstrates the value of participatory methods such as focus group discussions in capturing collective narratives, while also pointing toward interdisciplinary approaches that bridge sociology, feminist theory, and policy studies. Ultimately, the implications extend beyond academia: they call for stronger legal protections, awareness campaigns, and community-driven initiatives that promote equity and inclusion. By amplifying the voices of Balmiki women, this paper contributes to a broader discourse on social justice and provides pathways for transformative change.

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