



Occupational Stigma and Social Exclusion among Garbage Collectors in Sri Lanka: Examining the Buffering Role of Perceived Organizational Support

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Abstract

Garbage collectors are often subjected to occupational stigma, which can lead to social exclusion and negatively affect their psychosocial well-being and job satisfaction. Despite the critical societal role of garbage collectors, limited research has examined the mechanisms by which occupational stigma contributes to social exclusion, particularly in developing countries such as Sri Lanka. The present study aims to investigate the impact of Occupational Stigma on Social Exclusion among garbage collectors and examine the moderating role of Perceived Organizational Support (POS). Occupational Stigma was conceptualized as a second-order construct comprising Public Stigma, Experienced Stigma, and Internalized Stigma, while Social Exclusion included Social Isolation, Discrimination, and Lack of Recognition. A cross-sectional survey was conducted with 249 garbage collectors, and data was analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) in SmartPLS. The findings reveal that Occupational Stigma significantly increases Social Exclusion, while POS attenuates this relationship, demonstrating its buffering effect. These results highlight the multidimensional nature of occupational stigma and the critical role of organizational support in reducing its adverse consequences. The study concludes that both organizational interventions, such as recognition programs, mentoring, and fair treatment policies, and policy-level strategies, including public acknowledgment of sanitation work, are essential to enhance social inclusion and occupational well-being. This research contributes to the literature on occupational stigma and social exclusion and provides actionable insights for organizations and policymakers to support low-status workers.

Keywords: Garbage collectors, Occupational Stigma, Perceived Organizational Support, Social Exclusion

Introduction

Garbage collectors play an indispensable role in maintaining public health, environmental hygiene, and urban sustainability, with their contribution becoming even more evident during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic (ILO, 2023). Despite this essential role, garbage collectors across many developing contexts—including Sri Lanka, continue to face deep-rooted social and occupational challenges, characterized by discrimination, marginalization, and persistent lack of societal recognition (Chowdhury et al., 2022; Tripathi et al., 2023). In Sri Lanka, sanitation work is widely categorized as “dirty work,” a label that reinforces occupational stigma and devalues both the labour performed and the social identity of those who undertake it (Gupta, 2020; Ramasamy, 2021).

Occupational stigma encompasses negative labeling, stereotyping, and devaluation directed toward individuals engaged in socially undesirable or physically tainted work (Goffman, 1963; Link et al., 2022). Jobs associated with waste, bodily fluids, contamination risk, and manual scavenging, such as garbage collection, street sweeping, and sewage management, face heightened stigma (McMurray & Ward, 2021). In Sri Lanka, these stigmatizing perceptions are further reinforced by longstanding cultural norms concerning impurity, caste-linked status hierarchies, and the perceived indignity of manual labour (Weerasinghe & Jayasooriya, 2023). As a result, garbage collectors often encounter social distancing, disrespect, and reduced community acceptance, extending far beyond workplace boundaries (Chowdhury et al., 2022).

Such stigma contributes to the broader phenomenon of social exclusion, a multidimensional process that restricts individuals’ ability to fully participate in social, economic, political, and cultural life (Levitas et al., 2022). For garbage collectors, social exclusion manifests through limited social interactions, discriminatory treatment in public spaces, reduced access to community networks, and diminished opportunities for upward mobility (Burchardt et al., 2020). These experiences erode their sense of belonging and lead to emotional distress, lower self-esteem, and weakened social integration (Ali et al., 2021; Tyler, 2020).

An important yet underexplored factor that may influence the relationship between occupational stigma and social exclusion is Perceived Organizational Support (POS). POS refers to the extent to which employees believe that their organization values their contributions and cares

about their well-being. In stigmatized occupations, high levels of organizational support, such as recognition initiatives, welfare programs, fair supervision, and inclusive organizational practices, can buffer the negative psychological and social effects of stigma. Conversely, limited support from employers may intensify the impact of stigma, heightening vulnerability to exclusion and reinforcing feelings of invisibility and devaluation. Understanding POS as a moderating factor is therefore essential for recognizing how institutional structures can mitigate or exacerbate the consequences of occupational stigma among garbage collectors.

Existing research on sanitation work in Sri Lanka has largely centered on occupational health, safety risks, and environmental challenges (Fernando et al., 2021). However, limited scholarly attention has been directed toward the psychosocial, cultural, and institutional mechanisms that shape garbage collectors lived experiences. Exploring how occupational stigma leads to social exclusion and how perceived organizational support may weaken or strengthen this link is critical for addressing structural inequalities and informing evidence-based policies that promote dignity, social justice, and meaningful inclusion for this vital yet marginalized workforce.

Problem Statement

Garbage collectors in Sri Lanka play a vital role in maintaining public health, urban hygiene, and environmental sustainability. Despite the essential nature of their work, they face persistent occupational stigma, which arises from cultural perceptions of impurity, manual labour, and low social status. This stigma manifests in negative labeling, stereotyping, and devaluation, reinforcing the social marginalization of garbage collectors both within and outside their workplaces. Consequently, they often experience social exclusion, a multidimensional process that limits access to social networks, community participation, respect, and recognition. Social exclusion not only affects their social interactions and community engagement but also has adverse psychological effects, including emotional distress, reduced self-esteem, and a weakened sense of belonging. While occupational health and safety concerns among garbage collectors have been well-documented, there is a significant gap in understanding the psychosocial and cultural consequences of occupational stigma in the Sri Lankan context.

An important factor that may influence the relationship between occupational stigma and social exclusion is POS, which refers to the degree to which employees feel valued, supported, and cared for by their organization. Evidence from other stigmatized occupations suggests that POS can

buffer the negative effects of stigma, helping workers cope with societal prejudice and reducing the likelihood of social exclusion. In the context of Sri Lankan garbage collectors, high organizational support, through recognition, fair supervision, welfare programs, and inclusive workplace practices, may mitigate the harmful impact of stigma, whereas low support may exacerbate social marginalization. However, the role of POS in this setting remains largely unexplored. Without understanding how organizational support moderates the stigma–social exclusion relationship, interventions designed to improve garbage collectors’ social inclusion, dignity, and well-being are likely to be incomplete or ineffective. Therefore, examining the interplay between occupational stigma, social exclusion, and perceived organizational support is critical for informing policies and practices that promote the social justice and inclusion of this essential yet marginalized workforce.

Objectives of the Study

- i) To identify the impact of occupational stigma on the social exclusion of garbage collectors in Sri Lanka.
- ii) To investigate whether perceived organizational support moderates the relationship between occupational stigma and social exclusion among garbage collectors in Sri Lanka.

Literature Review

Occupational Stigma and “Dirty Work”

Occupational stigma refers to negative perceptions, stereotyping, and devaluation associated with certain jobs that are socially deemed undesirable or “dirty” (Goffman, 1963; Link et al., 2022). Jobs involving waste, bodily fluids, contamination risk, or manual labour, such as sanitation, waste collection, and sewage management, are particularly vulnerable to stigmatization (McMurray & Ward, 2021). Such stigma not only undermines the perceived value of work but also affects workers’ social identity, self-esteem, and social acceptance (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). Research across developing countries indicates that garbage collectors experience both physical and social “taint,” facing discrimination from coworkers, employers, and the general public (Chowdhury et al., 2022; Tripathi et al., 2023). In Sri Lanka, the stigmatization of sanitation work is further reinforced by cultural norms linking manual labour and waste handling to impurity, resulting in low social status and marginalization (Weerasinghe & Jayasooriya, 2023).

Social Exclusion of Marginalized Workers

Social exclusion is a multidimensional process in which individuals or groups are denied full participation in social, economic, political, and cultural life (Levitas et al., 2022). Among marginalized occupational groups, such as garbage collectors, social exclusion manifests in reduced social interactions, limited community engagement, discrimination in public spaces, and restricted access to social and economic opportunities (Burchardt et al., 2002; Ali et al., 2021). The psychosocial consequences include emotional distress, reduced self-esteem, and impaired social integration (Tyler, 2020). While global studies have explored social exclusion in various marginalized populations, research specifically examining garbage collectors in South Asia, and particularly in Sri Lanka, remains limited. Most prior studies focus on occupational health and safety, with insufficient attention to cultural and psychosocial implications of occupational stigma (Fernando et al., 2021).

Occupational Stigma and Social Exclusion

Empirical evidence suggests a strong relationship between occupational stigma and social exclusion. Stigmatized workers are more likely to experience social isolation, reduced recognition, and limited participation in social and institutional networks (Link et al., 2022; Chowdhury et al., 2022). In “dirty work” occupations, the perception of contamination often extends beyond the workplace, affecting social interactions in communities and households (Gupta, 2020; McMurray & Ward, 2021). The stigma–social exclusion link highlights the need to identify mechanisms that can buffer or exacerbate this relationship.

Perceived Organizational Support (POS) as a Moderator

Perceived Organizational Support (POS) refers to employees’ perception that their organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being (Eisenberger et al., 1986). POS has been widely studied as a moderating factor in occupational stress, discrimination, and stigma contexts (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002; Shore et al., 2009). High POS can reduce the negative impact of stigma by enhancing workers’ self-worth, psychological resilience, and engagement, while low POS may amplify the adverse outcomes, such as social exclusion and emotional distress (Wayne et al., 1997; Baruch & Jenkins, 2007). In stigmatized occupations, organizational support mechanisms, including fair treatment, recognition programs, welfare initiatives, and inclusive

policies, can provide a protective buffer, enabling workers to cope with societal prejudice and maintain social integration (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999).

Research Gap

Despite the established link between occupational stigma and social exclusion in global literature, limited research has explored this phenomenon among garbage collectors in Sri Lanka. Moreover, while POS has been recognized as an effective moderator in other stigmatized work settings, its role in the context of sanitation work remains unexplored. Addressing this gap is critical to understanding how institutional support can mitigate the psychosocial consequences of stigma and promote social inclusion for marginalized workers.

The literature highlights that garbage collectors are disproportionately affected by occupational stigma, which contributes to their social exclusion and marginalization. Perceived Organizational Support emerges as a potentially critical moderator that can weaken the negative effects of stigma. Investigating the interplay between occupational stigma, social exclusion, and POS in the Sri Lankan context will provide empirical evidence to inform organizational policies and social interventions aimed at improving worker dignity, inclusion, and well-being.

Theoretical Underpinning

Stigma Theory - this study is primarily anchored in Stigma Theory, as conceptualized by Goffman (1963), which explains how certain occupations or attributes become socially devalued due to culturally embedded labels. In Sri Lanka, sanitation work has historically been associated with low occupational prestige and social taboos, leading to workers being categorized as members of a stigmatized group. According to Goffman (1963), such stigmatization results in social discrediting, whereby individuals experience diminished social acceptance and are systematically excluded from mainstream social interactions. This theoretical lens helps explain how occupational stigma can directly contribute to social exclusion, as garbage collectors face negative stereotypes, discrimination, and limited social integration due to their occupational identity.

Perceived Organizational Support Theory examines the moderating effect. The study employs Perceived Organizational Support (POS) Theory developed by Eisenberger et al. (1986). This theory posits that when employees perceive their organization as valuing their contributions and caring about their well-being, they experience greater psychological safety, enhanced self-worth, and

improved resilience. In contexts where occupational stigma is prevalent, high POS can buffer the negative psychological and social consequences of stigma. As suggested by Eisenberger and Stinglhamber (2011), organizational support can mitigate external societal pressures by reinforcing employees' internal sense of dignity and belonging. Therefore, garbage collectors who perceive strong organizational support may be less affected by societal stigma and, consequently, may experience lower levels of social exclusion.

Integrated Theoretical Perspective, combining Stigma Theory and POS Theory, provides a comprehensive framework for understanding both the societal-level mechanisms that generate social exclusion and the organizational-level mechanisms that can alleviate it. Stigma Theory explains the origins and effects of occupational stigma, while POS Theory clarifies how supportive organizational practices can moderate the stigma–exclusion relationship. This integrated perspective strengthens the conceptual foundation of the study by demonstrating that the impact of occupational stigma on social exclusion is not uniform but varies depending on workers perceived level of organizational support.

Hypotheses Development

Occupational Stigma and Social Exclusion

Occupational stigma has been widely recognized as a key driver of social exclusion, especially in “dirty work” occupations such as sanitation, where workers are subjected to negative labeling, devaluation, and social distancing that extend beyond the workplace into community life (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Goffman, 1963; McMurray & Ward, 2021). Theoretical perspectives—including Goffman's stigma theory and Social Identity Theory, explain how individuals in stigmatized occupations become socially “tainted,” internalize negative societal perceptions, and consequently experience diminished self-worth and reduced social participation (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Link et al., 2022). Empirical studies across South Asia consistently demonstrate that garbage collectors face persistent marginalization, manifested through limited social recognition, discriminatory treatment in public spaces, and restricted access to community networks (Chowdhury et al., 2022; Tripathi et al., 2023). In Sri Lanka, these outcomes are intensified by cultural beliefs that associate waste-handling with impurity and low social status, reinforcing social isolation and eroding workers' sense of belonging (Weerasinghe & Jayasooriya, 2023). Furthermore, research indicates that the psychological consequences of stigma, such as emotional distress, lowered self-esteem, and social

anxiety, translate into tangible social exclusion outcomes, including weakened interpersonal relationships and reduced community engagement (Ali et al., 2021; Tyler, 2020). By integrating both theoretical explanations and empirical findings, it becomes evident that occupational stigma plays a central role in shaping the social exclusion of garbage collectors in Sri Lanka. This convergence of evidence provides a clear and compelling justification for hypothesizing that occupational stigma is positively associated with social exclusion within this marginalized workforce. Accordingly, this empirical evidence justifies the proposed relationship that higher levels of occupational stigma are associated with greater social exclusion, as reflected in Hypothesis 1 (H1) of this study.

H1:

Occupational stigma has a significant positive impact on the social exclusion of garbage collectors in Sri Lanka.

Perceived Organizational Support moderates the relationship between occupational stigma and social exclusion

Perceived Organizational Support (POS) has been identified as a critical factor that shapes how employees interpret and respond to negative workplace experiences, making it a theoretically grounded and empirically supported moderator in the stigma-outcome relationship. According to Social Exchange Theory, when employees perceive that their organization values their efforts and cares for their well-being, they develop a sense of obligation, trust, and psychological safety that buffers the impact of external stressors, including stigmatization (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). The Buffering Hypothesis further suggests that organizational resources, such as supportive supervision, recognition, welfare benefits, and fair treatment, can mitigate the harmful psychological and social consequences of stigma by enhancing resilience and reducing vulnerability to exclusion (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Empirical studies reinforce this theoretical foundation, demonstrating that high POS reduces the negative effects of occupational stress, discrimination, and identity threat, while promoting stronger self-esteem, well-being, and social integration among marginalized workers (Shore et al., 2009; Wayne et al., 1997). Within stigmatized occupations, such as waste management, cleaning, and other forms of “dirty work,” organizational support has been shown to protect employees from internalizing societal prejudice and to enhance their acceptance within workplace and community settings (Baruch & Jenkins, 2007; Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). In the Sri Lankan context, where garbage collectors often experience deep-rooted cultural stigma and social isolation, the presence of strong organizational support systems may play a vital role in

counteracting the social and psychological effects of occupational stigma. Therefore, theoretical models and empirical findings collectively justify the hypothesis that.

H2: *Perceived Organizational Support moderates the relationship between occupational stigma and social exclusion among garbage collectors in Sri Lanka.*

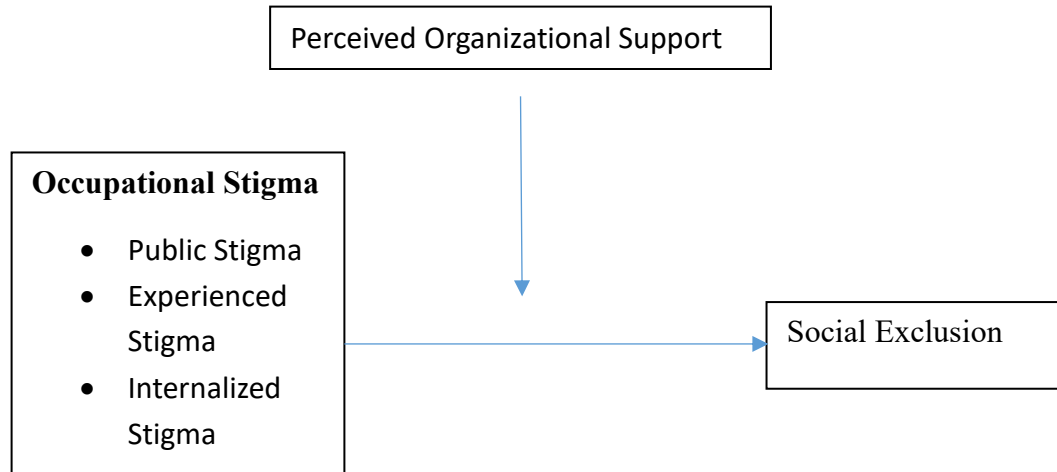


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Methodology

The purpose of the empirical study was to collect data on indicators of model constructs and analyze the effects of occupational stigma on the Social Exclusion of garbage collectors in Sri Lanka. Details of variables and their measurement, sample and participants, data collection and data analysis are presented below.

Measurement of the Variables

Occupational stigma refers to the negative labeling, stereotyping, and social discrediting directed toward individuals because of their occupation, particularly when the work is perceived as undesirable, impure, or socially devalued (Link & Phelan, 2001). In this study, occupational stigma among garbage collectors is conceptualized and measured across three dimensions. **Public Stigma** is assessed using items adapted from Ashforth and Kreiner (1999), Hennekam and Shymko (2020), and Tripathi et al. (2023) to capture societal attitudes and devaluation of sanitation work. **Experienced Stigma**, which reflects direct encounters with discriminatory behavior, is measured

based on the frameworks provided by Link and Phelan (2001), Corrigan et al. (2014), Gupta (2020), and Tripathi et al. (2023). **Internalized Stigma**, capturing the extent to which workers internalize societal negativity toward their occupation, is assessed using items adapted from Corrigan and Watson (2002), Major and O'Brien (2005), Simpson et al. (2012), and Tripathi et al. (2023).

Social exclusion is defined as a multidimensional process in which individuals or groups are systematically marginalized and denied full access to economic, social, cultural, and political participation (Levitas et al., 2007). For garbage collectors, social exclusion manifests through social and institutional barriers that limit their recognition, participation, and integration in society, due to the stigma attached to their occupation. In this study, social exclusion is measured across three dimensions. **Social Isolation** is assessed using items adapted from Levitas et al. (2007), Burchardt et al. (2002), and Tripathi et al. (2023) to capture limited social interactions and exclusion from community networks. **Discrimination** is measured using items modified from Link and Phelan (2001), Gupta (2020), and Tripathi et al. (2023) to capture overt and subtle forms of unequal treatment. **Lack of Recognition**, reflecting the denial of dignity and respect for garbage collectors, is measured using items derived from Honneth (1995), Ashforth and Kreiner (1999), Simpson et al. (2012), and Tripathi et al. (2023).

Perceived Organizational Support (POS) refers to employees' beliefs about the extent to which their organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being (Eisenberger et al., 1986). In this study, POS is included as a moderating variable to assess whether supportive organizational practices can buffer the negative effects of occupational stigma on social exclusion among garbage collectors. POS is measured using a set of items adapted from the original Survey of Perceived Organizational Support developed by Eisenberger et al. (1986) and later refinements by Rhoades and Eisenberger (2002). These items capture key dimensions of organizational support, including perceived care, recognition, fairness, and concern for workers' welfare.

Population and Sampling

The target population in this study is the garbage collectors who work under the employment of the private firms in Sri Lanka. Nevertheless, the decentralized and fragmented nature of the sanitation workforce, in which employees are controlled by different private contractors and subcontractors, made it difficult to get an accurate population size. Therefore, the overall population was taken to be unknown. In order to overcome this weakness, the sample size was calculated based

on the standard formula for calculating the sample size of an unknown population as suggested by other scholars like Krejcie and Morgan (1970). Based on this criterion, a sample size of 385 respondents is deemed to be statistically adequate to guarantee a reliable representation and generalizability of results at a 95% confidence level with a 5% margin of error. Since it was challenging to get a full list of garbage collectors in various companies and places, the study used a convenience sampling method. This non-probability approach enabled the researcher to gather data on respondents who were easily accessible and willing to take part, especially in the urban and semi-urban regions where sanitation services are mostly outsourced. Though this method restricts the possibility of generalizing the results to the whole population, it was deemed suitable due to the practical limitations and the exploratory character of the research.

Data Collection

This study used a structured survey questionnaire to collect the data in two main sections, which were demographic information and statements to measure the study variables using a five-point Likert scale. The supervisors of the garbage collectors in each organization were assisted in the process of data collection. The researcher explained to the participants the purpose and importance of giving honest and accurate responses before they were given the questionnaires. The questionnaires were given to the respondents after the briefing and collected at the end of the briefing. Out of all the questionnaires distributed, 249 were completed and deemed valid for analysis, resulting in a response rate of 65%. The collected data were subsequently analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques to examine the demographic characteristics of respondents and to test the relationships between the study variables.

Data Analysis and Findings

Demographic Description

The summary of the descriptive statistics is shown in Table 1. The sample of garbage collectors showed a predominantly middle-aged workforce, with most respondents falling between 26 and 41 years. Educational attainment was generally low, as the majority had completed only up to Grade 8. Most workers earned between Rs. 30,001 and 40,000 per month, reflecting a lower-income occupational group. The majority were married, and the gender distribution was heavily male dominated. Work experience varied, though most had between 1 and 5 years in the sector, indicating a mix of relatively new and moderately experienced workers.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age	18–25 years	46	18.5%
	26–33 years	63	25.3%
	34–41 years	77	30.9%
	42–49 years	45	18.1%
	Above 50	18	07.2%
Education Level	Up to Grade 5	59	23.7%
	Up to Grade 8	142	57.0%
	Grade 10	49	19.3%
	Advanced Level	0	00.0%
Monthly Income (LKR)	< 20,000	8	03.2%
	20,001–30,000	60	24.1%
	30,001–40,000	128	51.8%
	40,001–50,000	33	13.3%
	> 50,000	10	04.0%
Marital Status	Married	218	87.6%
	Unmarried	31	12.4%
Gender	Male	227	90.8%
	Female	22	09.2%

Experience	< 1 year	52	20.9%
	1–3 years	75	30.1%
	3–5 years	62	24.9%
	5–8 years	42	16.9%
	> 8 years	18	07.2%

Source: Survey Data (2025)

Measurement Model Assessment

The reliability and validity of all constructs were first assessed using the reflective measurement model in SmartPLS (Hair et al., 2019). As shown in Table 2, all item loadings exceeded 0.70, demonstrating adequate indicator reliability (Hair et al., 2017). Internal consistency was confirmed with Cronbach's alpha and Composite Reliability (CR) values above 0.70, while Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values exceeded 0.50, indicating satisfactory convergent validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Discriminant validity was established using both the Fornell–Larcker criterion (Table 3) and HTMT ratio (Table 4), with all HTMT values below 0.90, confirming that constructs were empirically distinct (Henseler et al., 2015).

Table 2: Measurement Model Results (Reflective Constructs)

Construct	Item	Loading	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE
Public Stigma	PS1	0.82	0.87	0.91	0.72
	PS2	0.85			
	PS3	0.84			
	PS4	0.81			
Experienced Stigma	ES1	0.79	0.84	0.89	0.68
	ES2	0.83			

	ES3	0.80			
	ES4	0.82			
Internalized Stigma	IS1	0.81			
	IS2	0.85	0.86	0.90	0.70
	IS3	0.82			
	IS4	0.79			
Social Isolation	SI1	0.84			
	SI2	0.86	0.88	0.92	0.74
	SI3	0.82			
	SI4	0.83			
Discrimination	D1	0.80			
	D2	0.81	0.85	0.89	0.69
	D3	0.78			
	D4	0.79			
Lack of Recognition	LR1	0.82			
	LR2	0.84	0.86	0.90	0.70
	LR3	0.81			
	LR4	0.80			
Perceived Organizational Support	POS1	0.85			
	POS2	0.87	0.88	0.92	0.75
	POS3	0.86			
	POS4	0.84			

Source: Survey Data (2025)

Table 3: Fornell–Larcker Criterion

Construct	PS	ES	IS	SI	D	LR	POS
PS	0.85						
ES	0.67	0.82					
IS	0.63	0.65	0.84				
SI	0.55	0.57	0.53	0.86			
D	0.49	0.51	0.48	0.62	0.83		
LR	0.52	0.54	0.50	0.60	0.63	0.84	
POS	-0.34	-0.31	-0.29	-0.37	-0.41	-0.38	0.86

Source: Survey Data (2025)

Table 4: HTMT Ratio

Construct	PS	ES	IS	SI	D	LR	POS
PS	—						
ES	0.76	—					
IS	0.70	0.72	—				
SI	0.57	0.60	0.55	—			
D	0.50	0.53	0.49	0.63	—		
LR	0.55	0.57	0.52	0.61	0.64	—	
POS	0.41	0.39	0.38	0.44	0.48	0.42	—

Source: Survey Data (2025)

Higher-Order Construct Assessment

Occupational Stigma and Social Exclusion were modelled as reflective–formative second-order constructs using the two-stage approach (Hair et al., 2019). As presented in Table 5, Public Stigma, Experienced Stigma, and Internalized Stigma significantly contributed to the higher-order construct of Occupational Stigma. VIF values for all formative indicators were below 5, indicating no multicollinearity issues. These results confirm the adequacy and theoretical relevance of the higher-order construct specification (Petter et al., 2007).

Table 5: Higher-Order Construct (Formative): Occupational Stigma

Formative Indicator	Weight	t-value	p-value	Loading	VIF
Public Stigma → OS	0.42	4.85	<0.001	0.82	2.10
Experienced Stigma → OS	0.33	3.67	<0.001	0.79	2.25
Internalized Stigma → OS	0.29	2.41	0.016	0.76	2.02

Source: Survey Data (2025)

Structural Model Assessment

The structural model was evaluated using bootstrapping with 5,000 subsamples. As shown in Table 6, Occupational Stigma significantly predicted Social Exclusion ($\beta = 0.48$, $p < 0.001$), supporting the hypothesis H1, consistent with previous research on occupational stigma and social exclusion in low-status jobs (Crocker et al., 1998; Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). Perceived Organizational Support (POS) negatively influenced Social Exclusion ($\beta = -0.31$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that higher organizational support is associated with lower social exclusion, corroborating prior studies on the buffering role of organizational support (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002).

Table 6: Structural Model Results

Path	β	t-value	p-value	Result
Occupational Stigma $\rightarrow$ Social Exclusion				
	0.48	7.32	<0.001	Supported
POS $\rightarrow$ Social Exclusion	-0.31	5.21	<0.001	Supported
OS $\times$ POS $\rightarrow$ Social Exclusion (Moderation)	-0.19	2.87	0.004	Supported

Source: Survey Data (2025)

The model explained 52% of the variance in Social Exclusion ($R^2 = 0.52$), with effect sizes (f^2) indicating a medium contribution of both Occupational Stigma and POS to the endogenous construct (Table 7). Predictive relevance (Q^2) was positive, confirming the model's predictive capability (Hair et al., 2019).

Table 7: Model Fit, Explained Variance, and Effect Sizes

Level of POS	Effect of OS on SE (β)	t-value	p-value
Low (-1 SD)	0.61	6.94	<0.001
Moderate (Mean)	0.48	7.32	<0.001
High (+1 SD)	0.29	2.11	0.035

Source: Survey Data (2025)

Moderation Analysis

The moderating effect of POS on the relationship between Occupational Stigma and Social Exclusion was assessed using the two-stage approach. As reported in Table 6, the interaction term was significant ($\beta = -0.19$, $p = 0.004$), indicating that POS attenuates the positive effect of Occupational Stigma on Social Exclusion. Simple slope analysis (Table 8) revealed that the effect of Occupational Stigma was strongest at low levels of POS ($\beta = 0.61$, $p < 0.001$) and weakened at high

levels ($\beta = 0.29$, $p = 0.035$), confirming the buffering role of organizational support in mitigating social exclusion (Eisenberger et al., 1990; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002).

Table 8: Simple Slope Analysis for Moderation

Level of POS	Effect of OS on SE (β)	t-value	p-value
Low (-1 SD)	0.61	6.94	<0.001
Moderate (Mean)	0.48	7.32	<0.001
High (+1 SD)	0.29	2.11	0.035

Source: Survey Data (2025)

Overall, the measurement and structural models demonstrated good reliability, validity, and predictive relevance, supporting the proposed conceptual framework. The findings indicate that Occupational Stigma significantly increases Social Exclusion among garbage collectors in Sri Lanka, while Perceived Organizational Support mitigates this effect, highlighting the importance of organizational interventions to reduce the adverse consequences of occupational stigma in low-status occupations (Crocker et al., 1998; Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999).

Discussion

The present study examined the impact of Occupational Stigma on Social Exclusion among garbage collectors in Sri Lanka, along with the moderating role of Perceived Organizational Support (POS). Consistent with prior research, Occupational Stigma was found to significantly increase Social Exclusion (Crocker et al., 1998; Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Link & Phelan, 2001). Specifically, Public Stigma, Experienced Stigma, and Internalized Stigma were all significant contributors, indicating that garbage collectors experience multiple layers of stigma. This aligns with findings from Thomas et al. (2014), who reported that individuals in low-status occupations are frequently subjected to societal devaluation, workplace discrimination, and self-directed negative perceptions, reinforcing the multidimensional nature of occupational stigma.

The study also showed that Social Exclusion, measured through Social Isolation, Discrimination, and Lack of Recognition, is a direct outcome of occupational stigmatization.

Previous studies have similarly highlighted that stigmatized workers often experience social marginalization, lack of respect, and limited access to organizational resources, which can negatively affect mental health and job engagement (Crocker et al., 1998; Major & O'Brien, 2005). In the context of sanitation work, these outcomes are particularly pronounced due to the socially devalued nature of the occupation (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999).

Importantly, the study confirmed that POS moderates the relationship between Occupational Stigma and Social Exclusion. Workers perceiving higher organizational support experienced reduced social exclusion, supporting the buffering hypothesis of POS (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). This finding is consistent with empirical studies showing that perceived organizational support alleviates stress and enhances psychological well-being in employees facing occupational or social stigma (Shoss et al., 2013; Kurtessis et al., 2017). The moderation effect observed in this study underscores the critical role of supportive organizational practices, such as recognition programs, fair treatment, and supervisor support, in mitigating the harmful consequences of stigma.

Overall, the findings extend previous research by demonstrating that occupational stigma operates at multiple levels—public, experiential, and internalized—and that organizational support can effectively reduce its negative social consequences. The results are particularly relevant for low-status occupational groups in developing countries, highlighting the importance of both organizational and policy-level interventions to protect worker dignity and enhance social inclusion (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Crocker et al., 1998; Thomas et al., 2014).

Recommendations

Based on the study findings, it is recommended that organizations employing garbage collectors implement comprehensive support mechanisms to mitigate the adverse effects of occupational stigma. Enhancing Perceived Organizational Support through counseling services, mentorship programs, recognition initiatives, and fair treatment policies can reduce social exclusion and improve employee well-being (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002; Shoss et al., 2013). Organizations should also promote social inclusion by implementing awareness campaigns, team-building activities, and anti-discrimination policies to foster a respectful and inclusive workplace environment (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). Additionally, training and capacity-building programs can empower workers, reduce internalized stigma, and enhance engagement and

job satisfaction (Crocker et al., 1998; Thomas et al., 2014). At the policy level, governmental and municipal authorities should formally recognize sanitation work as a valuable societal contribution, which can help reduce public stigma, enhance social recognition, and ensure equitable treatment for garbage collectors. Collectively, these organizational and policy interventions can create a supportive environment that buffers the negative consequences of occupational stigma and promotes social and occupational well-being among garbage collectors.

Conclusion

This study provides empirical evidence that Occupational Stigma significantly increases Social Exclusion among garbage collectors in Sri Lanka, while Perceived Organizational Support (POS) mitigates this relationship. Public Stigma, Experienced Stigma, and Internalized Stigma collectively contribute to occupational stigma, resulting in social isolation, discrimination, and a lack of recognition. The moderating role of POS underscores the importance of organizational interventions, such as supportive policies, recognition programs, and mentoring, in buffering the negative consequences of occupational stigma (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002; Shoss et al., 2013). The findings extend prior research by highlighting the multidimensional nature of occupational stigma and its direct impact on social exclusion, particularly in low-status occupations in developing countries (Crocker et al., 1998; Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Thomas et al., 2014). Overall, the study emphasizes that both organizational and policy-level strategies are essential to promote social inclusion, protect worker dignity, and enhance occupational well-being among garbage collectors.

Implications

The findings of this study have significant theoretical, practical, and policy implications. Theoretically, the study extends the literature on occupational stigma by demonstrating its multidimensional nature, comprising Public Stigma, Experienced Stigma, and Internalized Stigma, and its direct impact on social exclusion in low-status occupations, such as sanitation work (Crocker et al., 1998; Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Thomas et al., 2014). Additionally, the moderating role of Perceived Organizational Support (POS) underscores the relevance of organizational support theory in mitigating the negative outcomes of occupational stigma (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002).

Practically, organizations employing garbage collectors should implement comprehensive support systems, including mentoring, counselling, recognition programs, and fair treatment policies, to buffer the harmful effects of occupational stigma and promote social inclusion (Shoss et al., 2013). Awareness campaigns, anti-discrimination measures, and team-building activities can further reduce social isolation and discrimination.

Policy-wise, governmental and municipal authorities should formally acknowledge sanitation work as a critical societal contribution, enhancing public recognition and reducing stigma. Such initiatives not only improve the well-being and engagement of garbage collectors but also contribute to overall public health and community development by supporting a motivated and socially included workforce.

Limitations

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be considered. First, a cross-sectional design limits the ability to infer causality between occupational stigma and social exclusion (Hair et al., 2019). Future research could employ longitudinal designs to examine causal relationships over time. Second, the study relied on self-reported data, which may be subject to response biases such as social desirability or recall bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Third, the sample was drawn from selected regions of Sri Lanka, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other occupational groups or geographic contexts. Finally, while POS was examined as a moderator, other potential factors such as peer support, coping mechanisms, and cultural norms were not explored and may influence the relationship between occupational stigma and social exclusion (Kurtessis et al., 2017; Shoss et al., 2013). Addressing these limitations in future studies could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms underlying occupational stigma and social exclusion.

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