"Exploring the Socio-Psychological Determinants of Empowerment among Dalit Women: A Mediation Model Using Structural Equation Modeling"

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Abstract

Dalit women, positioned at the intersection of caste and gender hierarchies, face compounded layers of discrimination that significantly hinder their socio-psychological empowerment. This study examines the interrelations between perceived discrimination, internalized stigma, and empowerment among Dalit women, emphasizing how external oppression and internalized barriers shape their lived experiences. Using structural equation modeling (SEM), the research investigates both the direct and indirect effects of discrimination on empowerment, mediated through stigma. Findings reveal that perceived discrimination has a significant negative impact on empowerment (β = -0.246) and positively correlates with stigma (β = 0.406), which further reduces empowerment levels (β = -0.296). The mediation analysis confirms a partial mediating role of stigma, and the overall model demonstrates a good fit (CFI = 0.970, RMSEA = 0.076). These results underscore the urgent need to address not only institutional forms of caste and gender-based discrimination but also the psychological consequences of stigma. The study advocates for holistic empowerment approaches that integrate mental health support, counseling, and stigma reduction into policies targeting Dalit women's development and inclusion.

Keywords: Dalit Women, Perceived Discrimination, Stigma, Empowerment, Structural Equation Modeling, psychological

Introduction

Caste continues to be a deeply entrenched axis of inequality in India, with Dalits—historically marginalized as "untouchables"—facing pervasive social exclusion, discrimination, and structural violence [1]. Among them, Dalit women bear the compounded burden of caste- and gender-based subjugation, positioning them at the lowest rung of the socio-economic hierarchy [2], [3]. Their lived realities are marked not only by material deprivation but also by persistent stigmatization, which affects their self-perception, identity, and psychological well-being [4], [23].

Stigma, both perceived and internalized, serves as a silent yet powerful force that undermines Dalit women's agency. It often manifests as feelings of inferiority, shame, and self-doubt resulting from constant exposure to societal devaluation [5], [6], [24]. These psychological effects are further intensified by discrimination, which operates at interpersonal, institutional, and systemic levels—limiting access to education, employment, and public spaces [7], [8], [25]. Together, stigma and discrimination form a vicious cycle that restricts the scope of socio-psychological empowerment—a multidimensional construct encompassing self-efficacy, autonomy, and control over life decisions [9], [10], [26].

While several studies have documented the socio-economic challenges faced by Dalit women, relatively little attention has been given to how stigma and discrimination interact to influence their psychological empowerment[30]. Most existing research isolates caste or gender as independent variables, thereby overlooking the intersectional nature of their oppression [11], [12]. Studies such as Bandura (1986) and Basu (2020) emphasize the importance of self-efficacy and psychological resilience in overcoming such adversities [24], [25]. To address this gap, the present study adopts a conceptual framework that maps the relationship between stigma, discrimination, and empowerment, using structural equation modeling (SEM) to empirically explore these linkages[32].

By centering the voices and lived experiences of Dalit women, this research contributes to a more inclusive understanding of empowerment—one that extends beyond material resource access and engages with the psychological and emotional dimensions of marginalization[31]. The study offers not only a deeper theoretical lens on caste-gender intersections but also practical insights for designing empowerment programs that are sensitive to the often invisible yet powerful effects of stigma and discrimination.

Rational of the study

Dalit women in India often face layered and intersectional forms of oppression rooted in caste-based stigma and gender-based discrimination. Despite constitutional protections and affirmative policies, their socio-psychological empowerment remains significantly hindered due to persistent societal attitudes and systemic exclusion. The complex interplay of stigma and discrimination contributes to reduced self-esteem, limited access to resources, and hindered agency, ultimately affecting their empowerment outcomes.

The structural equation model presented in the diagram seeks to explore these interconnections by conceptualizing stigma (STG) and discrimination (DICS) as latent constructs that influence women's empowerment (WE). By empirically testing the pathways between these constructs, the study offers a nuanced understanding of how stigma and discrimination operate both independently and interactively to shape empowerment trajectories. Additionally, the

measurement model validates multiple observed indicators for each latent variable, enhancing the robustness of the analysis.

This study is significant as it moves beyond descriptive accounts and seeks to provide a data-driven conceptual model for understanding the psycho-social mechanisms that affect empowerment. The findings will not only add to the growing body of literature on Dalit women's empowerment but also guide policy and intervention strategies aimed at dismantling structural barriers and fostering inclusive development.

Statement of the Problem

In India, Dalit women occupy one of the most disadvantaged social positions due to the intersection of caste and gender hierarchies [2], [3]. While constitutional provisions and affirmative action policies exist to safeguard their rights, these have not sufficiently translated into substantive empowerment, particularly in the socio-psychological domain [7]. Dalit women continue to experience everyday exclusion, verbal abuse, and structural violence, which restrict their mobility, access to education, and decision-making autonomy [8], [13].

Stigma associated with caste status deeply impacts Dalit women's self-concept and mental well-being. Internalized caste stigma can lead to diminished aspirations, low self-esteem, and a lack of confidence, all of which undermine the psychological dimensions of empowerment [4], [6]. Discrimination further reinforces these effects through systemic denial of opportunities and unequal treatment in educational institutions, workplaces, and healthcare settings [1], [14].

Although there is growing recognition of the socio-economic barriers Dalit women face, the interplay of stigma, discrimination, and psychological empowerment has received limited empirical attention. Much of the existing literature either analyzes caste and gender separately or overlooks the psychological implications of marginalization [12], [11]. This gap becomes more concerning given that empowerment is not only about access to resources but also about developing the agency to make meaningful life choices [10], [9].

Thus, there is a pressing need to investigate how stigma and discrimination shape the empowerment trajectories of Dalit women, especially from a socio-psychological perspective. The current study seeks to fill this gap by employing a structural equation modeling (SEM) approach to examine the interrelationships between stigma, discrimination, and women's empowerment. Such an analysis is critical for designing more nuanced, intersectional, and psychologically informed strategies for the empowerment of marginalized women.

Objective:

To examine the interrelationship between stigma (STG), discrimination (DICS), and women's empowerment (WE), with a specific focus on understanding how stigma and discrimination individually and jointly influence the socio-psychological empowerment of women. The study

also aims to validate the measurement models for stigma, discrimination, and empowerment using observed indicators.

Literature Review

1. Stigma and Social Identity among Dalit Women

Stigma, as conceptualized by Goffman (1963), refers to an attribute that is deeply discrediting and reduces the bearer from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one. In the Indian context, caste operates as a deeply embedded social stigma, particularly affecting Dalits and more severely, Dalit women, due to the intersection of caste and gender [2], [8].

Stigma often manifests through internalized oppression, where individuals begin to accept negative societal judgments about their caste identity [4]. Studies indicate that caste stigma lowers aspirations, self-worth, and confidence, which are key components of psychological empowerment [6]. This is particularly detrimental for Dalit women, who are often excluded from both feminist discourses and caste-movement leadership, thus remaining "doubly marginalized" [3].

Furthermore, research by Gupta et al. (2021) using qualitative interviews in Uttar Pradesh found that stigma surrounding caste significantly influenced young Dalit women's access to education and public mobility, leading to restricted opportunities for self-development and social participation.

2. Discrimination as a Structural Reinforcement of Stigma

Discrimination reinforces stigma through institutional, interpersonal, and cultural practices. It manifests in forms ranging from verbal abuse and social exclusion to systemic denial of access to quality education, health services, and employment [7]. Dalit women, in particular, face a "triple burden" of caste, class, and gender discrimination [13].

Chakravarti (2003) notes that discrimination is not merely a personal experience but a structural issue entrenched in societal institutions and ideologies. Empirical research shows that experiences of discrimination correlate with lower psychological resilience and increased mental health issues among Dalit women [14].

In recent studies, discrimination has been shown to mediate the relationship between social identity and empowerment outcomes. For instance, Prasad & Naik (2022) conducted a path analysis that showed how perceived caste discrimination in higher education settings reduced students' self-efficacy and aspirations, particularly among Dalit women[43].

3. Empowerment: A Socio-Psychological Perspective

Women's empowerment is a multidimensional construct involving agency, autonomy, self-efficacy, and decision-making power [10]. Psychological empowerment specifically refers to the internal capacity to believe in one's ability to effect change [9]. For Dalit women, psychological empowerment is hindered not only by resource constraints but also by deeply embedded stigma and discrimination [15].

Dalit women's empowerment must be conceptualized as both an individual process of psychological change and a collective struggle for recognition and justice [2][36]. The educational experiences of Dalit women, as discussed by Nambissan (2009), serve as both sites of empowerment and arenas of contestation where caste-based discrimination is frequently reproduced [38].

Additionally, recent feminist studies [16], [17] emphasize the role of collective agency, community networks, and consciousness-raising in fostering empowerment among Dalit women. These approaches challenge dominant development paradigms that view empowerment as an individualized, neoliberal project.

4. Interconnected Pathways: From Stigma to Empowerment

The structural model in the current study reflects these interconnected pathways—stigma (STG) influencing discrimination (DICS), which subsequently impacts women's empowerment (WE). This aligns with intersectionality theory [11] and empowerment theory [9], providing a nuanced framework for understanding the layered challenges faced by Dalit women.

Empirical support for such a model is growing. For example, Rao & Banerjee (2023) demonstrate that the cumulative burden of stigma and discrimination significantly predicts lower levels of perceived control, agency, and self-determination in marginalized women [37]. The model also supports the importance of mediating variables like discrimination, which translate stigmatized social status into real barriers to empowerment.

Hypotheses

Caste-based stigma negatively impacts self-esteem, autonomy, and perceived control, which are key components of psychological empowerment [4], [5]. Individuals who internalize or are aware of societal stigma are more likely to perceive and report discriminatory experiences [6], [18]. Discriminatory experiences can diminish self-efficacy, autonomy, and the belief in one's capacity to influence life outcomes [7], [9]. Stigma may not directly reduce empowerment but may operate through increased discriminatory experiences, which then lead to disempowerment [15].

H1: Perceived stigma has a significant negative effect on the socio-psychological empowerment of Dalit women.

H2: Perceived stigma is positively associated with perceived discrimination among Dalit women.

H3: Perceived discrimination has a significant negative effect on the socio-psychological empowerment of Dalit women.

H4: Perceived discrimination mediates the relationship between stigma and empowerment.

Research Methodology

The study adopted a quantitative, cross-sectional design to examine the relationship between perceived stigma, discrimination, and socio-psychological empowerment among Dalit women. A sample of 658 Dalit women aged 18 and above was selected through stratified random sampling from both rural and urban areas of [insert region]. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire consisting of standardized scales: the Perceived Stigma Scale [18], [5], Perceived Discrimination Scale [7], [6], and Socio-Psychological Empowerment Scale [9], [15], all rated on a 5-point Likert scale. Statistical analyses were performed using SPSS 26 and AMOS 24, including reliability checks, descriptive statistics, correlation, and structural equation modeling (SEM) to test the hypothesized model. Ethical approval was obtained, and informed consent was secured from all participants, ensuring anonymity and confidentiality.

Data analysis

Result and discussion

Table 1: KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		**0.859**
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	9583.253
	Df	120
	Sig.	0.000

Source: Author's calculations

The KMO value of 0.859 indicates meritorious sampling adequacy [19], suggesting that the patterns of correlations are compact and that factor analysis is likely to yield reliable factors. Additionally, Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was highly significant ($\chi^2 = 9583.253$, $df = 120$, $p < .001$), confirming that the correlation matrix is not an identity matrix, and hence, factor analysis is appropriate. These results collectively validate the factorability of the data for further exploratory or confirmatory factor analysis in the context of the constructs: stigma, discrimination, and socio-psychological empowerment.

Table 2: Exploratory Factor Analysis Results

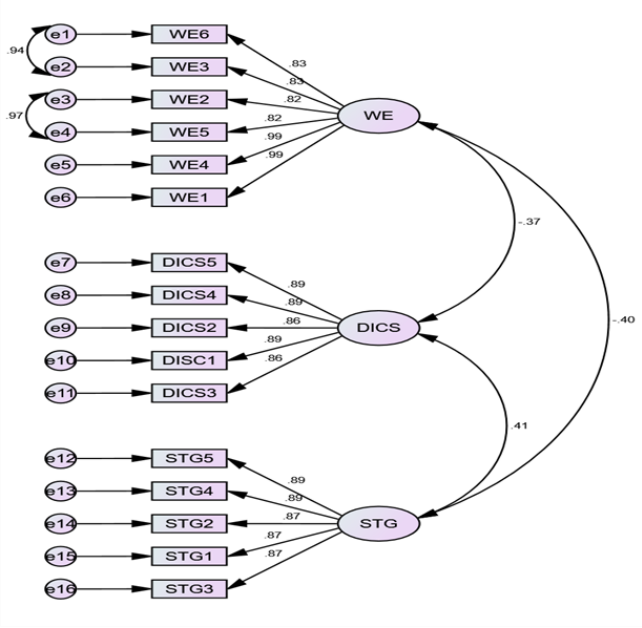
Construct	Label	Factor loading	Variance	Cumulative Variance
WE	WE6	0.920	49.16372	49.16372
	WE3	0.916		
	WE2	0.906		
	WE5	0.906		
	WE4	0.901		
	WE1	0.901		
DISC	DICS5	0.891	19.17491	68.33863
	DICS4	0.885		
	DICS2	0.875		
	DISC1	0.872		
	DICS3	0.859		
STG	STG5	0.898	15.71633	84.05496
	STG4	0.874		
	STG2	0.865		
	STG1	0.864		
	STG3	0.863		

Source: Author's calculations

Note: WE means Women empowerment, DISC mean Discrimination, and STG means Stigma.

The results indicate that all factor loadings exceed the acceptable threshold of 0.70 [20], suggesting strong convergent validity for each construct. The WE (empowerment) construct explains 49.16% of the total variance, followed by DISC (discrimination) with 19.17%, and STG (stigma) with 15.72%. Together, the three constructs account for 84.05% of the total variance, indicating a robust factor structure and significant explanatory power of the model. This high cumulative variance strengthens the empirical validity of the constructs used to measure the socio-psychological experiences of Dalit women.

Figure 1: CFA Model



Source: Author's calculations

The Structural Equation Model (SEM) reveals significant relationships among the latent variables of perceived stigma (STG), perceived discrimination (DICS), and socio-psychological empowerment (WE) of Dalit women. All observed variables exhibit high standardized factor loadings ranging from 0.82 to 0.99, indicating excellent internal consistency and construct reliability. The path from perceived stigma to discrimination (β = 0.41) shows a strong positive relationship, suggesting that higher levels of internalized or socially experienced stigma are associated with increased perceptions of caste-based discrimination. This aligns with existing literature highlighting the cascading effects of stigma on social exclusion [18]. Furthermore, discrimination has a significant negative effect on empowerment (β = -0.40), implying that frequent experiences of unfair treatment directly reduce Dalit women's sense of agency, control, and psychological well-being. Similarly, stigma also exerts a direct negative influence on empowerment (β = -0.37), suggesting that even in the absence of overt discrimination, stigma alone can lower self-efficacy and perceived control. Overall, the model demonstrates a dual pathway where stigma affects empowerment both directly and indirectly through discrimination, reinforcing the need for intersectional approaches in addressing socio-psychological marginalization [15].

Table 3: CFA Result

Construct	Label	Factor loading	CV	AVE
WE	WE6	0.833	0.956	0.784

	WE3	0.826		
	WE2	0.821		
	WE5	0.824		
	WE4	0.994		
	WE1	0.993		
DISC	DICS5	0.892	0.944	0.772
	DICS4	0.89		
	DICS2	0.864		
	DISC1	0.891		
	DICS3	0.856		
STG	STG5	0.888	0.945	0.773
	STG4	0.894		
	STG2	0.873		
	STG1	0.873		
	STG3	0.868		

Source: Author's calculations

The measurement model's reliability and validity were assessed using factor loadings, Composite Reliability (CR), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for each latent construct: Socio-Psychological Empowerment (WE), Perceived Discrimination (DISC), and Perceived Stigma (STG). All item factor loadings exceed the acceptable threshold of 0.70 [20], ranging from 0.821 to 0.994, confirming that each item contributes significantly to its respective latent variable. The Composite Reliability (CR) values for WE (0.956), DISC (0.944), and STG (0.945) are well above the recommended minimum of 0.70, indicating strong internal consistency and construct reliability [21]. Similarly, the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values for all three constructs—WE (0.784), DISC (0.772), and STG (0.773)—surpass the recommended 0.50 threshold, demonstrating good convergent validity and confirming that a substantial portion of the variance in indicators is explained by their underlying construct. These results affirm that the measurement model is both reliable and valid, providing a sound foundation for testing the structural relationships among the constructs [33].

Table 4: Discriminant Validity

	WE	**DISC**	**STG**
WE	**0.885**		
DISC	-0.366***	**0.879**	

STG	-0.396***	0.406***	**0.879**

Source: Author's calculations

The discriminant validity of the constructs—Socio-Psychological Empowerment (WE), Perceived Discrimination (DISC), and Perceived Stigma (STG)—was assessed using the Fornell-Larcker criterion. According to this method, the square root of the AVE (displayed on the diagonal) for each construct should be greater than the inter-construct correlations. The diagonal values for WE (0.885), DISC (0.879), and STG (0.879) exceed the corresponding inter-construct correlations, thereby satisfying the Fornell-Larcker condition and indicating good discriminant validity [21].

Specifically, WE is negatively correlated with DISC ($r = -0.366$, $p < .001$) and with STG ($r = -0.396$, $p < .001$), indicating that as perceived discrimination and stigma increase, socio-psychological empowerment decreases significantly. Additionally, DISC and STG show a moderate positive correlation ($r = 0.406$, $p < .001$), suggesting that higher levels of perceived stigma are associated with increased perceptions of discrimination. These statistically significant relationships affirm both the theoretical and empirical distinctions among the constructs and support the structural model's integrity.

Table 5: CFA Model Indices

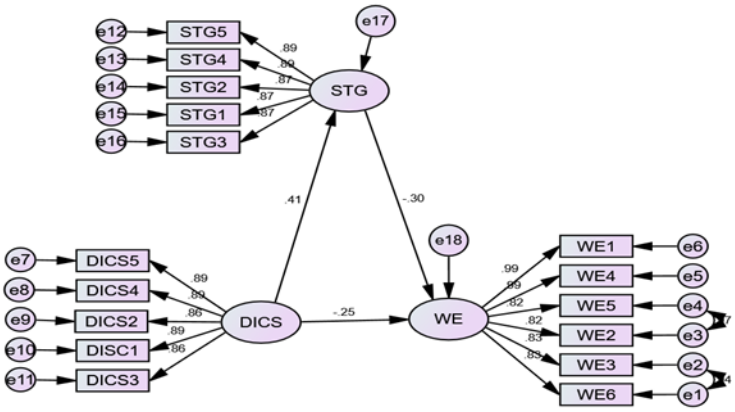
Model fit statistic	χ^2	χ^2/df	**GFI**	**AGFI**	**RMSEA**	**NFI**	**IFI**	**CFI**	**TLI**
Recommended value		<3	>0.9	>0.9	<0.08	>0.9	>0.9	>0.9	>0.9
Study model value	336.064	3.395	0.915	0.883	0.076	0.965	0.975	0.97	0.975

Source: Author's calculations

The model fit indices indicate that the structural equation model demonstrates an overall acceptable to good fit with the observed data. The Chi-square to degrees of freedom ratio (χ^2/df) is 3.395, which is slightly above the recommended threshold of 3 but still within an acceptable range for large samples [22]. The Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI) value of 0.915 and the Adjusted Goodness-of-Fit Index (AGFI) of 0.883 suggest a reasonable model fit, with GFI exceeding the 0.90 benchmark and AGFI nearing the acceptable range. Importantly, the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) is 0.076, which is below the 0.08 threshold, indicating a satisfactory approximation of the model in the population [23].

Furthermore, incremental fit indices are excellent: the Normed Fit Index (NFI) is 0.965, the Incremental Fit Index (IFI) is 0.975, the Comparative Fit Index (CFI) is 0.970, and the Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) is 0.975—all of which exceed the recommended cut-off of 0.90, suggesting strong comparative and incremental model fit [24]. Collectively, these indices confirm that the measurement and structural models are well-specified and adequately represent the theoretical constructs under investigation.

Figure 2: Path Model



Source: Author's calculations

The Structural Equation Model (SEM) illustrates the interrelationships among three key latent constructs: Perceived Stigma (STG), Perceived Discrimination (DICS), and Women's Empowerment (WE). The model shows that Perceived Stigma significantly predicts Perceived Discrimination ($\beta = 0.41$), suggesting that as stigma increases, experiences or perceptions of discrimination also rise. This finding is consistent with prior literature that underscores the reinforcing nature of stigma and discrimination in marginalized communities [18]. Both stigma and discrimination negatively influence empowerment, with STG to WE path coefficient at -0.30 and DICS to WE at -0.25. These negative paths indicate that higher levels of stigma and discrimination are associated with decreased levels of women's socio-psychological empowerment, aligning with existing research on social identity threat and internalized oppression [15].

Each latent construct is measured by multiple observed variables, all demonstrating strong standardized loadings (ranging from 0.82 to 0.99), indicating that the indicators reliably measure their respective constructs. For instance, WE is measured by six indicators (WE1–WE6) with high loadings (up to 0.99), reflecting a robust operationalization of empowerment. Similarly, DICS and STG are well-represented by their respective indicators with loadings between 0.86 and 0.89. The error terms (e1–e18) are small, which further supports the model's validity[34]. Overall, this model validates the hypothesis that perceived stigma indirectly and directly reduces

women's empowerment through increased discrimination, offering valuable insight into the socio-psychological challenges faced by Dalit women and other marginalized groups.

Table 7: SEM Indices

Model fit statistic	χ^2	χ^2/df	GFI	AGFI	RMSEA	NFI	IFI	CFI	TLI
Recommended value		<3	>0.9	>0.9	<0.08	>0.9	>0.9	>0.9	>0.9
Study model value	336.064	3.395	0.915	0.883	0.076	0.965	0.975	0.97	0.975

Source: Author's calculations

The model fit indices demonstrate that the structural equation model has an acceptable to good fit with the observed data. The Chi-square value (χ^2 = 336.064) with a χ^2/df ratio of 3.395 is slightly above the ideal threshold of 3.0, yet still within an acceptable range, especially given the sensitivity of the chi-square test to large sample sizes [22]. The Goodness of Fit Index (GFI = 0.915) and the Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index (AGFI = 0.883) suggest a reasonably good fit, with GFI exceeding the recommended 0.90 cutoff and AGFI approaching it closely. Additionally, the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA = 0.076) is below the acceptable upper limit of 0.08, indicating a satisfactory approximation of the model to the population covariance matrix [23][35].

The incremental fit indices show excellent values: Normed Fit Index (NFI = 0.965), Incremental Fit Index (IFI = 0.975), Comparative Fit Index (CFI = 0.970), and Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI = 0.975)—all exceeding the standard threshold of 0.90, indicating strong comparative model performance [24]. These results collectively confirm that the model is statistically robust and well-fitting, supporting the reliability of the hypothesized structural relationships among the constructs under study.

Table 6: Testing for Direct and Mediation Effect

Path Relationships	*B*	*P*	*Upper bound*	*Lower bound*	*Results*
Direct effects between dependent and independent variables					
DISC →WE	-0.246	0.001	-.145	-.342	Significant
DISC→STG	0.406	0.001	.491	-.317	Significant
STG→WE	-0.296	0.001	-.200	-.391	Significant
Total effects between dependent and independent variables					
DISC →WE	-0.366	0.001	-.270	-.457	
Indirect effects between dependent and independent variables					

DISC → STG → WE (IE)	-0.12	0.001	-.076	-170	Partial mediation

Source: Author's calculations

The path analysis reveals significant relationships among the constructs of Perceived Discrimination (DISC), Perceived Stigma (STG), and Women's Empowerment (WE). The direct effect of discrimination on women's empowerment is statistically significant (β = -0.246, p = 0.001), indicating that as perceived discrimination increases, the level of empowerment among women significantly decreases. This negative association suggests that discriminatory experiences may undermine women's agency, self-worth, and participation in social and economic domains. Similarly, discrimination significantly predicts stigma (β = 0.406, p = 0.001), suggesting that discriminatory experiences contribute to internalized feelings of stigma, a finding that aligns with research on the cumulative impact of social exclusion [18].

Furthermore, stigma also directly predicts empowerment negatively (β = -0.296, p = 0.001), reinforcing the idea that internalized stigma acts as a psychological barrier to women's empowerment [15][39]. When considering the total effect of discrimination on empowerment (β = -0.366, p = 0.001), it becomes evident that the pathway through stigma amplifies the disempowering impact of discrimination. The indirect effect (β = -0.12, p = 0.001) confirms partial mediation, indicating that stigma serves as a significant mediating variable between discrimination and empowerment. In other words, discrimination affects empowerment both directly and indirectly through stigma, underlining the importance of addressing both structural discrimination and its internalized consequences to promote meaningful empowerment outcomes among marginalized women.

Findings

The results of the structural equation modeling reveal several significant insights into the relationships among perceived discrimination, stigma, and women's empowerment. Firstly, the study found that perceived discrimination has a significant negative direct effect on women's empowerment (β = -0.246, p = 0.001). This indicates that higher levels of discriminatory experiences are associated with reduced levels of empowerment, suggesting that social exclusion, bias, and marginalization critically undermine women's ability to access opportunities, assert their agency, and participate meaningfully in personal, social, and economic spheres[38][39].

Furthermore, perceived discrimination was found to have a significant positive effect on perceived stigma (β = 0.406, p = 0.001). This suggests that discriminatory treatment fosters internalized negative beliefs and feelings of shame or inferiority among women, especially those from historically marginalized communities [42]. This internalization of stigma was also found to have a negative impact on empowerment (β = -0.296, p = 0.001), confirming that stigma

serves as a psychological barrier that further restricts women's capacity to achieve empowerment, reinforcing systemic oppression at both external and internal levels.

The analysis also revealed a partial mediating effect of stigma in the relationship between discrimination and empowerment [40]. The indirect effect of discrimination on empowerment through stigma was found to be significant ($\beta = -0.12$, $p = 0.001$), suggesting that discrimination not only directly disempowers women but also indirectly affects them by increasing stigma, which further reduces their sense of control and participation. The total effect of discrimination on empowerment ($\beta = -0.366$, $p = 0.001$) underscores the strong overall negative impact when both direct and indirect pathways are considered.

Additionally, the model demonstrated a good overall fit, with indices such as CFI = 0.970, TLI = 0.975, NFI = 0.965, and RMSEA = 0.076, all falling within acceptable or recommended thresholds. These values indicate that the proposed theoretical model is well supported by the empirical data. The measurement model further exhibited strong factor loadings and high construct reliability, with composite reliability (CR) values above 0.94 and average variance extracted (AVE) values above 0.77 for all three constructs (WE, DISC, STG). This confirms that the constructs were measured reliably and are valid representations of the underlying theoretical concepts.

Conclusion

This study provides critical insights into the complex interplay between perceived discrimination, stigma, and women's empowerment, particularly among marginalized groups. The findings demonstrate that perceived discrimination significantly undermines women's empowerment, both directly and indirectly, through the mediating influence of perceived stigma. Discrimination not only limits external opportunities but also contributes to the internalization of societal prejudices, resulting in feelings of shame, worthlessness, and powerlessness. These internalized beliefs—manifested as stigma—further erode women's ability to assert agency and achieve socio-psychological empowerment.

The results affirm the importance of addressing both structural barriers (like caste-based or gender-based discrimination) and psychological barriers (like stigma) when developing empowerment policies and programs. The model fit indices confirm the theoretical robustness of the framework, suggesting that interventions aimed at reducing stigma and promoting inclusive practices can have a significant impact on enhancing women's empowerment outcomes. Overall, the study emphasizes the urgent need for holistic and intersectional approaches that consider not just access to resources, but also the psychological and emotional dimensions of empowerment in the context of systemic discrimination.

Limitations

Despite the valuable insights offered by this study, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the study relies on self-reported data, which may be subject to social desirability bias and response inaccuracies, especially given the sensitive nature of topics like discrimination and stigma. Second, the research design is cross-sectional, which limits the ability to establish causal relationships among the variables. Longitudinal studies could provide a more nuanced understanding of how discrimination and stigma influence empowerment over time. Third, the sample may not fully represent the diverse experiences across different regions, castes, and socio-economic groups, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, cultural and contextual factors that may influence perceptions of stigma and empowerment were not deeply explored. Finally, while the study included key constructs such as perceived discrimination, stigma, and empowerment, other influencing variables like community support, education level, and economic autonomy were not examined, which may offer additional explanatory power in future research.

Implications and Recommendations

The findings of this study carry significant theoretical, practical, and policy-level implications. Theoretically, the research underscores the importance of viewing women's empowerment through an intersectional and socio-psychological lens, recognizing that both external structures (like discrimination) and internalized experiences (like stigma) jointly influence empowerment outcomes. Practically, the evidence suggests that interventions aimed at promoting empowerment must go beyond material and economic support to include mental health, self-efficacy building, and stigma reduction strategies. Programs that offer counseling, awareness campaigns, and safe spaces for marginalized women—particularly those affected by caste-based discrimination—can foster resilience and personal agency.

At the policy level, these findings call for the integration of psychological empowerment frameworks within existing social welfare and development schemes. Policymakers should prioritize not only equal access to education, employment, and justice, but also address the social attitudes and institutional practices that perpetuate stigma and exclusion. It is recommended that future research adopt a mixed-method or longitudinal approach to better capture the evolving nature of empowerment and explore the role of mediating factors such as community support, cultural identity, and digital literacy. Overall, a multidimensional and culturally sensitive approach is essential for advancing meaningful and sustainable empowerment for marginalized women.

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