Article

Systematic Literature Review on Multidimensional Analysis of Social Exclusion

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Abstract: Social exclusion represents a complex and multidimensional process involving the lack or denial of resources, rights, goods and services, and the inability to participate in the normal relationships and activities available to the majority of people in a society, whether in economic, social, cultural or political arenas [1]. This systematic literature review employs PRISMA 2020 methodology [17] to synthesize current research on the multidimensional analysis of social exclusion. Following a comprehensive search across multiple databases, 45 studies published between 2018 and 2026 were included in the final review. The analysis shows that social exclusion is conceptualized through multiple frameworks, including the Bristol Social Exclusion Matrix (B-SEM), which identifies ten key domains across three broad categories: resources, participation and quality of life [15]. Findings indicate that social exclusion operates through dynamic, relational processes involving economic deprivation, political marginalization, social isolation and cultural discrimination. The review identifies measurement challenges, highlights the life-course dimension of exclusion, and emphasizes the need for multidimensional indicators that capture the relative, dynamic and context-specific nature of exclusion. The study contributes a comprehensive synthesis of contemporary approaches to understanding and measuring social exclusion, with implications for policy development and intervention strategies aimed at promoting social inclusion.

Keywords: Social exclusion; multidimensional analysis; PRISMA methodology; systematic literature review; marginalization; Bristol Social Exclusion Matrix.

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and Rationale

Social exclusion has emerged as a critical concept in social policy and research over the past three decades, representing a paradigm shift from traditional poverty measurement toward understanding the multifaceted nature of disadvantage and marginalization [1]. Unlike unidimensional poverty measures that focus primarily on income or consumption, social exclusion encompasses the complex processes through which individuals and groups are systematically denied full participation in economic, social, political and cultural life [2][3]. The concept originated in European social policy discourse during the 1970s and has since gained global recognition as a framework for understanding inequality and developing inclusive policies [4]. Social exclusion is increasingly recognized as a key determinant of health, well-being and life outcomes, making it essential to understand its multiple dimensions and underlying mechanisms [5].

1.2 Defining Social Exclusion

Social exclusion can be defined as a dynamic, multidimensional process operating through relationships of power that systematically blocks opportunities for certain groups and individuals to access resources and participate fully in society [6]. As Levitas et al. state, social exclusion is a complex and multidimensional process involving the lack or denial of resources, rights, goods and services, and the inability to participate in the normal relationships and activities available to the majority of people in a society, whether in economic, social, cultural or political arenas [1]. This definition emphasizes four critical characteristics: relativity, meaning exclusion is understood relative to the norms and standards of a particular society and time period; multidimensionality, meaning it operates across economic, social, political and cultural spheres; dynamism, meaning it is a process

rather than a static state and involvess trajectories over the life course; and agency, meaning exclusion involves multiple actors including economic forces, state institutions, communities and individuals. In summary, social exclusion is a complex process of denied opportunities and resources that leaves individuals unable to participate fully in society [1][4].

1.3 Research Objectives

This systematic literature review aims to identify and synthesize existing research on multidimensional approaches to analyzing social exclusion, examine the various dimensions and domains used to conceptualize and measure social exclusion, analyze measurement frameworks and methodologies employed in social exclusion research, identify gaps in current knowledge and suggest directions for future research, and provide evidence-based recommendations for policy development and intervention strategies. In other words, the review asks what the main findings, methods and dimensions explored in the literature on social exclusion across multiple domains are, which theoretical models are applied, and how exclusion is operationalized in different contexts.

1.4 Significance of the Study

Understanding social exclusion is vital for advancing equity and inclusion in development. Its multidimensional nature means that individuals may be deprived in ways that economic measures alone do not capture [1]. By systematically reviewing the literature, this study clarifies how exclusion is conceptualized and measured, thereby informing strategies to combat it. The findings also relate to global commitments such as the United Nations 2030 Agenda, which emphasizes inclusive growth and social protection. In sum, the review offers insights that can help policymakers design holistic interventions to ensure all population groups have opportunities to participate and thrive.

2. Theoretical Framework
2.1 Capability Approach and Social Exclusion

The capability approach (Sen 1992) provides an important theoretical foundation for multidimensional exclusion. Exclusion can be viewed as a failure to achieve valuable capabilities due to systematic barriers [8]. In this perspective, social exclusion may be understood as a lack of freedoms or opportunities that others in society enjoy, and researchers often combine capability theory with exclusion analysis to ask which important capabilities, such as health, education and political voice, are denied. This perspective highlights both individual entitlements and the structural factors that constrain them, linking exclusion to human development and agency.

2.2 Dimensions of Social Exclusion

Contemporary research typically categorizes social exclusion into several broad dimensions. Most frameworks identify three main domains: economic/material, social/cultural and political/civic, among others.

2.2.1 Economic Dimension

Economic exclusion encompasses material deprivation, lack of access to employment opportunities, financial services and productive resources [9]. This dimension includes income poverty and material deprivation, unemployment and precarious employment, limited access to financial services and credit, exclusion from economic decision-making processes, and inability to afford basic necessities and participate in socially expected consumption patterns. Research demonstrates that economic exclusion often serves as a gateway to other forms of exclusion, creating cascading effects across multiple life domains [10].

2.2.2 Social and Cultural Dimension

Social exclusion involves isolation from social networks, relationships and cultural participation [11]. Key aspects include weakening or absence of social capital and support networks, exclusion from family and community relationships, limited participation in cultural and recreational activities, social stigmatization and discrimination based on identity characteristics, and residential segregation and spatial exclusion. Robert Putnam's concept of social capital underscores the importance of social networks and relationships in achieving social inclusion [12]. Individuals experiencing poverty often face social exclusion that results in isolation and lack of essential social support.

2.2.3 Political and Civic Dimension

Political exclusion refers to limited access to political processes and civic participation [13]. This dimension encompasses denial of citizenship rights and political participation, exclusion from voting and running for political office, limited voice in decision-making processes affecting one's life, restricted access to justice and legal protection, and inability to organize collectively for representation. Low-income migrants, for example, often find themselves politically marginalized and excluded from voting rights and political representation in both their place of origin and destination [14].

2.3 The Bristol Social Exclusion Matrix (B-SEM)

One of the most comprehensive frameworks for analyzing multidimensional social exclusion is the Bristol Social Exclusion Matrix (B-SEM), developed by Levitas and colleagues [15]. The B-SEM identifies ten key domains of potential exclusion organized across three broad categories: resources, participation and quality of life.

Table 1. Bristol Social Exclusion Matrix (B-SEM) domains.

Category	Domains
Resources	Material/economic resources
Resources	Access to public and private services
Resources	Social resources
Participation	Economic participation
Participation	Social participation
Participation	Culture, education and skills
Participation	Political and civic participation
Quality of Life	Health and well-being
Quality of Life	Living environment
Quality of Life	Crime, harm and criminalization

Source: Author Calculation from Bristol Social Exclusion Matrix (B-SEM)

The B-SEM framework recognizes that these domains interact across the life course, from childhood through youth, working-age adulthood and later life, with different patterns of exclusion affecting different age groups [16].

3. Methodology
3.1 Study Design
This systematic literature review follows PRISMA 2020 guidelines [17]. PRISMA provides a structured set of items for reporting systematic reviews and meta-analyses to improve clarity, transparency and reproducibility, and its four-phase flow diagram tracks the progression of studies through identification, screening, eligibility and inclusion. PRISMA therefore provides a standardized methodology for conducting and reporting systematic reviews, ensuring transparency, rigor and reproducibility.

3.2 Research Question
The primary research question guiding this review is: what are the key dimensions, measurement approaches and findings in contemporary research on the multidimensional analysis of social exclusion? Secondary questions examine the theoretical frameworks used to conceptualize multidimensional social exclusion, the measurement tools and indicators employed to assess exclusion across multiple dimensions, the populations and contexts studied, and the main findings regarding the patterns, causes and consequences of multidimensional social exclusion.

3.3 Eligibility Criteria
3.3.1 Inclusion Criteria
Studies were included if they were published in peer-reviewed journals or official research reports, published between January 2018 and March 2026, written in English or Hindi, focused on multidimensional analysis of social exclusion involving at least two dimensions, employed empirical research methods whether quantitative, qualitative or mixed methods, and provided clear conceptualization and measurement of social exclusion dimensions.

3.3.2 Exclusion Criteria
Studies were excluded if they focused solely on unidimensional poverty or single aspects of exclusion, were opinion pieces, editorials or commentaries without empirical data, did not clearly define or measure social exclusion, were unavailable in full text, or focused exclusively on social inclusion interventions without measuring baseline exclusion.

3.4 Information Sources and Search Strategy
A comprehensive search was conducted across multiple databases, including Web of Science, Scopus, PubMed, JSTOR and EconLit, along with grey literature sources such as Google Scholar and institutional repositories and specialized sources such as social policy databases, the World Bank repository and the OECD library. The search strategy employed a combination of keywords and Boolean operators, including social exclusion or social marginalization or marginalization, combined with multidimensional or multi-dimensional or multiple dimensions, and measurement or analysis or assessment or indicators. Additional keywords included Bristol Social Exclusion Matrix, B-SEM, capability approach, multiple deprivation, social inclusion and exclusion domains.

3.5 Selection Process
The selection process followed four stages as per PRISMA guidelines: identification, in which initial database searches identified potentially relevant records; screening, in which titles and abstracts were reviewed for relevance; eligibility, in which full-text articles were assessed against eligibility criteria; and inclusion, in which the final set of studies was retained for the review. Two independent reviewers conducted the screening and eligibility assessment, with disagreements resolved through discussion and consultation with a third reviewer.

3.6 Data Collection and Extraction

Data were extracted using a standardized form that captured study characteristics such as author, year, country and design, the theoretical framework employed, dimensions of social exclusion examined, measurement tools and indicators used, sample characteristics such as population, sample size and demographics, key findings regarding patterns, causes and consequences of exclusion, and limitations and recommendations.

3.7 Quality Assessment

Study quality was assessed using appropriate tools based on study design, including the Newcastle-Ottawa Scale for observational studies, CASP checklists for qualitative studies, and customized criteria for mixed-methods research. Quality assessment considered sampling adequacy, measurement validity, analytical rigor and reporting transparency.

4. Results

4.1 Study Selection Results

The study selection process is summarized in Table 2. In total, 3,003 records were identified, including 2,847 from database searching and 156 from other sources. After removing 892 duplicates, 2,111 unique records remained for title and abstract screening. Screening excluded 1,876 records, leaving 235 full-text articles for eligibility assessment. Of these, 190 articles were excluded, and 45 studies were ultimately included in the review.

Table 2. PRISMA flow summary of study selection.

Phase	Number of records
Records identified through database searching	2,847
Additional records identified through other sources	156
Total records identified	3,003
Duplicates removed	892
Records after duplicates removed	2,111
Records screened (title/abstract)	2,111
Records excluded at screening	1,876
Full-text articles assessed	235
Full-text articles excluded	190
Studies included in the review	45

Source: Author Calculation

4.2 Study Characteristics

The 45 included studies represented diverse geographical contexts and methodological approaches. To improve clarity, the study characteristics are organized in a three-part table covering geographic region, study design and population focus.

Table 3. Characteristics of included studies (N = 45).

Characteristic type	Category	Number of studies
Geographic region	Europe	18
Geographic region	North America	8
Geographic region	Asia	9
Geographic region	Africa	4
Geographic region	Latin America	3
Geographic region	Multi-country	3
Study design	Quantitative	28
Study design	Qualitative	7
Study design	Mixed methods	10

Population focus	General population	15
Population focus	Older adults	8
Population focus	Youth and children	6
Population focus	Migrants and refugees	7
Population focus	Specific vulnerable groups	9

Source: Author Calculation

4.3 Dimensions of Social Exclusion Examined
4.3.1 Most Commonly Examined Dimensions

Across the studies, the economic and material domain was the most frequently examined, appearing in 42 of 45 studies (93%). Social relationships and networks were next (84%), followed by employment participation (78%), health and well-being (69%), education and skills (62%), access to services (58%), political and civic participation (53%), housing and living environment (49%), cultural participation (40%) and safety and security (31%). These findings suggest that researchers often focus on basic economic and social needs, with relatively less emphasis on political inclusion or subjective well-being.

Table 4. Frequency of social exclusion dimensions examined across studies.

Dimension	Number of studies	Percentage
Economic/material resources	42	93.3%
Social relationships/networks	38	84.4%
Health and well-being	31	68.9%
Political/civic participation	24	53.3%
Education and skills	28	62.2%
Access to services	26	57.8%
Housing and living environment	22	48.9%
Cultural participation	18	40.0%
Employment participation	35	77.8%
Safety and security	14	31.1%

Source: Author Calculation

4.3.2 Number of Dimensions per Study

Studies varied in the number of dimensions examined. Twelve studies (26.7%) examined only two to three dimensions, 18 studies (40.0%) covered four to five dimensions, 11 studies (24.4%) addressed six to eight dimensions, and four studies (8.9%) incorporated nine or more dimensions. The most comprehensive studies employed frameworks similar to the B-SEM, examining up to ten distinct domains of exclusion.

4.4 Measurement Approaches and Tools
4.4.1 Measurement Frameworks

Researchers applied a variety of conceptual frameworks to measure multidimensional exclusion. About one-quarter of the studies used a capability approach, focusing on functionings and freedoms. Many used indices borrowed from poverty research or inclusion metrics, including pre-existing social inclusion or exclusion indices and multiple deprivation indices. The B-SEM framework was explicitly used in eight studies, while fifteen studies developed custom multidimensional frameworks tailored to their context.

Table 5. Measurement frameworks employed in studies.

Framework/approach	Number of studies
Bristol Social Exclusion Matrix (B-SEM)	8
Capability approach-based frameworks	12
Multiple deprivation indices	7

Social inclusion/exclusion indices	11
Custom multidimensional frameworks	15
Mixed approaches	6

Source: Author Calculation

4.4.2 Methodological Approaches to Aggregation

Studies also varied in how they aggregated indicators across dimensions. The most common method was counting approaches, where individuals are classified by the number of dimensions in which they experience exclusion. Other studies used weighted indices, multiple correspondence analysis, factor analysis and cluster analysis. The choice of aggregation method influenced findings because simple counting treats all dimensions equally, whereas weighted indices can emphasize the intensity of deprivation in key areas.

4.5 Key Findings on Patterns of Social Exclusion
4.5.1 Multidimensional Nature and Clustering

Studies consistently found that social exclusion tends to cluster across dimensions. Being excluded in one domain often increases the risk of exclusion in others. Economic deprivation frequently acted as a gateway to further exclusion by limiting access to education, health and social opportunities. Several analyses identified distinct exclusion profiles, including a smaller but highly vulnerable group experiencing deep exclusion with multiple simultaneous deprivations.

4.5.2 Life Course Dynamics

Temporal patterns also emerged. Different dimensions matter at different life stages, and cumulative disadvantage intensifies over time. Educational exclusion in childhood can have long-lasting impacts on adult outcomes, and transitions such as leaving school, retirement and migration were identified as critical periods when individuals become especially vulnerable to exclusion.

4.5.3 Population-Specific Patterns

Research identified distinctive patterns of multidimensional exclusion for specific populations. Migrants and refugees experience heightened exclusion across political, economic and social dimensions; youth populations are vulnerable to educational and economic exclusion; older adults face increased risks of social isolation and health-related exclusion; and women and minority groups experience exclusion shaped by intersecting forms of discrimination.

4.6 Causes and Mechanisms of Social Exclusion
4.6.1 Macro-Level Drivers

Macro-level drivers include economic globalization and labor market restructuring, policy frameworks and institutional arrangements, economic crises and austerity measures, discrimination embedded in laws and institutions, and spatial segregation and unequal development.

4.6.2 Meso-Level Factors

Meso-level factors include community-level stigmatization and discrimination, geographic isolation and limited infrastructure, inadequate public services in certain areas, and organizational barriers to access.

4.6.3 Micro-Level Risk Factors

Micro-level risk factors include individual characteristics such as age, gender, ethnicity and disability; educational attainment and skills; health status and functional limitations; family structure and household composition; and social network characteristics. Research emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between risk factors that signal vulnerability and triggers that have direct causal impact.

4.7 Consequences of Multidimensional Social Exclusion
4.7.1 Health Outcomes

Social exclusion is associated with higher rates of physical and mental health problems, reduced life expectancy, limited access to healthcare services and health behavior patterns that compound health risks. In short, exclusion compromises both physical and psychological well-being.

4.7.2 Economic and Social Outcomes

Social exclusion is linked to persistent poverty and limited economic mobility, intergenerational transmission of disadvantage, reduced social capital and trust, and higher rates of crime victimization and involvement.

4.7.3 Psychological and Subjective Well-being

Psychologically, exclusion leads to feelings of hopelessness and despair, reduced sense of agency and control, stigma and shame, and lower life satisfaction and subjective well-being.

4.8 Measurement Challenges and Innovations
4.8.1 Methodological Challenges

Studies highlighted challenges related to selecting appropriate dimensions and indicators, determining threshold levels for exclusion in each dimension, weighting dimensions appropriately, avoiding double counting when dimensions overlap, capturing the dynamic and relational nature of exclusion, and balancing comprehensiveness with parsimony.

4.8.2 Data Limitations

Data limitations included lack of suitable data covering all relevant dimensions, difficulty capturing subjective experiences of exclusion, limited longitudinal data to examine dynamics, challenges in cross-national comparability and underrepresentation of the most excluded groups in surveys.

4.8.3 Innovative Approaches

Recent studies have introduced methodological innovations such as multiple correspondence analysis to determine indicator weights, tools designed specifically to measure multidimensional exclusion across diverse populations, integration of subjective and objective measures, participatory approaches involving excluded populations in defining and measuring exclusion, and machine learning techniques to identify patterns and predict exclusion risk.

5. Discussion

5.1 Synthesis of Key Findings

This systematic review synthesizes current research on the multidimensional analysis of social exclusion and reveals several important insights. First, social exclusion is consistently conceptualized and measured as a multidimensional phenomenon, with economic resources, social relationships, health and participation emerging as core dimensions. Second, the B-SEM and capability approach-based frameworks provide robust theoretical and empirical foundations for analysis across multiple domains. Third, measurement approaches vary considerably in terms of dimensions, indicators and aggregation methods, which improves contextual fit but limits comparability. Fourth, research consistently demonstrates clustering and cumulative processes, with disadvantage in one domain increasing vulnerability in others. Fifth, life course dynamics are critical to understanding how exclusion unfolds over time. Sixth, specific populations such as migrants, older adults, youth and marginalized identity groups experience distinctive patterns of multidimensional exclusion shaped by intersecting structural factors and discrimination.

5.2 Implications for Theory and Research
5.2.1 Theoretical Implications

The reviewed research advances theoretical understanding by showing that Sen's capability approach provides a normative foundation for multidimensional measurement, that exclusion should be understood as a relational and dynamic process, and that multilevel theoretical frameworks are needed to account for interactions between structure and agency.

5.2.2 Research Gaps and Future Directions

Despite significant progress, several gaps remain: more longitudinal research is needed to examine trajectories, transitions and turning points; causal mechanisms require deeper explanation; intersectionality deserves greater attention; research in low- and middle-income countries remains limited; agency and resilience should be examined more carefully; digital exclusion is emerging as a critical dimension; and methodological innovation is needed to capture subjective experiences and develop comparable cross-national indicators.

5.3 Implications for Policy and Practice
5.3.1 Policy Implications

Because exclusion operates across multiple domains, effective responses require coordinated policy across economic, social, health, education and housing sectors. Targeted interventions are needed for specific populations, while prevention and early intervention are especially important because early exclusion can have lasting effects. Policies should also ensure that excluded groups have voice in decision-making and should address structural drivers such as labor market arrangements, discriminatory laws and spatial inequalities.

5.3.2 Practical Applications

For practitioners and service providers, multidimensional assessment tools can identify exclusion across multiple domains, interventions should address interrelated needs rather than isolated problems, excluded populations should be engaged in co-design, partnerships across sectors should be strengthened, and outcomes should be monitored across multiple dimensions to assess effectiveness.

5.4 Contribution to the 2030 Agenda

Understanding and addressing multidimensional social exclusion directly contributes to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly the commitment to leave no one behind [38]. Multidimensional frameworks help identify those most at risk of being left behind and highlight the multiple barriers they face, thereby informing inclusive development strategies.

5.5 Strengths and Limitations of This Review
5.5.1 Strengths

The review has several strengths: rigorous adherence to PRISMA 2020 guidelines, a comprehensive search strategy across multiple databases and grey literature sources, clear eligibility criteria, systematic selection with independent reviewers, standardized data extraction and quality assessment, and synthesis of diverse methodological approaches and geographical contexts.

5.5.2 Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged: the language restriction to English and Hindi may have excluded relevant studies in other languages; publication bias may favor studies with positive or significant findings; heterogeneity in measurement approaches limited quantitative synthesis; rapidly evolving scholarship means recent developments may not be fully captured; and resource constraints limited retrieval of all potentially eligible full texts.

6. Conclusion

This systematic literature review provides a comprehensive synthesis of contemporary research on the multidimensional analysis of social exclusion. The review demonstrates that social exclusion is a complex, multifaceted phenomenon operating across economic, social, political, cultural and health-related domains through dynamic, relational processes involving multiple actors and levels of causation. Multidimensionality is fundamental because single-

dimensional approaches cannot adequately capture the clustering of disadvantage. Clustering and cumulation characterize exclusion, life course matters, context shapes exclusion, measurement challenges persist, and policy responses require integration across sectors. Future research should prioritize longitudinal designs, causal inference methods, intersectional approaches and participatory methodologies that center the voices and experiences of excluded populations.

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