

Policies for

DECENT JOBS FOR WASTE AND SANITATION WORKERS

SUMMARY

For the 64 million urban residents of Bangladesh, the services provided by waste and sanitation workers are vital. They help keep toilets usable, clean drains and streets, remove rubbish, and recover waste for recycling. The majority of these workers are informal, with hazardous working conditions. Rather than being welcomed for their contribution, they face harassment and discrimination from residents and authorities. Explicitly including these groups in existing labour policies would create a new set of expectations for how local authorities, companies, and residents should treat these workers. It would be a step towards transforming the lives of these workers as they serve people and the environment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Waste** and sanitation workers, irrespective of their employment status, should be included as a category of worker and thus accorded rights under the Bangladesh Labour Act. This includes the rights to decent working conditions, a liveable wage, and freedom from harassment and social exclusion. It would also include access to support accorded to other recognized trades including safe sanitation at work, access to appropriate technologies and equipment, skills development, and financial services.
- **A set of guidelines** should be created to accompany this legal recognition, outlining the implications of the change for all those who engage with waste and sanitation workers. These guidelines should be created through stakeholder consultation, prioritizing the experiences and views of informal waste workers themselves.
- **These guidelines** should recognize the vulnerable situation of many waste workers, particularly women. They should aim to eliminate gender inequalities and support everyone to work safely. They should identify and aim to mitigate any potentially negative consequences of legal and policy changes.
- **An 'Informal Workers Unit'** should be established under the Labour wing of the Ministry of Labour and Employment. The Ministry would be the focal point for overall implementation of the guidelines, and the Informal Workers Unit would provide coordination and oversight. The Government should publicize the guidelines and its support for informal workers.

- **Informal workers** should be aware of their rights and actively work to educate themselves and each other, work cooperatively, voice their concerns, and protect themselves by adopting safer working practices, tools, and protective equipment wherever possible.

WORKING CONDITIONS OF INFORMAL WASTE AND SANITATION WORKERS

Every day in towns and cities across Bangladesh waste is produced, needing to be collected, reused, recycled, or safely treated. Rubbish needs to be cleared from streets and drains. Toilets are used and filled, requiring safe emptying and treatment. At the front line of this work are hundreds of thousands of informal

workers. They include an estimated 400,000 waste pickers, with the informal sector in Dhaka alone recycling 475 tonnes of waste per day, or 15 per cent of waste generated (MoEF, 2010). Many waste and sanitation workers are employed as daily labourers by recycling companies or municipalities. Others work independently to offer pit emptying or waste collection services, or to pick and sell recyclables. Many, but not all, are from the marginalized Dalit/Harijon community, with 1–1.5 million from this community working as street sweepers. Our national survey confirmed that while the workforce is male dominated, an important minority of workers (around a quarter) are women.

Practical Action conducted baseline research in four municipalities in 2018

to understand the working conditions and relationships between actors for informal waste workers (Table 1). The largest numbers work as waste collectors and sweepers. All sweepers work for the municipality. Waste collectors work either for the municipality or for NGOs or, in Gazipur, for a private sector company. Table 2 shows the approximate proportions linked to the municipality in each town. By contrast, waste pickers and pit emptiers work independently. They are not paid a daily wage and do not have an ‘employer’.

Whether employed as a daily labourer or independently, working conditions are ‘informal’. Workers do not enjoy benefits and protections such as paid leave, regulated working hours, or sickness and injury benefits.

Table 1 Different roles of informal waste workers and their links with other actors

Role	Link to municipality	Link to NGO or private sector	Link to waste buyers	Link to households
Sweeping roads and drains	Employed	–	Some sell recyclables	–
Waste collector from household or bins	Employed	Employed	Some sell recyclables	–
Waste picker	–	–	All sell recyclables	Some collect recyclables from households
Pit emptier	–	–	–	Offer independent service to households

Table 2 Informal workers and their links with municipalities

Town	Approx. number of informal workers	Proportion linked to the municipality (%)
Faridpur	482	73
Bagerhat	250	56
Barguna	366	50
Gazipur	627	30

Source: Practical Action, 2018

Our nationwide survey of informal waste and sanitation workers shone a spotlight on their poor working conditions (Practical Action, 2019). Nearly half (44 per cent) said their work put them at risk of injury, with two fifths (42 per cent) missing work and pay due to illness or injury. Only 12 per cent had been issued with safety equipment. They also reported high levels of discrimination and abuse, with women particularly vulnerable. They face disgrace and harassment by communities, employers, and law enforcement agencies. Incomes vary according to roles, but women overall earn considerably less than men. Workers faced social exclusion, with far-reaching effects on their lives beyond work.

44 %

said their work put them at risk of injury



ON DARK STREETS

‘Any time a car can hit us. These accidents often take place.’

RECOGNITION OF WASTE AND SANITATION WORKERS IN NATIONAL POLICIES

The contribution of waste and sanitation workers is often overlooked. For example, they are not formally acknowledged as an occupational group

in the national Labour Force Survey. Neither are they recognized under the Labour Act. Other national level acts, rules, policies, and strategies relating to sanitation and waste management also make no mention of the livelihoods or rights of workers. Exceptions are the recently agreed faecal sludge management Institutional and Regulatory Framework and National Action Plan where these issues were partially addressed.

From its foundation, and in its constitution, the nation of Bangladesh has aimed for unity, equal opportunities for all, and the protection of human rights. In this spirit, the Government

ratified the International Labour Organization's Convention 155 Article 4 which advocates for a national policy on Occupational Safety and Health, preventing accidents and injuries and minimizing hazards at work. The Bangladesh Labour Act of 2006 (most recently amended in 2018) is committed to ensuring a safe and dignified working environment for all.

Waste and sanitation workers, irrespective of their employment status, should be included as a category of worker and thus accorded rights under the Bangladesh Labour Act. This would both help meet existing commitments and achieve broader national goals.

GUIDELINES FOR WORKING WITH INFORMAL WASTE AND SANITATION WORKERS

A second important step would be to agree a set of guidelines for all those engaging with informal waste and sanitation workers. This would, first, aim to change perceptions of their role and contribution to a clean environment. The guidelines would be a starting point for future legal and policy frameworks. Overarching principles for these guidelines should include:

- **Making** every effort to identify and mitigate negative consequences. For example, people should continue to enter this work without facing harassment or bureaucratic barriers.

For some, this work represents an occupation of last resort, and without it vulnerable people may make even more hazardous choices.

- **Avoiding** creating or entrenching hierarchies of workers with some enjoying better conditions and others falling outside its protections. The guidelines should proactively seek to reduce gender inequalities in working conditions and wages.

The guidelines would cover a number of aspects as suggested below.

OVERSIGHT ROLE OF LOCAL AUTHORITIES

Local government authorities should have an obligation to monitor and improve the occupational health and safety of all waste and sanitation workers. This would include, for example, understanding the risks they face, organizing training for workers, and maintaining a record of incidents.

Local authorities should make agreements with local health care providers to extend emergency health support to informal waste workers.

To enable this, local authorities should seek to create and maintain a database of workers. Informal workers should be encouraged to register (without restrictions on their working practices and without cost). Registering would enable them to access benefits such as training, recognition through a work-ID card, and access to emergency health care for injuries sustained at work.

Workers should also be made aware of the opportunity to join cooperatives

through which further benefits could be accessed such as more extensive health insurance, or access to housing and education for them and their families. These cooperatives should be eligible for welfare funds available for other workers' cooperatives through the Ministry of Labour.

It would also be the role of local authorities, supported by NGOs and others, to run awareness campaigns celebrating the contribution of waste and sanitation workers, and encouraging citizens to treat them with respect and dignity.

ROLE OF EMPLOYERS IN ENSURING DECENT WORKING CONDITIONS

The legal recognition of waste and sanitation workers would place responsibilities on all employers to ensure decent working conditions. This could include providing toilet and washing facilities at work, and following rules as set out in the Labour Act governing working hours, holidays, leave, and maternity benefits. Employers would need to show they are taking measures to ensure the safety and security of women workers. A Minimum Wage Board could be constituted under

the National Minimum Wage Commission. Employers would need to ensure minimum wages were paid, and work to eliminate wage discrimination on the basis of, for example, gender or ethnicity.

Larger-scale recycling companies could be encouraged to use part of their corporate social responsibility funds to support waste pickers through their relationships with traders, directly to their cooperatives, or by supporting training or awareness raising activities.

PROTECTING THE RIGHTS OF INDEPENDENT WORKERS

It is more difficult to ensure decent working conditions for those waste and sanitation workers who work independently. Regulations should avoid placing burdens or restrictions on workers themselves. However, guidelines could make it the responsibility of those they interact with to provide support.

For example, waste traders should be encouraged to help waste pickers to register with the local authority, and point them to cooperatives they could join or other sources of support. Similarly, with pit emptiers, households could be encouraged to use the services of registered providers.

PROMOTING CAPACITY BUILDING AND SKILL DEVELOPMENT

Informal waste and sanitation workers already have in-depth knowledge of their work, their customers' needs, and some aspects of waste and sanitation markets. However, strengthening their skills and capacities may help them to organize together, negotiate more effectively, and provide better, more

efficient services. A transformative approach should be adopted for upgrading skills, and by participating in appropriate courses, informal workers could be recognized as skilled, certified workers. The government should make this training available in appropriate ways to waste and sanitation workers.

A ROADMAP FOR CONSULTATIVE POLICY DEVELOPMENT

A key principle in developing guidelines and eventually legally binding policies should be to ensure a leading role for informal workers themselves. A bottom-up process would start with wide-ranging consultations, with informal workers involved in the development of a draft policy. The Ministry of Labour and Employment should convene this process and ensure coordination with other ministries. A special 'Informal Workers Unit' should be established within the Ministry of Labour and Employment to ensure coordination and effective implementation of the policy.

In this brief we are calling for all waste and sanitation workers (irrespective of their employment status) to be recognized as a separate category of worker and thus be included in the provisions of the Bangladesh Labour Act. This should be accompanied by guidelines explaining the implications of this change for all those engaging with these workers. We have suggested some important features of those guidelines, and also the bottom-up approach through which the guidelines should be created. The Covid-19 pandemic has shone a light on the essential services these workers provide, and the need to recognize their rights to decent working conditions.

References

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About Practical Action

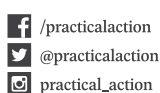
We are an international development organization putting ingenious ideas to work so people in poverty can change their world. Our vision is for a world that works better for everyone.

We help people find solutions to some of the world's toughest problems, including challenges made worse by catastrophic climate change and persistent gender inequality.

We believe in the power of small to change the big picture. And that together we can take practical action to build futures free from poverty.

Big change starts small.

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