



Practical ACTION

Creating the working
conditions for

HEALTH, DIGNITY, AND OPPORTUNITY

SUMMARY

Waste collectors make their living from the things we throw away; rubbish to us is survival to them. However, a large national study carried out in city corporations and municipalities across Bangladesh has revealed appalling working conditions for waste and sanitation workers. While being responsible for almost all the recycling and recovery of waste in the country, they pay a high price in their own health, dignity, and opportunity to engage with the rest of society. There are systematic ways in which women face further discrimination and risks of violence. Workers are doing their best to organize themselves, but these efforts need to be supported and strengthened.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Encourage** sanitation, waste, and recycling businesses to promote health and safety in the workplace and for their informal sector suppliers.
- **National government** should develop co-ordinated policy actions which increase recognition of the contribution of waste and sanitation workers, and approve accessible, appropriate programmes of learning and development to help them improve their skills.
- **Recognize how the Labour Act of 2018** applies to informal and casually employed workers, especially in its provisions for health and safety and the gender pay gap, and ensure its implementation.
- **Support waste and sanitation workers** to join workers' co-operatives or unions, and to form these in municipalities where they do not yet exist. Help these organizations to improve the health, safety, and general working conditions of their members.
- **Develop awareness programmes** that can be used by municipalities and others to encourage residents to value and respect the contribution that waste and sanitation workers make to the economy and environment.
- **Municipalities should plan** and budget for actions to improve the health, safety, and dignity of waste and sanitation workers.

NATIONAL CONTEXT

It is estimated that in 2005, 13,300 tonnes of municipal waste were generated in Bangladesh every day (UNEP, 2017). Since then, the urban population has grown from around 32.5 million to 62.8 million (UN, 2019). Even without any increase in the amount of waste produced per person (0.41 kg per day), the total generated is likely to be at least 25,700 tonnes per day today. Only just over half (56 per cent) of this waste is estimated to be collected. At the front line of waste collection are an estimated 400,000 waste pickers. Many are employed as daily labourers, mostly by recycling companies. In 2005, the informal sector recycled 15 per cent of the waste generated, amounting to 475 tonnes per day. The value of this waste is estimated at around BDT 10,706 m (around US\$173 m) (MoEF, 2010).

Our nationwide survey

The contribution of waste pickers and sanitation workers to the national economy is often overlooked. For example, they are not formally acknowledged as an occupational group by the national Bureau of Statistics for their Labour Force Survey. In order to shine a spotlight on their working conditions, we carried out a nationwide survey, interviewing 396 waste and sanitation workers, around half in city corporations and half in municipalities. Reflecting the lower representation of women in the workforce, 26.5 per cent of those interviewed were women and 73.5 per cent were men. In addition, we carried out a range of focus group discussions to hear first-hand about their lives and working conditions, and how these could be improved.

WORKING CONDITIONS

Health and safety risks

A high proportion (44 per cent) of waste and sanitation workers said their work puts them at risk of injury. The situation can be extremely severe. More than one-fifth (22 per cent) of workers said they knew about the death of a fellow worker. The material they work with can be full of hazards, whether they are sweeping streets, emptying latrines, collecting waste from households, or picking waste for recycling at dump sites or roadside collection bins. One female hand trolley user said 'I got cut on my left leg while working on the waste. I had three or four stitches, but it did not heal well.' Beyond this, the top risks that workers identified were: suffering from the elements (heat, cold, or rain), mentioned by 37 per cent; getting bitten by insects or dogs (36 per cent); or the risk of road accidents (27 per cent). One woman working in Dhaka said 'As we work at night on the street, there is a possibility of having an accident. Any time a car can hit us. This type of accident often takes place.'

These risks lead to a range of health problems. These differ to some degree between men and women but, overall, 42 per cent of workers said they found themselves unable to work at times due

to frequent illness. Only one in five (19 per cent) said they had access to paid annual leave or sick leave. The most common health complaint was stomach problems, mentioned by nearly two-thirds of men working in municipalities, and 60 per cent overall. The second most common problem was skin diseases, mentioned by nearly half (47 per cent) of workers, and affecting 6 in 10 women working in the municipalities. The third largest problem was related to insect bites, mentioned by 22 per cent of workers and causing dengue, malaria, or chikungunya.

Women, who may be more likely to be involved with street sweeping, also mentioned asthma or breathing problems related to exposure to dust (14 per cent of women working in the city corporations). Very limited account seems to be taken of women's needs while pregnant or during menstruation. For example, over half the women workers (56 per cent) said that no allowance was made if they were ill, including feeling unwell during menstruation, and 42 per cent said they needed to continue working and doing heavy work even when pregnant.

44 %

of waste and sanitation workers say their work puts them at risk of injury



ON DARK STREETS

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



27%

of women face physical or sexual abuse, and lack access to toilets.
27% of women mentioned abuse.

12%

of workers had been issued with safety equipment



This is contrary to section 45 of the Bangladesh Labour Act 2018, which states that pregnant women are entitled to 16 weeks of leave with full wages, to be taken either side of their due date.

Access to and use of safety equipment

Only just over 1 in 10 workers (12 per cent) had been issued with safety equipment. Only 5 per cent use gloves and 3 per cent use boots. Some said that they were issued with equipment several years ago, but it is not replaced when it is worn out or damaged. Many complained that the equipment hampers their ability to work. Masks make it difficult to breathe. Gloves are too bulky to allow workers to effectively search through waste. Boots are heavy and make it difficult to walk. In one case, all the boots issued were for men, and women found them the wrong size and too heavy. Uniforms that were issued were not baggy enough to be comfortable.

Facilities and benefits for workers

Workers often said that their health

risks are exacerbated because of a lack of access to safe water and sanitation facilities. Without a place to wash their hands with soap, or to sit and rest for lunch, they often eat without being able to wash first. They can also suffer from lack of access to a toilet. One woman said 'We are working from 10 p.m. at night to 1 a.m. At this hour, all the shops and malls are closed. There is nowhere for us to relieve ourselves.' These problems were worse for those in the smaller municipalities, and were mentioned by 32 per cent of workers there compared with 23 per cent in the city corporations. Very few workers (12 per cent) said they were given access to a free health check. Only 3 per cent of city corporation workers said they received any financial help in case of injury or for the family in case of a death at work.

Discrimination and victimization

Despite the enormous value these workers provide in helping to keep the country's towns and cities clean, and to recycle waste, they suffer from very high levels of discrimination and abuse.

An extraordinary 98 per cent of male workers in the city corporations (and 91 per cent of workers overall) said they had experienced disrespect or abuse through the behaviours and attitudes of the general public. Other ways in which these workers are routinely excluded include not being allowed to share freely in food and drinks at social gatherings (mentioned by 36 per cent of workers) and finding it difficult to find marriage partners for their children (31 per cent of workers). Some said that upward mobility is difficult for their children: 'My son is a graduate, but he is not getting any job.'

The effects of this kind of discrimination are far-reaching. Workers talk about not being allowed inside restaurants, being automatically blamed for petty crimes such as theft, and having to struggle to be included on voting lists. If they try to start their own businesses, customers will not come. Just under half of those surveyed (46 per cent) said they would switch to another way of earning a living if they could. However, many find it hard to find other work.

Women may be at particular risk of abuse, and they can find themselves in risky situations with working hours starting very early in the morning or very late at night, and sometimes being alone in public spaces. Over a quarter (27 per cent) of women complained of facing taunts from passers-by and sometimes physical abuse: 'We face problems by the local vile people. They touch our body.' Others have been robbed: 'People break the street light to do mischief. They took away one of our worker's silver chains by snatching it from her neck.'

Gender pay gap

A clear gender pay gap exists. For all those surveyed, average earnings for men were BDT 7,000 per month (US\$ 83), while women earned BDT 3,800 per month (\$45). Some of these differences might be explained by the fact that women are working fewer hours, trying to balance family and childcare commitments. It may also be that women are doing types of work that are less well paid. However, women in focus groups clearly felt that they were being paid less for the same work as men.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR A DIGNIFIED LIFE

Waste and sanitation workers are among the most vulnerable and marginalized workers in the economy. They suffer significant health risks and face abuse and victimization as they try to earn a living. Far from trying to protect them, working practices often put them at great risk: workers do not have adequate equipment and work in risky locations and at dangerous times of the day.

Within the city corporations, a small proportion of workers (11 per cent of women and 13 per cent of men) belong to an association which can lobby for their rights. Membership is far lower in the municipalities, and clearly there is a long way to go to meet the aspirations of the constitution, which prohibits discrimination and seeks the advancement of those who have been discriminated against in the past.

References and Endnotes

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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.

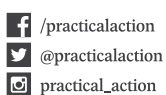
We help people find solutions to some of the world's toughest problems, including challenges made worse by catastrophic climate change and persistent gender inequality.

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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