

Proceedings

# DIALOGUE ON DIGNIFYING SANITATION WORKERS LIVES FOR ACHIEVING SDG 6.2

17 October 2023 | ITN-BUET Seminar Room



## SUMMARY OF THE PROCEEDINGS

The “Dialogue on Dignifying Sanitation Workers’ Lives for Achieving SDG 6.2,” held on October 17, 2023, at the ITN-BUET Seminar Room, brought together a diverse group of stakeholders committed to improving the lives of sanitation workers in Bangladesh. Participants included government representatives, sanitation workers and leaders of their organisations/cooperatives organisations, municipal authorities, development organisations, private sectors, academia, and WASH/FSM sector actors.

The dialogue aimed to appraise the working conditions and vulnerabilities of sanitation and waste workers, learning from small scale good practices and policy attention for lives and livelihoods improvement of these groups address policies and practices affecting sanitation workers and empower them to advocate for their rights and dignity. It highlighted the need for improved safety, security, minimum wages, gender equality, and social inclusion for sanitation workers.

Acknowledgments were extended to all individuals and organisations for their support. The event emphasised policy changes, real-world examples, and sanitation workers' experiences. Many I/NGOs and organisations were recognised for their efforts to dignify sanitation workers' lives through initiatives like Faecal sludge treatment plants, personal protective equipment, and health insurance.

Key points from the open discussion included the need for increased wages, access to regular use and maintain of PPE, skills development, and government involvement for recognition. Gender discrimination in wages and insurance coverage was a prominent issue.

A pledge-taking session was led by Ms. Sudeshna Biswas, where participants, including high-ranking government officials, committed in writing to support the dignity and well-being of sanitation workers. Various organisations and government bodies shared their contributions and commitments to improving sanitation workers' conditions.

The reflections from special guests and the chief guest underscored the importance of setting standard which includes health and safety for sanitation workers, the role of insurance, increasing the minimum wage, and the need for access to technology, finances and business development, developing orgnaistaions/networks.

The dialogue concluded with a call for collective efforts including relevant ministries and departments to address the challenges faced by sanitation workers, emphasising the importance of working together to accelerate progress in improving their lives and dignity.

## BACKGROUND

The dialogue session was a gathering of more than 100 participants who want to make sanitation workers' lives dignified. This included people from the government, sanitation worker organisations, municipal authorities, development organisations, private sectors, academia, and sector actors. The goal of the dialogue was to discuss about ways to improve the policies and practices that affect sanitation workers lives and livelihoods. This included finding ways to empower sanitation workers to speak up for themselves and make their own lives better.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The dialogue “Dignifying Sanitation Workers Lives for Achieving SDG 6.2” was a success because of the help of all participating individuals and organisations. The event brought opportunity for people to talk about and work together to make sanitation workers lives dignified.

The dialogue event focused on policy changes that could improve the lives and jobs of sanitation workers. It also discussed real-world examples of how sanitation workers have gained dignity and respect. The event gave sanitation workers a platform to advocate for changes that would improve their standard of living, dignity, and livelihoods.

Bangladesh FSM Network is grateful for the support of government agencies, Network members, and other partner organizations. It also thanks the municipal officials, representatives from sanitation workers’ cooperatives, CSOs, and private companies who participated in the event.

Bangladesh FSM Network also thanks the waste and sanitation workers, speakers, panelists, policymakers, government officials, academics, researchers, and private sector players who shared their knowledge, experiences, and insights at the event. Their contributions helped to advance the discussion on gender discrimination, safety, dignity, and equal pay for male and female workers.

Our heartfelt thanks to the waste and sanitation workers who attended the event from different municipalities. These workers are heroes, and FSM Network is grateful for their steadfast support and dedication.

## WELCOME SPEECH



**Shawkat A. Begum, PhD**, the Country Director of Practical Action in Bangladesh, delivered the welcome speech on behalf of the FSM Network, setting the event’s tone. She began by expressing gratitude to the distinguished guests, participants, and organisers for coming together to discuss the crucial topic of dignifying sanitation workers, lives for achieving the SDG 6.2.

Dr. Shawkat underscored the importance of sanitation and access to clean water as fundamental human rights and essential elements of public health. She emphasized the necessity for sustainable and inclusive sanitation services that include everyone. She expressed hope that the discussions and insights shared during the event would lead to practical solutions that advance sanitation services in Bangladesh.

## OPENING SESSION

### Real life situation and experiences of sanitation and waste workers



**Ms. Ratna Akter**, a sanitation worker, led the first session of the dialogue, delivering a presentation on the situation and experiences of sanitation workers in Bangladesh. She discussed the difficulties and risks associated with her job and the way people treat sanitation workers. She pointed out that, in many cases, people fail to recognize the significance of the sanitation workers' work and tend to hold them in low regard. She also talked about the challenges of occupational safety and health, and wage and gender discrimination.

Sanitation workers from various municipalities discussed the efforts they are making to enhance their lives. They also talked about the support they receive from different national and international NGOs, municipalities, and cooperatives to dignify their lives. For example, BASA Foundation is working to construct Faecal sludge treatment plants and form sanitation workers cooperatives. BRAC is providing sanitation workers with personal protective equipment (PPE) and training on occupational safety and health. NGO Forum has helped to improve the livelihoods of sanitation workers by transitioning from manual emptying services to mechanized services. Oxfam is providing sanitation workers in Teknaf and Ukhiya with training on occupational safety and health, PPE, and health insurance.

Sanitation workers also shared their own stories and experiences. Ms. Najmoni, a sanitation worker who works for WaterAid's project, said that she now has health insurance coverage thanks to Sajida Foundation. Mr. Nayan, a sanitation worker in Kolaroa municipality, thanked the mayor and Practical Action for providing PPE, training, and Vacutag emptying services, which have helped to improve his livelihood and dignity.

Ms. Ratna Akter concluded her presentation by summarizing the expectations of sanitation workers in Bangladesh:

1. A national forum of waste workers
2. Job security (with appointment letter)
3. A minimum wage like RMG workers
4. An ID card from their respective municipalities
5. Health and live insurance coverage
6. Housing support

## OPEN DISCUSSION



**Mr. Alauddin Ahmed**, Programme Manager at ITN-BUET, moderated the open discussion session. He highlighted the significance of National Sanitation Month and International Hand Washing Day. He invited waste management and sanitation professionals to discuss their goals for increased income, social dignity, and overcoming other obstacles.

## Key points from the discussion

### 1. PPE and sanitary landfills:

- 1.1. The Conservancy Inspector of Kolapra municipality emphasized the need for PPE and sanitary landfills in every municipality.
- 1.2. Md. Monirul Islam, Conservancy Inspector of Sayedpur municipality, added that hundreds of sanitation workers continue to work without PPE and should be registered as full-time municipality employees.

### 2. Wages and social status:

- 2.1. Sanitation workers raised the issue of their low pay and requested comfortable PPE that they could wear for extended periods of time. They also mentioned that additional training on PPE usage is necessary.
- 2.2. A Meherpur municipality official, Mr. Khandakar Jahiruddin Haque, shared that the mayor of that municipality raised the salary and set aside funds for the life insurance of sanitation and waste workers.

### 3. Skills development and alternative sources of income: Mr. Alauddin talked about the importance of raising workers technical proficiency and looking into alternate sources of income, as sanitation services are becoming automated in developed nations.

### 4. Role of the government:



Results Management Expert (RMA) Md. Anowarul Arif Khan of the A2i stated that no one should fall behind (as per NLOB, SDG) as the government of Bangladesh is working to transform the nation from Digital Bangladesh to Smart Bangladesh. He called for more relevant ministries to step up and focus more on creative solutions.

### 5. Salary discrimination and benefits:

- 5.1. Ms. Rifat Binte Jia, Gender Expert of CWIS-FSM Support Cell of DPHE, expressed concern about salary discrimination between male and female employees.
- 5.2. Mr Sharif, Urban Planning Specialist at Associates for Development Services Limited (ADSL), informed the FSM Network that a temporary worker who works continuously for more than 90 days may be granted the status of a permanent worker, entitling them to all the benefits of permanent workers as specified in Bangladeshi labor laws.
- 5.3. Mr. Tahmidul Islam, Technical Lead at WaterAid, informed the FSM Network that the WaterAid is providing health cards to all employees, enabling them to receive up to 60% coverage, and is paying BDT 200 monthly as insurance premiums for a BDT 30,000 insurance package.



## Other important discussions:

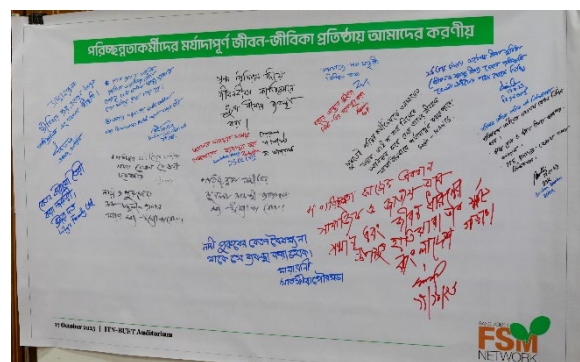
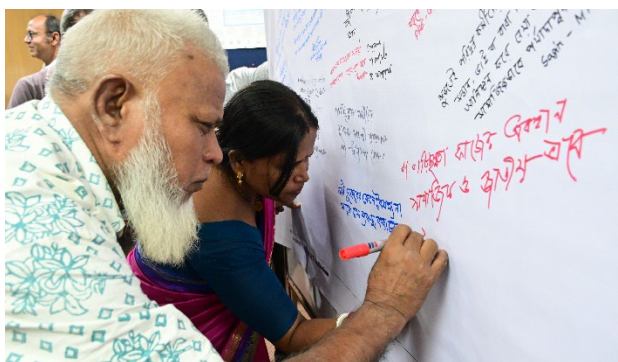
1. Dr. Mahfuzul Haque, Bangladesh University of Professionals (BUP), has visited a few municipalities and shared his learning regarding PPE usage, wage discrimination, and later talked about the importance increasing insurance coverage.
2. Mr. Uttam Kumar Saha, Practical Action and Mr. Mir Md. Ajmal Alam, Assistant Vice President at Delta Life Insurance Company Limited, spoke about the 4 years long health insurance scheme of BDT 50,000 they are offering to the sanitation workers under an agreement with Practical Action.
3. Ms. Nasrin Jahan of the Sajida Foundation informed the platform that they are paying BDT 199 for a one-year insurance plan and have processed three claims so far. She also mentioned that, regrettably, all the fatal cases involve people between the ages of 35 and 40.
4. Mr. Habibur Rahman, the Interim Country Lead at WSUP, underlined the significance of using PPE and raising wages for sanitation and waste workers. He also called for all parties involved to take the necessary steps to prevent worker fatalities.
5. Mr. Plaban Ganguly, Communications Specialist at SNV, emphasized on FSM Network's drive for sustainable solution for workers rather depending individual mayor's support.
6. Mr. Alauddin highlighted the key points from the open discussion and emphasized the need for context-specific PPE, national pay restructuring, increasing the amount of the base salary, and enhancing workers' livelihoods to raise the status and recognition of the profession.



## Responsibilities to Dignify the Lives of Sanitation and Waste Workers



**Ms. Sudeshna Biswas** from the NGO Forum facilitated the event. She invited all participants to come forward and express in writing the actions they can take within their capacity to enhance the dignity of sanitation and waste workers in areas such as safety, security, fair wages, gender equality, and social inclusion. Many participants, including high-ranking government officials, showed their support for these causes by recording their commitments on a whiteboard.



## REFLECTIONS FROM THE SPECIAL GUESTS AND THE CHIEF GUEST

Uttam Kumar Saha, the Strategic Lead for Urban & Energy Programme, Practical Action, moderated this important session. The session featured distinguished government officials as special guests and a chief guest, all of whom generously shared their valuable insights. Here are some key highlights from their reflections:

### Special Guests:



**Ms. Julia Jesmin**, Joint Inspector General (Health Division) at the Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE), expressed her concerns regarding the health and safety of sanitation and waste workers. She mentioned her appreciation for being part of the event, which offered insights into the challenges faced by these workers.

Jesmin was saddened to learn about unfortunate deaths among sanitation workers and recommended that they reach out to their respective municipalities. She informed the audience about a support fund available at DIFE and encouraged workers to utilize this resource. She also discussed a draft guideline that focuses on addressing the specific work hazards in their professions and outlined safety precautions in line with this guideline.

Jesmin assured that DIFE would take additional steps to finalize the guidelines and distribute them appropriately. The guideline also includes a Standard Operating Procedure for their respective professions. She expressed a desire to be informed about the training content provided to sanitation and waste workers so that DIFE can take further initiatives to incorporate or make necessary adjustments.



**Mr. Shafiqul Hassan**, Project Director and Co-chair of the CWIS-FSM Support Cell at the Department of Public Health Engineering (DPHE) acknowledged the challenges in coordinating with all municipalities but assured that the Support Cell is doing its best to fulfill its responsibilities. He expressed his dissatisfaction with the current conditions of sanitation workers and highlighted the expected increase in waste generation due to urbanization.

Hassan shared that DPHE has experience with various waste management technologies, including the OmniProcessor. He also mentioned that municipalities have constructed and are operating many Faecal Sludge Treatment Plants (FSTP). Municipal officials in these areas will receive training from DPHE in the coming days. DPHE has already distributed 5,000 PPE and provided training on their usage.

He discussed the ongoing WISE project at DPHE, aimed at reducing health issues for waste and sanitation workers. Hassan expressed concerns about the limited available land in many municipalities for FSTP construction. He also talked about FSTP operation and maintenance and expressed a preference for the integrated waste service management concept.



**Dr. Md. Ashrafuzzaman**, Executive Director (Joint Secretary) at the Insurance Development and Regulatory Authority (IDRA), introduced a new insurance card that allows workers to get hospital treatment with the insurance company covering the expenses. Stressing the risky nature of their work, he highlighted the importance of insurance for all sanitation and waste workers.

He proposed a package priced at BDT 199 for six months, making it affordable for the workers. He also emphasized that, given the government's "Digital Bangladesh" vision for the "Smart Bangladesh by 2030" strategy, workers should receive training in mechanized services. Currently, there are 36 operational insurance companies in Bangladesh, and the government can explore initiatives to subsidize insurance premiums.



**Ms. Hazera Khatun**, Joint Secretary at the Ministry of Labour and Employment (MoLE) provided information about the Labor Welfare Fund, which offers support to sanitation and waste workers according to their needs. She emphasized the importance of modernizing waste management and sanitation services, comparing the situation in developed countries to that in Bangladesh.

She also discussed the need to increase the minimum wage from BDT 3000 to BDT 6000. Khatun explained that the minimum wages for various industries are outlined in the Labor Act, and if a temporary employee works continuously for 90 working days, their contract should automatically become permanent. She shared her experiences from attending the G20 meeting in India, where ensuring equal pay for women was a top priority.

Khatun also talked about the process of raising the minimum wage for workers in specific sectors or industries. She expressed the ministry's interest in participating in upcoming FSM Network events and asked DIFE to focus on taking additional measures to ensure the safety of all sanitation and waste workers.

### Chief Guest



**Md. Emdadul Hoq Chowdhury**, Joint Secretary of the Local Government Division, Policy Support Branch, expressed his gratitude to the organizers for inviting key guests from relevant ministries and participants from municipalities, civil society organizations, NGOs/INGOs, and other sector stakeholders. He drew from the Al-Quran, emphasizing that all professions should be respected, and people should strive to provide the best possible service, as Allah created individuals from various working-class backgrounds, irrespective of their job titles.

He emphasized the importance of following the ministry guidelines and ensuring a minimum wage for all workers in the sanitation and waste management sector. Mr. Chowdhury also emphasized the necessity of providing health insurance for all workers in this sector and encouraged collaboration among relevant stakeholders in this regard. Additionally, he discussed the value of using personal protective equipment (PPE) and the importance of skill development to enhance the delivery of mechanized services in the future.



## SUMMARY OF THE REFLECTION FROM THE CHIEF & SPECIAL GUESTS

1. Sanitation and waste workers face significant health and safety hazards.
2. There is a need to improve waste management technologies and practices.
3. Sanitation and waste workers should have access to health insurance and social safety nets.
4. The minimum wage for sanitation and waste workers should be raised.
5. Sanitation and waste workers should be provided with training in mechanized services.

## CLOSING REMARKS



In his concluding remarks, Mr. Professor Dr. Ashraf Ali of the Department of Civil Engineering at the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET) wholeheartedly appreciated Ms. Ratna's presentation, which had helped him understand the difficulties faced by sanitation and waste workers. He also commended the individual guests for their commitment to doing their utmost on behalf of the workers. He thinks that if we all work together instead of just ourselves, the nation will grow more quickly.

In his closing statement, Professor Dr. Ashraf Ali from the Department of Civil Engineering at the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET) expressed his sincere appreciation for Ms. Ratna's presentation. He mentioned that her presentation had provided valuable insights into the challenges confronting sanitation and waste workers. He also commended the distinguished guests for their unwavering commitment to advocating for the welfare of these workers.

Dr. Ali emphasized the importance of collective effort, stating that by working together as a united front rather than individually, the nation's progress could be accelerated.

# PHOTO GALLERY

