

**National Study on Waste and Sanitation Workers'  
Working Condition, Occupational Health and Safety,  
Wages, Livelihood and Exclusion**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The population of Bangladesh continues to grow at an exponential rate, resulting in the generation of enormous amount of waste every day. Waste generation is projected to reach 47, 064 tons per day by 2025 due to escalation of economy and urbanization level. The urban poor are clinging to life at dreadful situations, often crammed in densely packed slums, with little to no access to sanitation services or literacy. Poor management of waste generated in these slums only amplifies their problems, which is often the breeding ground of diseases and creating nasty odor around its perimeter. The waste management sectors employs as many as 400,000 waste pickers around the country, comprising of women and children, in the collection process of the waste. The child waste pickers in Dhaka are popularly known as “Tokai”. In spite of the fact that the country earns approximately US\$ 0.2 billion per year from recycling and reusing the waste collected and TK 2.4 billion spent per year on household waste disposal services, the working conditions and the safety level at which these waste workers operate is more often overlooked. A 2009 report by Department of Environment showed that approximately 475 tons of wastes were daily being recycled by the waste pickers which is only 15 percent of the total waste generated.

About 7961 cleaners (Field Survey, 2015) are engaged with Sweeping Street and collecting waste found in places other than dustbin, road side, open spaces, ditches etc. by hand trolley<sup>1</sup>. Women working in the waste management industry often disregard any form of health and safety measures. They often do not have sitting space to have their meals or are provided with bathing or hand-washing tools to clean themselves and maintain their hygiene. Fewer woman workers (11.4%) receive the supply of sanitation materials for maintaining personal hygiene than their male counterpart (18.2%). Most of the workers do not receive provision for regular or irregular health checkup from their institutions. More than half of the woman workers (55.7%) do not get rebated during illness or menstruation and one-fourth women were compelled to perform heavy work even during then. 42.3% of women were also required to work during childbearing stage. Most of the disable women take up this job because they are deemed to be physically fit for any other formal job like domestic aide, constructions work, etc. There is also stigma associated with women’s involvement in waste work. This stigma, along with their class and race, influences their earnings and what work is available to them.

Women workers receive less wage compared to the male workers in the waste management industry. The average pay of women is half of their male counterpart in almost all categories of this industry. Women working as individual labour with their own van and women working as a regular worker in other government office get the least pay among all other categories of job at BDT 1,400, while their male counterpart earns BDT 6,750 and BDT 20,000 in the same departments respectively. Overall, the average pay of women working in the waste management industry, considering all categories of job, is BDT 4,100 whereas male workers earn double of that with an average pay of BDT 8,000.

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<sup>1</sup> Islam, A.Z.M. S. (2003). “Solid Waste Management in Dhaka City”, Institute for Global Environmental Strategies, Kitakyushu Initiative for a Clean Environment, <http://kitakyushu.iges.or.jp/docs/mtgs/seminars/theme/swm/presentation/3%20Dhaka%20%28Paper.pdf>,retrieved on 12 August, 2014.

Less woman than man receive appropriate safety materials to keep them safe from hazardous activities, leaving them prone to health diseases such as skin diseases, dysentery, etc. from working long hours in unhealthy working environment. Out of 105 women considered in a survey, only 8.6% expressed to have received safety materials. Around 5909 workers died and 14413 workers were injured in different occupational accidents during last ten years (2002-2012)<sup>2</sup>. Since a lot of handling is manually performed and the workers lack protection, they come in direct contact with waste, exposing them to increased risks. Only 3.4 % of women as opposed to 11.1% of men said to have received hand gloves by their respective institutions. The standards of workforce and industries are often not enforced due to the weak implementation of the regulatory provisions in developing countries. Some sanitation workers have had to reportedly cut off their limbs due to wounds being infected in the absence of proper treatment. There are no exemptions when working in adverse weather such as excessive rain, severed cold or heated atmosphere. More than 54% of the female workers expressed that they were at risk of working in too much heat/cold/in the rain. Many women workers have expressed falling sick the next day. Unhygienic conditions pave the way for a plethora of health risks like digestion problems, stomach aches, asthma, etc. 61% of the workers reported of having the possibility of risk to have stomach ache, digestion problems, or diarrhea.

A lot of the workers experience some form of harassment by the officers, discrimination by the community or are victims of extortion. About 91% of workers reported of being disrespected by people from society through actions and words. They are also not well respected in the society for societal narratives. Therefore, they end up being isolated from the society. Some expressed that their children are neglected at school, while 31.2% of them felt others were unwilling to marry them or members of their family. The waste workers mostly face humiliation from the society as they come from the lower income group of people who deal with all sort of waste collection<sup>3</sup>. They are also forced to celebrate their religious festivals separately and some are intimidated into illegal activities. Most of the waste workers experience a wide-range of societal neglect and unfair treatment. They are often not allowed to enter restaurants, get blamed of stealing, unable to continue study as well as not included in the voter list after exceeding 18 years of age.

Waste workers generally take loans in the range BDT 5,000 – 10,000. Very few women, compared to men, practice savings and take loan from financial institutions or lenders or scavengers shop in the sanitation and waste management industry. That being said, the savings are higher in Municipality area in comparison to City Corporation area. Over 68% of the workers have expressed using their own capital/assets in the use of waste management activities. Over three quarters of workers have reportedly taken loans in association with their family members. However, few workers refrain from taking loans for either being unable to pay installments or because of high interest rates. Of the 8 women surveyed, no woman took loan from bank in the City Corporation area. Workers find it more convenient to practice savings in association or with collaboration with an NGO. Three-fourth of the women waste workers in City Corporation has expressed practicing it. Most of the workers finance the equipment with their own

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<sup>2</sup> Khan, M. R., Hossain, J., & Akter, A. (June 2015). Occupational Safety and Health in Bangladesh. Dhaka: Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies-BILS.

<sup>3</sup> Policy Brief (December 2014). Legal Accreditation for the Informal Sector waste Pickers and Their Formal Involvement in Municipal Waste Management System: An Opportunity for Their Decent Occupation & Sustainable Livelihood. Grambangla Unnayan Committee

assets when it should have been provided by the institutions and 60.5% workers reported spending their own money to purchase broom/spade/ basket.

Alternative jobs to waste picking, domestic aide for instance, offer less income (around BDT 15000/month) and more working hours per day. Additionally, there is no flexibility of time in the formal sector. Therefore, it incentivizes them to stay in the waste management industry despite of all the hardships. Studies show that a van puller gets a salary of BDT 4000 from the van owner but can additionally earn BDT 20-40 a day by collection waste and selling them<sup>4</sup>. The daily wage rate of broken glass collector ranges from Tk.120-150. Children at a very young age are encouraged to get involved in the waste collection process, rather than going to school, because that way they can contribute to the overall income of the family. Soon enough, they are more interested in earning through waste collection and selling recyclable goods than studying at school. Some children are plunged in this line of work because of the death of the main income earner of the family. At a juvenile age, they have to be the sole breadwinner. Societal deprivation also pushes children of waste workers to take up the same job as their parents. A healthy percentage of workers from both sex are still inclined and prefer to switch to other jobs if possible from distaste of their existing job. Even then, many of the waste workers felt that they receive low payment or do not get expected price for the waste they have collected. Moreover, the workers in sanitation and waste management industry don't receive any forms of retirement benefit, or even pension funds after their demise when workers from other categories of job reportedly do.

According to the Labour Law (2018) Act, the employers should undertake corrective measures on occupational safety and health. However, most of the workers have little to no knowledge about occupational health and safety. The level of awareness regarding using necessary safety measures while working is also very low among the majority. Of the 396 workers surveyed, only 1.3% had knowledge about required occupational health and safety. Most are not aware of their labor rights, and neither has the institutions taken any initiative to inform them about those rights. The only way they can resolve their problems is getting involved in workers' union. The union takes care of the conflicts or if workers are treated unfairly. But survey shows that the level of participation or involvement in these unions is also low. No women of the 61 surveyed were involved in any union in the Municipality area. The fact remains that most of the waste workers (85.3%) have little to no educational qualification to get the job in this industry. There have been cases when workers were required to offer bribe to get a job position. There is also an extensive network of hiring process that operates whenever there is need for a new recruitment. In addition to receiving no education, majority have expressed not receiving appropriate training on the waste collection procedure as well. More than half of the women do not have separate toilet facilities.

On a positive note however, waste management industry employs thousands of women, solving issues of unemployment. Currently, 400,000 waste workers or pickers are working in Bangladesh<sup>5</sup>. Besides, 120,000 from the informal sector are involved in the recycling chain of Dhaka City. It also empowers them to become financially independent and capable of taking care of their family and practice savings for a better future. Despite the social discrimination, the job gives them confidence and increases their self-esteem to

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<sup>4</sup> Maksud, A K M, Rasul, Imtiaz, Hossain, Khandaker Reaz, Reza, A B K, Akter, Mosammat Tahmina (December 2012). Action Research for Renewable Resources Oriented Development of the Waste Pickers in Bangladesh. Grambangla Unnayan Committee

<sup>5</sup> Maksud A K M (2010). *An Action Research for Adapting Kajoli Model Pre-School Activities to Create Early Learning Opportunities for the Child Laborers*, Grambangla Unnayan Committee and Research Initiatives Bangladesh.

live in this society. It is extremely important to acknowledge their significant economic contribution to the country's GDP. The recycling process of the waste collected saves the country millions of dollars annually. The waste recycling industry works hand in hand with the waste management industry and further creates thousands of job for the urban poor.

Plastic comprises of 8 percent of the country's waste generated every year, weighing some 800,000 tonnes.<sup>6</sup> Urban areas of Bangladesh generates 633,129 tons/year of plastic waste and out of this, 51% plastic waste (which amounts 3,23,000 tons/year) is being recycled. Waste Concern's research finding shows that with improved recycling, Bangladesh can save US\$ 801 million every year.<sup>7</sup> Their study has also revealed that as much as 72% of the plastic waste is not recycled which is depriving the country of substantial earnings of around BDT 61.50 billion annually. The yearly production of the country's plastic factories, from well over 5,000 units, is approximately 4 million tonnes, of which more than 1 million tons turns into waste. The recycling of RMG discarded fabrics, if done efficiently, can save the country from spending millions of dollars on importing raw materials. The re-manufactured garments can in turn be exported. Additionally, the contribution of e-waste recycling is significant, generating tons of gold and silver annually that can be used to build electronic devices. Experts estimate metal deposits in e-waste to be up to 40 to 50 times richer than ore extracted from mines. The annual generation of e-waste stands at 400,000 metric tons as of 2018. In 2016, the amount was only 310,000 tons. If the current growth rate continues, the estimated e-waste amount will reach 462,000 tons per year, by 2035.<sup>8</sup> The contribution from the waste and sanitation industry is an integral part of the country's economy and the ordinary people involved in the entire process of collecting waste and recycling them accounts for a significant proportion of Bangladesh's population.

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6 UNDP Bangladesh, Recycling and alternative of plastic products stressed to beat plastic pollution, July 29th, 2018. Retrieved from

<http://www.bd.undp.org/content/bangladesh/en/home/presscenter/pressreleases/2018/07/29/recycling-and-alternative-of-plastic-products-stressed-to-beat-p.html>

7 Waste Concern (website). Retrieved from <http://wasteconcern.org/prospects-of-plastics-waste-recycling-in-bangladesh/>

8 Dhaka Tribune, Annual e-waste generation stands at 400,000 tons, October 4th, 2018. Retrieved from <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/environment/2018/10/04/annual-e-waste-generation-stands-at-400-000-tons>

# ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATION

CBO – Community Based Organization  
CDM – Clean Development Mechanism  
CI – Conservancy Inspector  
DCC – Dhaka City Corporation  
DFID – Department for International Development  
DNCC – Dhaka North City Corporation  
DSCC – Dhaka South City Corporation  
FGD – Focus Group Discussion  
GDP – Gross Domestic Product  
GUC – Grambangla Unnayan Committee  
ILO – International Labour Organization  
JICA – Japan International Corporation Agency  
KCC – Khulna City Corporation  
NGO – Non-Government Organization  
NFE – Non-Formal Education  
OSH – Occupational Safety and Health  
OSHE foundation – Occupational Safety, Health and Environment foundation  
PAB- Practical Action in Bangladesh  
PCSP – Primary Collection Service Provider  
RDF – Refuse-derived fuels  
RDA – Rural Development Academy  
RIB – Research Initiatives Bangladesh  
SDC – Swiss Development Cooperation  
SNV - Stichting Nederlandse Vrijwilligers  
SDG – Sustainable Development Goals  
STS – Secondary Transfer Station  
UNDP – United Nation Development Programme

UNICEF – United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund

WaSH – Water, Sanitation and Hygiene

WMD – Waste Management Department