ON THE GROUND
STORIES OF WASTE WORKERS AND WASTE PICKERS IN ASIA
VOLUME 1: INDIA

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ON THE GROUND: STORIES OF WASTE WORKERS AND WASTE PICKERS IN ASIA

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This publication has been made possible in part through funding support from the Plastic Solutions Fund (PSF). The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect that of the PSF and its funders.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
GAIA Asia Pacific is grateful to its members for their Zero Waste work and for the support they provided for the development of this publication: Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakari Panchayat, Stree Mukti Sanghatana, and Hasiru Dala, and their staff who reviewed relevant sections of the publication and/or facilitated the interviews: Bianca Fernandes and Nithya Joshua (Hasiru Dala) and Lubna Anantkrishnan (KKPKP).

Finally, we express our sincerest gratitude and appreciation to all the waste pickers who have agreed to be interviewed and shared their stories for this publication.

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FOREWORD

Waste pickers’ realities are replete with irony too obvious to miss, and yet for years remained undetected, and worse, uncorrected.

- Waste pickers are at the forefront of the waste crisis, but for so long, they were neither involved nor consulted in policy discussions and decisions around waste management. These discussions, which typically take place in air-conditioned rooms — away from the stench and ghastly sight of unmanaged waste — are dominated by representatives of the very corporations that are polluting the planet.
- Waste pickers contribute immensely to society. They save cities millions of dollars in hauling fees alone. They also divert tonnes of waste from disposal, thus ensuring environmental health and public safety. In many countries, they perform the only available form of solid waste collection at little or no cost to municipalities. Ironically, their work is not considered legitimate labor. They are neither paid nor thanked for their contributions. Instead of gratitude, they receive ridicule and insult. They are intimidated, harassed, and even accused of theft just for doing their job.
- Marginalized, waste pickers are among the most vulnerable against the threats of climate change. But for all their vulnerability, they also hold an important key to delaying global warming. Twenty percent of methane emissions come from waste. Fully supported, waste pickers can contribute so much more to climate change mitigation. Yet even at present, our waste pickers are left to their own devices as they deal with the impacts of climate change.
- Governments tend to favor expensive, hazardous technologies that not only worsen the problem but also displace waste pickers. Our very hopes of solving this problem are being threatened of being taken out of the system.

That these ironies — and many more — proliferated and continue into the modern times tell us one thing: we are living in a world operating on a dysfunctional system.

That needs to change.

In the past decades, waste picker organizations like Hasiru Dala in Bangalore, Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakari Panchayat (KKPKP) and Solid Waste Collection and Handling (SWaCH) in Pune, Stree Mukt/ Songhstano in Mumbai, and the Indian Alliance of Waste-pickers have done tremendous work introducing systemic change in their cities, which transformed the lives of thousands of waste pickers. Through the work of these organizations, the once-faceless workers who faced discrimination and harassment for decades now stand on a more solid ground — their collective voices louder, their stance clearer. They are now claiming their spaces, and demanding to be part of the conversation on issues that directly affect them.

This publication is the first of a series of publications on waste pickers and waste workers to better understand their realities on the ground and document the amazing work of our members and their allies.

So much more still needs to be done. With 1.5 million waste pickers in India, the number of those that have been included in the system is still minimal. So much more still live in precarious conditions, without a voice, and without social protection.

As we support these organizations in introducing more changes in the system, and reaching more waste pickers, we also take the time to celebrate their success. The waste pickers had to go through so much to get to where they are now; every transformation story is worth celebrating.
When Anita Mahadev Bhosale, 36, decided waste picking was going to be her lifeline, her family members were concerned. Having finished 9th grade, they felt she would be embarrassed as a waste picker.

But Anita persisted. She thought waste picking was an important job as it protected the environment, promoted the city’s health, and prevented diseases due to unmanaged waste. It also offered her flexibility and autonomy — important considerations for mothers of young children who needed to manage their homes while also sustaining them financially.

Today, her once apprehensive family is supportive and proud of her and her work. Through waste picking, Anita contributes to her family’s finances, which has improved their lives.

**CHANGE WAS IMMINENT**

Anita is one of the 3,500 waste pickers of Pune, India who are members of Solid Waste Collection and Handling or SWaCH (meaning ‘clean’ in the local language). SWaCH is “India’s first wholly-owned cooperative of self-employed waste collectors and other urban poor. It is an autonomous enterprise that provides front-end waste management services to the citizens of Pune.”¹

Organized in 2007 by Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakam Panchayat (KKPKP), a trade union of waste pickers, SWaCH has significantly improved the waste management system in the city of Pune — home to nearly 5 million — and changed the lives of its members and their families. Today, SWaCH waste collection services cover 70% of the city, which translates to 800,000 households daily, and 70,000 tonnes of waste recycled annually. In 2021, the cooperative saved 100 crore (INR 1 Billion) for the local government, the Pune Municipal Corporation (PMC).²

Prior to the creation of SWaCH, waste management in the city was inefficient at best. The PMC, which is responsible for the implementation of solid waste management, had neither the necessary structure nor action plan to carry out this responsibility. At the time, only 7% of households were formally serviced for door-to-door waste collection, and just 42% of the municipal community bins were emptied daily. There was no waste sorting, nor was there any material recovery taking place within the formal municipal system. Thus, mixed waste was being collected and dumped in the city’s dumping grounds. Solid waste management, as the city implemented it, merely meant collection, transport, and disposal.

In the absence of an efficient waste management system, itinerant waste pickers recovered some of the recyclables generated by households and establishments from the streets and landfills. Waste picking at the time was back-breaking and demeaning. The waste pickers were chased by dogs, disrespected by the residents, and even harassed by the police who typically accused them of theft.

The situation was so dire then that Anita did not consider waste picking an option.

Fortunately, KKPKP had set the stage for changes that would dramatically improve not only the waste management in the city but also the working conditions of the waste pickers. After its formation in 1993, KKPKP conducted a study quantifying the contributions of waste pickers. Their research demonstrated that waste pickers saved the city huge amounts of money; about USD 5 worth of free labor per waste picker per month. This translated to annual savings of USD 316,455 for the city for transportation alone. Waste pickers did this without recognition, much less support from the government. Moreover, waste pickers recovered and diverted from landfills nearly 118,000 tonnes of recyclable materials annually.³

The study was used by KKPKP⁴ as an advocacy tool to convince PMC to “institutionalize the integration of waste pickers through a wholly worker-owned autonomous cooperative of waste pickers and itinerant waste buyers that would provide front-end waste management services to the city.” That cooperative was later registered as SWaCH.

The objective of the institutionalization of SWaCH is two-fold: 1) to provide good daily waste collection services compliant with waste management rules, and 2) to protect and upgrade the livelihoods of waste pickers.
**IMPROVED WASTE MANAGEMENT**

The core service provided by SWaCH to the city is door-to-door waste collection. SWaCH has a contract with the PMC to collect waste from households and establishments against a user fee of INR 70 per household per month. This amount is relatively burdensome on disadvantaged households. To ensure equality in service provision, the PMC subsidizes the user fee in disadvantaged societies. In these communities, waste pickers charge each household only INR 50. At the end of each month, they collect the balance from the PMC.

“Essentially, the waste pickers are still able to collect a fair amount of income from their collection service and disadvantaged communities are not burdened to pay more than they can,” said Lubna Anantkrishnan of KKPKP.

Under the SWaCH model, households are required to store their waste separately into three categories: wet, dry, and sanitary waste, the last being a recent addition. Waste pickers handle about 30 metric tonnes of household sanitary waste on a daily basis. In 2017, SWaCH launched the Red Dot Campaign to sensitize the public about the challenges faced by waste pickers who handle this waste stream. The initiative encourages women to wrap their soiled sanitary napkins in newspaper and put a red dot on it to indicate to the waste picker that it is sanitary waste.

“This stream is handled separately due to the associated health and hygiene issues. This ensures that hygiene and the dignity of the waste pickers is maintained, and sanitary waste is channeled separately,” explained Lubna.

Waste pickers then sort the dry waste, taking the recyclables to sell to scrap shops, some of which they collectively own and manage. The residual or non-recyclable dry waste is turned over to the city transport system for disposal in landfills.

According to Lubna, the waste pickers’ cooperative scrap shops were started in the mid-1990s. “The reason behind starting them was the exploitation of waste pickers at the hands of the scrap dealers who frequently under-weighed materials and underpaid waste pickers. The waste pickers usually had no idea about how much the shopkeepers were profiting, and what they were passing on to [the waste pickers],” she said. “We wanted to prove that we can run fair trade shops profitably, without exploiting waste pickers.”

There are now three cooperative scrap shops owned, managed, and operated by waste pickers in Pune. Each shop caters to anywhere between 40 and 100 waste pickers. The waste pickers are equal shareholders in the shop; they all have decision-making rights and have equal share of the profits. The actual terms of operation, profit share, and investment varies, depending on the resolutions made by the waste pickers who own it.

As per the country’s Municipal Solid Waste Management Rules of 2016, municipal corporations could no longer send wet waste to the landfill. SWaCH waste pickers facilitate at-source composting by providing their expertise and the materials needed to install new infrastructure (pits or fiber-reinforced polymer bins or biodigesters) in both residential and commercial spaces. They also provide coco peat and other safety materials for the composters, and maintain the composting unit.

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⁵Housing communities

⁶https://swachcoop.com/initiatives/red-dot-awareness/
BETTER INCOME, IMPROVED WORKING CONDITIONS

With the formation of SWaCH, the working conditions of waste pickers have improved dramatically. In the past, waste pickers had to rummage through unsegregated waste in landfills and streets to collect recyclables, exposing themselves to health risks and other threats. Today, SWaCH waste pickers collect segregated waste at the point of generation.

Waste pickers within the system also have better incomes. They have two main sources of income: the user fee they collect from households and the sale from recyclable materials. They also make money through the profit sharing from their cooperative scrap shops.

Anita shared that prior to this, she could not make her own decisions even about their household expenses. “I needed to ask my mother-in-law if I could buy chicken, even how much chicken to put on a dish,” she shared.

Today, with her own income, she is able to buy necessities at home without having to consult anyone.

“I am making my own money and I have control of how I spend it. I am not dependent on anyone,” she smiled.

Citizens also treat waste pickers with respect; particularly after the pandemic when people realized their significance in maintaining the cleanliness of their surroundings. Earlier, the waste pickers were virtually invisible and treated poorly. Today, they are recognized for their work and get the respect they deserve. “Citizens now ask, ‘How are you? Are you okay?’ They even give me gifts — beautiful sarees, like that,” Anita beamed.

But what Anita and her fellow waste pickers appreciate the most is the flexibility and autonomy that comes with waste picking.

Data from 2012 showed that 90% of waste pickers are women, 90% of whom are illiterate, with 50% of the waste pickers less than 35 years of age. Many of them are mothers with huge responsibilities at home who cannot negotiate eight-hour long work days. Waste picking allows them to determine the time that works for them, and the number of hours they work on any given day.

“I am my own master. I make my own decisions. I will not exchange the freedom that comes with the work for anything,” Anita said.

Finally, waste pickers now have a (louder) voice. They make decisions about the management of their cooperative, and policies and programs that are relevant to them. And if they are not, they assert their right to be consulted. After all, they are environmentalists, and experts in waste management. They understand the effects of problematic materials such as plastic on the environment and human health and the impact of bans and regulations on their livelihood better than anybody else — so who better to consult?

Unfortunately, not all waste pickers are part of SWaCH, and Anita wishes that other waste pickers — those working in landfills, for example — could be integrated into the system.

“I feel that the waste pickers in the landfills should be enrolled in the system. Waste pickers who are not part of the organization walk for kilometers to collect waste. Here, [under the system], people bring you the waste from households. So it is easier for us to work as part of the organization,” she said.

MORE CHANGES NEEDED

Indeed, the SWaCH waste pickers have come a long way from where they used to be prior to the formation of the cooperative — so much so that many of them are not only happy but also proud of their profession.

Nevertheless, challenges remain: waste pickers do not get the full social welfare benefits that the government promised, most importantly medical support and enrollment in pension programs.

“Medical costs are prohibitive. It’s a huge burden on us. We don’t get seen by a doctor until we pay the down payment,” Anita expressed.

And while waste picking does allow older men and women to work, at some point they know that they will no longer be able to. “Pension and some kind of elder care for waste pickers would be beneficial,” Anita added.

But what’s good and worth noting is that waste pickers know full well what they need and what is good for them, and they are not afraid to articulate these. For KKPKP, waste pickers raising these concerns is testimony to their comprehensive understanding of and perspective on their own marginalization, and their demands of governments and society.

In fact, in the current discussions on just transition and waste picker integration in the global policy shape, their message resounds: “Involve us, talk to us, don’t assume you know what we need and what is good for us.”

The fervent hope is that decision makers take heed; they would be fools not to.
Asha Baban Zombade, “Ashabai,” 52, and Sarika Baban Gaikwad, 36, were visions of joy in their colorful sarees and jewelry adorning their wrists, neck, and ears during an interview at the SWaCH office in Pune, India last October. But their beautiful garb was not as striking as their bright smiles, their poise, and their sincerity as they recounted their life’s journeys. Their endearing humility and pride shone through, marking them as individuals who have struggled, endured, and stood up to the challenges that never stopped coming their way. In the end, they emerged stronger, their lives transformed forever.

Both Asha and Sarika are members of the Solid Waste Collection and Handling or SWaCH, a cooperative of waste pickers contracted by the municipality of Pune to provide solid waste collection services to the city. They collect waste from low income societies — a job they are proud of. According to them, waste picking changed their fate dramatically, both liberating them from their past struggles and enabling them to overcome their persistent heartaches and strife from not so long ago.

The undeniable similarity in Asha’s and Sarika’s life stories speaks of the systemic poverty underlying their society. Both had difficult childhoods where they were faced with deprivation, suffered alcoholic fathers, and married young into families that were as marginalized as their natal homes.

Asha became a...
waste picker as early as when she was a child. “I was embarrassed by it,” she confessed.

With no access to even primary education, Asha’s job options were limited. She did other informal jobs, worked in a tile factory, and did housekeeping. When she was barely 16 years old, she was married off to a laborer. She and her husband had a daughter and two sons soon after.

Once their kids were adults and settled with their respective families, they moved to the outskirts of Pune to start anew, only for Asha’s life to take a turn for the worse. One day, on her way to the temple, she had an accident.

“I was hospitalized for months [and had to get] 17 stitches,” she shared.

The accident further reduced Asha’s access to gainful work. Her injuries made heavy lifting well near impossible.

Meanwhile, Asha’s husband was struck with paralysis. Neither of their sons were of any help at this time; one being an alcoholic, and the other missing in action. Asha had to take on whatever work was available to support her husband’s treatment.

Fortunately, he recovered and was able to return to work. Once he regained his strength and hope, he tried his hand at animal husbandry. He bought a goat against a small loan, which yielded three kids. He thought his financial woes were finally over.

Unfortunately, that was not the case. He eventually fell sick again, requiring hospitalization and suffering from excruciating pain for months.

Sarika’s life was no cake walk either. Born to a waste picker, she was familiar with the work from childhood. Married when she was just 13, she bore a daughter within a year, then later, a son.

Her husband was an alcoholic who not only drank away her earnings but also beat her. To support the family, Sarika worked as a domestic worker and took on other small chores. But after eight years of constant fighting with her husband, she packed both her and her child’s belongings and left with her daughter. She never looked back. She continued working as a domestic helper to support herself and her children, but she also began asking around for better opportunities. Like Asha, Sarika’s capacity for strenuous labor was also compromised due to an earlier accident.

THE CALL THAT CHANGED THEIR LIVES

Though aware of waste picking and its attendant benefits, it had not crossed Sarika’s mind to take it on herself. Not until her friend, also a waste picker, suggested she give it a try. So she did.

“The first day, I did not know how to go about it, so I just observed my friend as she worked. I knew immediately it was the right job for me,” Sarika said.
For Asha, it was her sister-in-law who persuaded her to do this work. “I came to the city and worked with her for a few days then went back to the outskirts. Soon she called to inform me that one of the waste pickers in her area was stopping work and I could replace her.” Asha shared. Asha jumped at the opportunity, and just like Sarika, has not looked back.

Fortunately, both Asha’s sister-in-law and Sarika’s friend were members of SWaCH. This meant that the waste picking they witnessed and were involved in no longer represented their childhood memories of it; thanks to the transformative work of SWaCH and KKPKP that significantly changed the lives of the waste pickers.

Previously, waste pickers trudged several kilometers, sifting through putrefying mixed waste to recover recyclables, harassed by authorities and accused of theft. Now, SWaCH is being contracted by the Pune Municipal Corporation to collect waste directly from households and commercial establishments, who are required to separate their waste into dry, wet/biodegradable, and sanitary waste, before handing it over. While it is still a tough job, waste picking as a profession has nonetheless acquired some dignity and respect, and the terms of work have become less laborious and far more hygienic than before.

The recognition from the government led to a 180-degree turn in citizens’ perception and treatment of waste pickers. Citizens have become respectful of them, and some are even friendly. When Asha’s husband passed away, she was overcome with sadness as she worked. Several citizens saw this and stopped by, expressing their concern and offering support. “Because of my work, people now recognize me. They ask how I am; they care. Being part of the organization is like being part of a family,” Asha shared.

The improvements in the city’s waste management system likewise made it easier for Asha and Sarika and the 3,500 waste pickers of SWaCH to collect waste from their assigned lanes. Their incomes are also higher as they earn both from the waste collection fee paid by the households they service, and the sale of the recyclables they recover from the waste they collect. Additionally, they now also have the flexibility and autonomy that the job offers, which they welcome.

“I make my own decisions. I can choose the number of hours I need to work based on my needs. If I work for someone else, I will have a fixed salary and I will have to work eight hours a day. I won’t have the freedom to do what I want,” Sarika said. “My kids are happy. They are well-fed. They are able to go to school. I am so proud of my work.”

“The best part is that even when you are much older, you can still work. [This] is not the case with contractors and workers where there is an age limit,” Asha interjected. adding: “We hope we can be enrolled in some kind of pension scheme and get more support for our medical needs.”

Asha pointed out that although their income is enough to tide them over, big-budget expenses like medical care continue to be a burden. “I also worry about my grandchildren. Their father does not support them. What will happen to them when I’m gone and I’m not able to leave them something? So you see, a form of pension would be a big help,” she expressed.

Aware that they will be unable to work when they are old, both Asha and Sarika wisely investing their money, the former in a 1,000 sqm piece of land on which she built her house, and the latter, on her children’s education. Sarika’s daughter is pursuing a university degree in law and her son is in high school 9th standard (equivalent to secondary level).

“I don’t want my daughter to go through my experiences. I want her to be independent and have as much freedom as possible,” Sarika shared.

As many waste pickers are deprived of work and social security, Sarika recognizes that she is among the lucky ones. She encourages her daughter to put her education to good use and help the marginalized once she becomes a full-fledged lawyer.

“I once told her, ‘I’m proud that you’re doing law but don’t forget that you owe your success and knowledge to my work, and SWaCH. Waste pickers find it difficult to talk to a lawyer as they rarely have the time of day to talk to us and we have a hard time understanding their language. You’re from our community and so when you become a lawyer, I hope you’d make time not just for me but for other waste pickers — and help them in their legal issues,’” Sarika shared.

She added that she was not surprised by her daughter’s assertion that she planned to do just that.

And so the hope, satisfaction, and pride what were palpable at the start of the interview became more pronounced as Asha and Sarika shared their challenges and how they navigated and prevailed through them, both as individuals who fought their way, and as members of a collective who decided to change
Alumelu had just finished first grade when she stopped going to school to start waste picking to help her mother put food on the table. Born to a family of waste pickers, she and her five siblings were exposed to hard work. When her father died and her older siblings got married at an early age, the burden of looking after the younger members of the family fell on her and her mother.

The young Alumelu did not understand why she had to work as hard as she did at such a young age. “I would sometimes ask myself, ‘I’m just a young girl, why do I have to do this?’,” she shared. Although she was confused, she continued to do what she could to help her family.

When she turned 16, she too got married. She and her husband had two children: a daughter and a son. But her husband, an alcoholic like her father, passed away just eight years after they got married. Once again, she was left with the sole responsibility of taking care of her family. She did so by doing the one job she was good at: waste picking.

“It was difficult,” Alumelu shared. “I would start waste picking at four in the morning, then quit at around 10 or 11 AM, when the sun became unbearable. I would resume at 3 PM and end at about 5 PM or 6 PM,” she said. But while the hours were challenging, it was the least of Alumelus concerns. Instead, she was most affected by how people treated her as she roamed around to collect waste from garbage heaps by the roadside. “Residents were suspicious of me. They would ask me: ‘Why are you here? What are you doing here?’” she said, adding that the questioning would, more often than not, turn into accusations of theft — if not by residents, then by the authorities.

Sadly, these incidents of harassment were not isolated cases; they came with the job. It was so pervasive that even waste pickers themselves did not imagine it changing.

Fortunately, it eventually did.

In 2010, social worker Nalini Shekar and her husband moved back to Bengaluru, her hometown, with the intention to retire. At the time, the city was not yet segregating its waste and the waste management system was inefficient. Some of the citizen groups were discussing improving the system through decentralization, but Nalini noted that waste pickers were not being included at all in these discussions to transition out of the business-as-usual approach.

Nalini thought it was unacceptable that the very people who contributed most to waste management in the absence of city government did not have a say in issues that greatly affected them. Based on her experience, empowering waste workers is a transformative move. Thirteen years back, she had co-founded a trade union of waste pickers in Pune, Maharashtra — Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakari Panchayat (KKPKP). The organization had dramatically transformed not only the waste management in the city, but also the lives of thousands of waste pickers.

Seeing the situation of waste pickers in her hometown, Nalini set aside her retirement plans. Together with Anslem Rosario, she organized the waste pickers in Bengaluru to provide a platform for them to be recognized for their environmental and economic contributions to the city. And so, Hasiru Dala, meaning ‘green force’ in the local language, came to be.

IDENTITY AND RECOGNITION

According to Nalini, waste pickers are among the most vulnerable in the urban informal labor sector and in the Indian caste system. “When we are born, we are issued a birth certificate. Many of the waste pickers who belonged to the Dalit community didn’t have any kind of identity, even though they have stayed in the community for ages,” Nalini shared.
Forming the lowest stratum in Indian society, the Dalit or untouchables are the most oppressed group in the country. Faceless and nameless for so long, they were unpaid laborers doing the “dirty work” like dealing with waste in cities, which was not considered as legitimate labor. Without any identification cards, they were unable to access basic social services like food, education, and healthcare.

“So my main issue was how to integrate waste pickers in the local solid waste management system so they could have predictable income, and at the same time, look at how they could access social security or social entitlement,” Nalini said.

Thus, the first order for Hasiru Dala was to secure identity cards for the waste pickers.

Alumelu shared that when she and fellow waste pickers were approached by Hasiru Dala, they were confused and even skeptical. “One day, people from Hasiru Dala came to us. They asked us a lot of questions about our work. We asked one another, ‘Why do they ask these questions? We did not believe anything good would come out of it,’” she recalled.

“They took our details and left. When they came back, they gave us ID cards from the local government. We did not think much of it. But the next time we got harassed in our waste picking, we showed them our ID. We said, ‘We are waste pickers. We have the right to waste. The government gave us this ID.’” They acknowledged the ID and since then, we experienced much less harassment,” Alumelu shared.

At present, over 11,400 waste pickers have been given occupational identity cards — after a long and tedious process which included waste picker engagement, policy dialogues and court interventions. The identity cards contained the waste pickers’ basic information, identified them as waste pickers, and authorized them to collect waste within the jurisdiction of the city.

To help the waste pickers improve their services, Hasiru Dala provided them with training on various aspects of waste management, such as waste collection, organics management and recycling.

Armed with ID cards and the training they had received, Hasiru Dala waste pickers were able to enter into contracts with the local government to offer authorized door-to-door waste collection, waste sorting, and composting services. Some waste pickers were able to borrow loans to operate dry waste collection centers (DWCC) where the waste collectors would bring the waste collected from waste generators for further sorting.

Alumelu, for example, has gone from picking waste from roadside dums to collecting waste directly from households, who she says now treat waste pickers well. At present, she is one of the 12 waste sorters in the DWCC owned and operated by a fellow waste picker, Kumuda.

“Work now is so much easier. We sort the waste that comes into the DWCC. We start work at 8 AM and finish at 5 PM. Sometimes we extend to 6 PM. Income is also better,” she smiled.

Because of their ID cards, the waste pickers’ children also now have an identity, enabling them to go to school. Moreover, they have been able to open bank accounts and apply for different life entitlements like pensions and scholarships for their children.

Thus far, Hasiru Dala has transformed the lives of nearly 20,000 waste pickers. In 2021-2022, they recorded 16,169 social services availsments, 272 school enrollments and re-admissions among the first generation learners of waste picker’s children, and 1,597 scholarships and educational loans.

BEYOND IDENTITY CARDS

The impact of the recognition they got from the local government through the issuance of ID cards was life-changing for the waste pickers. While this made Nalini happy, she knew their work had just begun. There was so much more that still needed to be done.

Their next step was to help waste pickers gain access to housing.

“Housing is the key. You bring in a lot of stability with housing,” Nalini said. “It brought in security [and opportunities] for the [waste pickers’] children. So we have done a lot of work around it, even upgrading the current housing using discarded materials, thus reducing the ecological footprint of construction.”

Karthik Natarajan, an architect and designer, joined Hasiru Dala to oversee their housing project in 2018. It was supposed to be a short-term three-month engagement, but Karthik, who is always on the lookout for something new, found himself staying on to manage pilot projects of the organization. He has now been with Hasiru Dala for four years and counting. He currently oversees projects that assess the health implications of working in waste, and how better design infrastructure and facilities can work in mitigating some of the issues with the waste pickers’ health. He is also involved in some of the research and policy work of the organization.

According to Karthik, Hasiru Dala helps ensure that waste pickers have a living wage and access to social services by co-creating programs with them. “They come up with their own ideas. If they have a problem that they need to solve, if there is an area we want to work in, we find mechanisms and ways to work with them,” he said, explaining that this format of community-led interventions is not possible in formal setups because “businesses do not invest in experimental models of community-led levels of government.”

“We are trying to bridge the gap of informal to formal industries for waste pickers, specifically. We come up with the area of intervention, [the waste pickers] define how they want to engage
with it, we build up on the formal layer within Hasiru Dala. We tell them, ‘for you to do this, we need this from you, and in exchange we allow you some form of stability, some form of financial assistance within the infrastructure.’ So, oftentimes our role is to hold the project together in terms of supporting everything,” he expounded. “When the project gets to a stage that it can run by itself, we hand it over to the waste pickers and they become the owners and operators of the business, at which point it will be scaled to whatever scale that they want to scale it to.”

The pilots they have worked on, thus far, include textile waste, use of solar lights and fans for the dry waste collection centers, and production of boards out of multilayer plastic (MLP) among others.

“The reason we think the pilots went very well is because the alternative is that somebody else comes in and take the space where waste pickers should be. If we treat waste work as a profession, instead of something born out of someone’s need that they have shown up in, it means we also have the responsibility of ensuring upward mobility for the waste pickers, and if we can’t do that then the ventures become meaningless,” he said.

And while they are supporting waste pickers especially in improving their livelihood, Karthik cautions against “glorification of their resilience and entrepreneurial spirit.”

“I find that narrative a little reductive,” he said. “It is not out of choice. It is that the world has been created in a way that they have to be constantly fighting and evolving. I would like it if the narrative shifts from entrepreneurial spirits — not to say that it does not exist but to emphasize why they are where they are, and why we should really be listening to their perspective a lot more,” he elaborated.

Karthik emphasized that the work that waste pickers do is so impactful that they deserve to be compensated well, and heard. “They have immense strength, they have immense power, and they have a great understanding of materials, and of the work that we still don’t have the mechanism to capture fully. We always say in [our] team, if you are doing important work for the planet … then why shouldn’t you be fairly compensated for it?,” he rued.

According to Hasiru Dala, on average, a waste picker collects about 60-90 kilograms of waste per day and thus collectively, the 15,000 waste pickers in Bengaluru are saving the city 84 crores (INR 840 million or USD 10.2 M) annually.

But more than their economic contributions, an important and often overlooked impact of waste pickers is on the issue of climate change. Waste contributes 20% of methane emissions. By handling waste and recovering recyclables, waste pickers are preventing waste from going to landfills or incinerators, consequently helping reduce methane emissions.

Fortunately, once waste workers realized that they have been contributing to mitigating further damage from climate change through their work, they were no longer content with being relegated to the sidelines. They now demand to be listened to. “[They] have come to take charge of the profession, they have made connections, and they are not only bringing change to their own community and their own family, but also contributing very heavily to the climate mitigation space,” Nalini shared.

“The waste pickers themselves are now talking about their own rights. In the past, they would let people talk about them in any which way. But now they talk about themselves. They know that their contribution has helped the city economically. So they’re very proud of themselves,” she added.

“We contribute to the city. We protect the environment. If we stop working, there will be waste dumps everywhere. The city will become dirty. It will become stinky. People will get sick,” reminded Alumelu.
Sushila Mokal, 57, started waste picking when she was barely eight years old. Her father had just died due to an accident, leaving her and her mother to fend for themselves and take care of her baby brother. With no support available to the family, her mother was left with no other option than to bring her brother with them as they collected waste from a big public market near where they lived.

Aside from the usual challenges that waste pickers experienced in their area of work—the talking from the people and authorities telling them they couldn’t put down their collected waste on the sidewalk—Sushila recalled having to endure unwanted attention from men who showed interest in her mother. Her mother did not return their advances; she stayed focused on her work.

“My mother never remarried,” Sushila shared.

Due to the hardships they faced, Sushila was married off when she was 12 years old. Her husband worked as a security guard, while she continued waste picking. Life was hard, but they managed to get by.

In 1998, after years of waste picking, things started to change for Sushila. “Coordinators from an organization called Stree Mukti Sanghatana or SMS came to our community in the slums and convinced me to join them,” she said.

As a member of the organization, she received various skills training, including composting and gardening. The training she received proved pivotal for Sushila. Soon after, she was the one training her community members on the same topics.

Today, Sushila oversees about a hundred waste pickers and is the secretary of her own cooperative, which has a contract with 14 housing societies for regular waste collection and composting of biodegradable waste. Each society has anywhere between 50 to 100 households. Depending on the size of the society, most generate a minimum of 50 kilograms of biodegradable waste daily.

EXTENDING A HELPING HAND

When coordinators from SMS reached Sushila, the organization had already been operating for 25 years. It was formed immediately after the declaration of 1975, as International Women’s Year by the United Nations. The declaration inspired a group of young female activists in Mumbai to establish a women’s organization—Stree Mukti Sanghatana (Women’s Liberation Organization)—with the aim of empowering disadvantaged women in India.

Now nearly 50 years old, SMS is a leading women’s organization in the state of Maharashtra with thousands of followers. The organization provides women support through its family counseling centers and day care programs, and raises understanding on women’s issues through its awareness campaigns using various media, including theater.

In 1998, SMS turned their attention to the plights of the parisar bhaginis (neighborhood sisters) and waste pickers. The number of waste pickers in India is estimated to be anywhere between 1.5 million¹ to 5 million², majority of whom are women.

“Women waste pickers in India lie at the bottom of the waste management pyramid. They are exploited and constantly live below the poverty line,” said Jyoti Mhapsekar, co-founder of SMS.

According to Jyoti, waste picking is caste- and gender-based; almost all of the waste pickers come from Dalit communities—the most oppressed segment of Indian society. Many of the waste pickers are illiterate and single parents. Exposed to health hazards, they suffer serious health problems resulting from unhygienic work conditions. They live below the poverty line, and are in desperate conditions.

A survey conducted by SMS showed that these women confront numerous issues: child marriage, illiteracy, indebtedness, and exploitation, among others. Moreover, most of them were either widowed, deserted, or victims of alcoholism.

SMS has a neighborhood development program, Parisar Vikas, which seeks to address two things: (1) the problems of women waste pickers, and (2) the inefficient waste management in the city. Under this program is the self-help group. Through the self-help group, they are able to access small loans from the contributions of the members of the group.

In 2003, SMS constructed two biogas plants of five tonnes capacity each for BMC. SMS then trained waste pickers to maintain biomethanation plants.

The following year, SMS formed the Parisar Dhangvi Vikas Sangha (PDVS), a federation of 250 self-help groups consisting of 2,500 waste pickers in Mumbai. This was followed by the formation of the Parisar Sakhi Vikas Sanstha (PSVS) with 500 members in Navi Mumbai.

Both federations are led by an executive committee of nine members (plus two advisors from SMS) who meet every quarter to discuss ways to address issues. Under the guidance of SMS, the federation of Mumbai maintains seven dry waste sheds where they store the dry waste they collect until they have enough quantity for sale. They also monitor the internal lending activities of the individual self-help groups to ensure seamless operations. Moreover, they provide economic assistance to members in need, and provide training for leadership skills and alternate skills like composting, bio-methanation, gardening, and fine sorting of dry waste.

PBVS members formed cooperatives and registered them with their State government. These cooperatives were then able to enter into contracts with housing societies and other establishments for Zero Waste projects. Waste pickers cooperatives started taking contracts for maintenance. They also started Zero Waste projects in 50 housing complexes where trained waste pickers collected dry waste from housing complexes and composted wet waste in the society premises. Members of these cooperatives no longer

^4 SMS Website: [https://streemuktisanghatana.org/core-activities/parisar-vikas-initiative/](https://streemuktisanghatana.org/core-activities/parisar-vikas-initiative/)
^5 [https://globalrec.org/organization/parisar-bhagini-vikas-sangh-pbvs/](https://globalrec.org/organization/parisar-bhagini-vikas-sangh-pbvs/)
have to roam around for waste; they now collect waste right at the source, making their work easier, and giving them a predictable source of income, and dignity of labor.

In addition, SMS also conducts health camps and runs a dispensary opposite a dumping ground, and a mobile medical van to visit the communities. The organization also provides evening study sessions for the waste pickers' children, allowing them to cope with studies. The organization's special programs for adolescent girls have helped reduce the incidence of child marriages.

"Unless women waste pickers are united, their problems will not be solved. Together, they can achieve a lot. We need to strengthen women's organizations not only at the city level, but at the state, national and global level," Jyoti said.

So far, 6,000 women waste pickers have been supported by SMS in six cities. While Jyoti is happy to share the positive changes in waste pickers' lives, she noted that many challenges remain. Among the many hurdles are the weak implementation of waste segregation policies, refusal of local authorities to integrate women waste pickers into the system, and apathy of the urban middle class.

"Government should make compliance with policies on at-source waste segregation compulsory. Robust waste management policies must be fully implemented. People, especially the middle class, should do their part in segregating waste," she said.

As already demonstrated, progressive and people-centered policies go a long way. Fully supported, waste pickers are not only able to turn their life around, they also save the city huge amounts of money, not to mention lessen the impact of waste on the environment.

Jyoti hopes governments realize this before it's too late.
By 2008, city-level waste picker groups in India were making improvements in waste management and transforming the lives of waste pickers in their communities. But while their interventions were making improvements in their cities, these groups understood that national-level campaigning was necessary if they wanted to steer the nation towards waste pickers’ inclusion and integration in the waste management system.

Thus, feminist organization Stree Mukti Sanghatana (SMS), women workers trade union Self-Employed Women Association (SEWA), waste picker group Kopad Kach Patro Kaishakar Panchayat (KKPKP), and environmental organization Chintan Environmental Research and Action Group decided to come together to form the Alliance of Indian Waste-pickers (AIW) in 2008.

“At the time, the country’s Municipal Solid Waste Management (SWM) Rules of 2001 did not have any reference to waste pickers,” said Kabir Arora, National Coordinator of AIW. “Moreover, waste pickers organizing was limited to four cities: New Delhi, Mumbai, Pune, and Ahmedabad. The waste picker organizations felt that they needed an alliance to have coordinated efforts to ensure the inclusion of waste pickers in national programs.”

Waste pickers account for 1-2% of the country’s population and are an integral part of the urban community setup. The silence of the country’s municipal waste management policy framework on this segment of the population that is heavily engaged with and impacted by waste and environmental degradation, while also contributing to local economies and public health and safety, highlighted their invisibility in government policies, even in issues that directly affected them.

Eight years after its inception, AIW scored a major win. Following years of campaigning, the SWM rules of 2016 finally included waste pickers and informal waste collectors.

“Our colleague, Harshad [Barde] of KKPKP, was part of the committee which drafted these rules,” Kabir said.

In the 2016 SWM rules, waste picker was defined as ‘a person or group of persons informally engaged in the collection and recovery of reusable and recyclable waste from the source of waste generation: the streets, the bins, material recovery facilities, processing and waste disposal facilities for sale to recyclers directly or through intermediates to earn their livelihood.’

In an article he wrote for the International Alliance of Waste Pickers, Kabir called the inclusion of waste pickers in the new SWM rules “a matter of celebration.”

“Such a measure is welcome as it is inclusive of all relevant vocations in the informal waste economy. Further, the rules proposed issuance of occupational identity cards to waste pickers and informal waste collectors and their integration in door-to-door collection as responsibility and duty of local authorities and village panchayats. Moreover the rules also commanded setting up of material recovery facilities which enables waste pickers and waste collectors to separate recyclables from the waste collected, and stated that incentives need to be provided to recycling initiatives by the informal waste recycling sector. Local bodies have been asked to do capacity building of waste pickers and waste collectors through training. For strong implementation of rules, the departments in-charge of local bodies of all...
state governments have been asked to constitute state level advisory committees, which will have representatives of waste pickers and informal waste recyclers,” he wrote.

It may be recalled that not too long ago, waste picking was not even considered legitimate work and waste workers were being harassed and threatened just for doing their jobs.

“For the first time, there is clarity of roles — of the mandate for municipal authorities to provide sorting spaces, involve waste pickers, and do the integration. So this is why it became the first legal document where waste pickers’ enrollment has been mandated by law,” Kabir added.

ONGOING CAMPAIGNS

Today, AIW has grown its membership to 25 organizations, and represents more than 100,000 waste pickers across the country. The alliance continues to advocate the cause of waste pickers by conducting training for member organizations and even municipalities, developing policy analysis and recommendations, doing research on waste picker status and issues, and organizing waste pickers in India. It is also actively involved in international policy spaces such as the Conference of Parties (COP) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), Intergovernmental Negotiations Committee to prepare a legal instrument to deal with plastic pollution.

In recent years, waste picker issues have become more prominent in waste management discussions than it ever was.

“Municipalities now understand that waste pickers need to be involved in the process. Before the alliance was set up, people’s approach to waste and waste pickers and understanding of the informal recycling sector was very generic. Now they see the intricacies of waste picking and are able to deal with it in strategic ways through different programs in the community,” Kabir and his colleague, Haris Najib, said in a separate interview with GAIA.

Looking to strengthen itself, the alliance is currently working on a database of waste pickers. “Many of our members have been keeping rudimentary data of organized waste pickers. Still, we need a more detailed database to provide us with an overview of the membership and the condition of waste pickers in India. As such, the database shall also serve as a resource for our present and future advocacy work,” Kabir said.

The alliance is also actively keeping tabs on programs and policies on waste management, including issues around plastic and extended producer responsibility (EPR).

“The Indian policy landscape is very dynamic and we have to keep negotiating with authorities so models created out of years of struggle of waste pickers won’t be disregarded simply because there is a change in guard,” Kabir said.

He added: “Members face many challenges including municipal authorities changing their policies and we have to keep negotiating with the authorities to keep policies favorable to waste pickers. Second, not all waste pickers get the benefits outlined in various laws and policies. Given the extensive size of the sector and our limited resources, we can only reach a limited few.”

Together with other waste picker organizations, AIW is also actively elevating the role of waste pickers in climate change mitigation, both in national and international policy spaces.

“A lot of the waste pickers that we know of in India, Bangladesh, and other places, have been displaced by climate change-related events. A lot of them, when they started getting integrated into the system, engaged in organic waste management and composting, which we know is carbon neutral. Similarly, when they get involved in recycling, they divert waste from dumps,” he pointed out, emphasizing that waste pickers play an important role in methane reduction.

“Supporting waste pickers is a great step toward climate change mitigation. It’s important that we don’t miss this opportunity,” he added.