

Strategies to Improve Socio-Economic and Health Conditions of Rag Pickers in Developing Nations

Shaurya Agarwal

Lotus Valley International School, Gurgaon, Haryana, India

Email: [shaurya_agarwal\[at\]icloud.com](mailto:shaurya_agarwal[at]icloud.com)

Abstract: *This paper focuses on the prevailing condition of waste pickers across various developing countries. It explores the key issues and challenges they face in their occupation and the causes of these challenges. The paper also studies the approach of various countries in their treatment of waste pickers and their approach toward their integration into the formal waste collection and management system. Certain policies are already in place for the formalization and recognition of workers; this paper studies a few of these using case studies of nations such as Brazil, Chile, China, Colombia, and India. Alternative solutions to these policies have been discussed with the aim of strengthening the current framework. Policy recommendations for the protection and upliftment of waste pickers have also been proposed.*

Keywords: Informal, Policy, Ragpickers, Socio-economic Welfare, Waste Management

1. Introduction

The Rag pickers are part of a largely informal and unrecognized workforce that collects and segregates waste, selling it to recycling industries in exchange for remuneration. They contribute significantly to the global waste collection and processing systems but remain invisible to authorities and receive little to no support or recognition. Faced with health hazards, waste pickers experience dismal quality of life, social exclusion and discrimination, and little to no social security, thus, they often struggle to make ends meet. Rag pickers are mostly unorganized, individual contributors who are barely able to earn a living, and due to lack of formalization and structured support, they are excluded from most aid and support programs launched by governments while also being harassed by authorities. Their plight is often overlooked and they remain chiefly ignored. The hazardous nature of their work coupled with the lack of protection and resources poses a serious threat to their well-being. It is thus imperative to take swift and decisive action and frame effective policies to alleviate their situation. This paper elucidates the challenges faced by waste pickers today, explores the existing initiatives and efforts for their upliftment, ideates on alternative solutions, and recommends policy changes to combat the issue.

2. Issues and Challenges

Certain key issues that waste pickers face that inhibit their ability to collect solid waste and earn substantial income necessary for survival are as follows:

- 2.1. Informal and Unregulated Nature of the Job:** The lack of formalization in their job sector effectively prevents them from receiving health insurance, safety gear, and equipment for handling hazardous refuse, fair remuneration, and compensation as well as protection from exploitation and harassment. This issue has also led to growing cases of child labor and exploitation as well as forced labor.
- 2.2. Cartelization and Harassment:** Harassment by government officials as well as local cartels that monopolize waste collection for profit has posed a

significant threat to the livelihoods of rag pickers. These obstacles have led to a cycle of exploitation and oppression creating an inescapable state of poverty and sub-par living conditions.

- 2.3. Increasing Competition:** Rag pickers also face stiff competition from private waste collection firms that win government contracts for waste collection and disposal in most urban areas, where a majority of solid waste is generated. This competition has slowed the integration of rag pickers into the waste collection system as they are often unable to compete with firms with vast resources. Waste pickers, particularly when unorganized, often have a weak bargaining position vis-à-vis middlemen that purchase the recyclables and receive low prices.
- 2.4. Social Stigma and Discrimination:** Waste pickers often belong to socially disadvantaged and vulnerable groups (e.g. migrants and refugees, unemployed, women, children, persons with disabilities, and ethnic and religious minorities). They frequently face stigma, are discriminated against, and are harassed by public and private actors in waste management chains. This widens the socioeconomic gap between people leading to an oppressed class of people who are struggling to survive daily having little to no social security or aid from authorities.
- 2.5. Lack of Structured Data on the workers:** Data collection and registration of these workers has also grown to be a serious hurdle in their formalization as it has been difficult to find reliable data on them on a large scale.
- 2.6. Gender Inequalities:** Gender inequalities are also deeply entrenched in this line of work. Although women make up a majority of the workforce of rag pickers in many countries they are often paid less than their male counterparts and their work is also valued less.
- 2.7. Changing Nature of Waste-Picking Methods:** There has been a trend of adopting capital-intensive methods of waste picking and management which often leads to the exclusion of waste pickers from obtaining legal

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permits for refuse collection due to their failure to meet the government requirements of tools and machinery.

Although waste pickers are considered to be indispensable in waste collection processes, most nations currently lack any concrete policy or law that offers coverage and protection to the majority of their waste pickers leading to minimal support for them in reality.

3. Efforts toward the upliftment of rag-pickers across the world

The problem of integration of rag pickers into the formal waste management system has been primarily faced by developing countries in Latin America and South Asia. Due to their diverse socio-economic structures and cultural backgrounds, many nations have devised vastly different policies to tackle the issue.

Cooperatives and other Social and Solidarity Economy Organizations (“SSEOs”) have also played a key role in getting legal recognition for rag pickers and even organizing discussions with local governing bodies and appealing to courts for remedial measures to ensure sustainable livelihood for waste pickers. By joining or forming cooperatives and other SSEOs, waste pickers can strengthen their collective voice and negotiation power with public authorities and other private actors in waste management chains. They can also participate in waste management policy-making processes that would affect their lives. At the same time, they can also negotiate with governments to extend social protection to waste pickers, particularly when they provide waste management services under formal contracts with the public sector.

1) Brazil

In 2002, the country provided official recognition to workers by listing waste picking as an occupation in the Brazilian Classification of Occupations. Waste pickers or Catadores contribute to the waste management system by segregating and gathering the recyclables, an essential resource of any economy. With this legal recognition, waste pickers have gradually found a place in official statistics, enabling research and monitoring of the occupational group. It has proven to be an extremely effective initiative by integrating an estimated number of 2,00,000 to 8,00,000 waste pickers. A further legal instrument that promoted the social inclusion of waste pickers at a federal level was Presidential Decree 5940/06. This Decree determined that a “Solid Waste Selective Collection” would be implemented in all federal public buildings in Brazil and that the material generated would be delivered to waste picker organizations. The main objective of the Decree was to recognize the labor of waste pickers and to allow for the generation of income for these workers. These measures have greatly contributed to the upliftment of waste pickers and the formalization of their occupation but do not address the issue of heavy competition they face from private recycling companies that pose a major threat to the security of their jobs.

2) India

Waste collection is the lowest in the hierarchy of urban informal occupations, and the majority of those employed

are women and children. The poorest of the poor, those who are illiterate, and unskilled, and migrants frequently work as waste pickers because they are unable to find other types of employment. Many of them currently collect garbage from urban landfills. Because there is a strong lobby in favor of privatizing garbage collection, it is most common to contract out the doorstep garbage collection system, either partially or entirely, to both local and international operators. Due to the contracting party now having direct control over the waste and its disposal, these measures frequently replace waste-pickers. A system where waste pickers gather recyclable waste at the source from homes, institutions, shops, and establishments is being implemented in several regions of the country, most notably in Delhi, Pune, and Ahmedabad. Groups that support waste pickers have been pushing for their inclusion in the door-to-door collection program to ensure their access to scrap, improve their working conditions, increase their pay, and change the perception of their work from scavenging to service provision.

This leaves a lot to be desired from a policy perspective as there needs to be more legal protection and recognition provided to waste pickers. Heavy reliance on the public initiative for the upliftment of rag pickers calls for stronger policy action by the authorities to ensure the preservation of the livelihoods of rag pickers.

3) Chile

Chile has the most effective processes in place for recycling waste among any nation in Latin America. Their work enables municipalities to save roughly 12 billion pesos a year on waste collection and landfill disposal. In Chile, there are reportedly 60,000 waste pickers, but only 3,500 of them (or about 5%) are organized into collective or localized groups. Waste pickers are often working under informal contracts, health insurance, and workers' benefits which lack the required legal enforceability. To help informal collectors formalize their work, give them identification cards, and control stock centers i.e. waste processing centers, the Union Association of Independent Collectors (“ASRI”) was established in 1997. The National Movement of Recyclers of Chile (“MNRCH”) has been promoted by several ASRI activists and leaders even though ASRI no longer exists. To improve the living conditions of Chilean waste pickers, the MNRCH encourages the formalization of waste pickers, provides vital networking between recyclers at the regional, national, and international levels, and promotes the sharing of experiences and cooperation.

Chile has an effective waste management system, but there are still no adequate policies for formalizing and recognizing rag pickers. This is a cause for concern because these groups continue to be exploitable and have no job security.

4) China

China has experienced a rapid increase in waste production that has coincided with its exponential economic growth. In 2004, it surpassed the United States as the world's top producer of waste. Additionally, according to estimates, China employs the most waste pickers globally. However, China also imports a lot of recyclable waste, which negatively affects domestic waste disposal and collection. In

China's cities and small towns, there are reportedly 2.5 million waste collectors at work. Chinese recycling efforts are not very profitable because the country serves as a significant dump for waste from high-income nations. Waste pickers collect paper, plastics, cardboard, glass, metals, and other recyclables from streets, bins, dumpsites, and landfills. The conditions in which the waste pickers live and work are unhealthy. Due to China's explicit policy requiring migrants from rural to urban areas to carry a letter of employment from the employer, a significant number of workers reside in landfills. As a result, many of the workers are undocumented immigrants who entered the city illegally. Hence, they are susceptible to intimidation and eviction by the government. Waste pickers in China are not formally recognized and are treated with an enormous amount of neglect by the government. Legislators must act swiftly to ensure the security of waste pickers' livelihoods and their safety to guarantee decent living conditions and opportunities for sustaining a healthy lifestyle.

5) Colombia

The livelihood of waste pickers depends on having access to waste. Livelihoods in the waste industry are directly impacted by newer waste management models that implicitly promote the privatization of waste management due to capital-intensive waste processing methods. The Colombian Constitutional Court aimed to safeguard the waste pickers' customary right to access and sort recyclable waste in 2010. The co-operatives connected to the National Recycling Programme of Fundacion Social represent a wide range of working conditions. The fundacion is a non-governmental organization that has been assisting waste pickers in the formation of co-operatives since 1986 when a sanitary landfill replaced an open dump in the city of Manizales. The Foundation has helped the displaced waste pickers to form a co-operative and assists groups of waste pickers in other cities to also create co-operatives. Some members use pushcarts, while others use pickup trucks or horse-drawn carts to move materials. Some of them are close to the local dumps where the residents salvage materials. Certain members follow established routes along city streets, retrieving items from containers placed at the curbside for collection or from materials littering public places. While other cooperatives, however, participate in source segregation programs, gathering recyclables from homes, businesses, offices, and small industries, sometimes under formal agreements. To accumulate and sell recyclables in large quantities at prices that are higher than those that would be paid to each co-operative individually, recycler cooperatives have formed regional marketing associations. In an April 2009 judgment, the Constitutional Court ruled in favor of waste pickers by granting them the traditional rights to access, sort, and recycle recyclable materials. To give co-operatives of recyclers enough time to organize and compete for the contracts that are typically awarded to private companies, the Court ordered the Cali municipality to postpone the tender for a waste-management concession. The court further ruled that future contracts for waste disposal should favor and try to preserve the status of waste pickers as self-employed entrepreneurs.

While these provisions would give waste pickers a head start in becoming self-sufficient and setting up competitive

operations of waste collection in the short run, in the long run, their unchecked competition with large waste processing firms can certainly spell an end to their employment and subsequently revert them to their earlier conditions.

These examples showcase the different routes countries have taken to address the problem of formalization of rag pickers. Ranging from neglect and ignorance to directly addressing the problem and finding remedies, different nations have reacted differently to the problem of lack of formalising rag pickers however the common trend seen by these examples highlights the lack of policies addressing this issue in most countries.

4. Support to be provided to rag-pickers

Waste picker unions should be further empowered to promote rag pickers' rights and improve in conditions of work. Legal tenders for waste collection should be awarded to the destitute and marginalized waste pickers to ensure the security of work, along with other benefits such as health and legal coverage, protecting them from harassment from local authorities. Employment data such as the national census and labor force surveys etc. should be inclusive of waste pickers as a legal occupation to provide reliable data on their present condition.

Waste pickers' unions have made great strides in ensuring the protection of the rights of waste pickers and increased the negotiating power of waste pickers often securing better pay, working conditions, and treatment. Government authorities and associated organizations overlooking waste collection should increase their focus on the very bottom of the waste management chain which often is left ignored and may consider taking the following initiatives:

- 4.1. **Upskilling and capacity building:** Local as well as national authorities should provide training to waste pickers on efficient methods of waste collection, usage of equipment, waste sorting, handling hazardous waste, etc.
- 4.2. **Access to affordable healthcare:** Due to the hazardous nature of their work, rag pickers require substantial medical insurance coverage to preserve their health, they should also have concessions on receiving healthcare as well as greater accessibility to hospitals, which can be done by setting up clinics near landfills and waste dumps as these are areas prone to work-related accidents.
- 4.3. **Access to social resources:** Waste pickers should also have access to financial resources, education, and childcare as well as avenues for seeking remedies in cases of illegal hindrances and restrictions on their work.
- 4.4. **Raising public awareness on the role of waste pickers:** It is essential to spread awareness amongst the public on the role and importance of waste pickers in any functioning economy. This will help in reducing the social stigma there is regarding this profession and will lead to greater acceptance of the profession as well as break social and hierarchical barriers that stem from occupations of choice.

5. Policy Recommendations

The current problems can be alleviated by an overhaul of the current policy structure and legal status of rag pickers. The following policy recommendations would help in transforming the current landscape of the waste management industry with an emphasis on better working conditions and protection of the grassroot workers.

5.1. Formalization and recognition of rag pickers: It is imperative to ensure legal recognition of waste pickers and formalize their work. They should work under government contracts that offer fair remuneration and decent working conditions as well as safety gear. To prevent harassment of rag pickers by authorities they need to be a part of the formal workforce which will ensure greater legal protection as well as a system of redressal in case their legal rights are adversely affected.

5.2. Introduction of Welfare Schemes: Welfare schemes focusing on providing housing, education, financial resources, and aid to rag pickers are instrumental in their upliftment and will prevent them from stagnating and languishing at the bottom-most rung of the socio-economic ladder. This will provide them with opportunities for growth and progress to be self-sufficient and ensure decent living conditions.

5.3. Social Upliftment and Spreading Awareness: Policies should be introduced that ensure equality between workers, closing the discriminative wage gap between men and women working at the same level. Governments should also spread awareness amongst citizens to change the perception of waste pickers from human scavengers to service providers thus aiding in the de-stigmatization of their profession. Efforts should also be made to prevent the forceful induction of people into these jobs based on their social status i.e. caste, class, color, gender, etc.

5.4. Greater Accountability of Local Authorities: There needs to be greater checks on local authorities to ensure that tenders for waste collection are not unfairly given to large waste collection organizations with the purpose of cost-saving and profiteering. Individuals and rag pickers' unions should also be given contracts that provide equitable opportunities for earning income for waste pickers.

5.5. Promotion of Unions and Cooperatives: Policies incentivizing the formation of unions and cooperatives will ensure greater representation of waste pickers. These unions also improve the bargaining power of waste pickers, protect them from exploitation, help in scaling waste picking operations, and provide financial and social support to members. They also devise fair remuneration policies for the union that ensure adequate income to its members.

6. Conclusion

The promotion of recycling and the circulation of resources can be aided by inclusive waste management policies that incorporate waste pickers into formal recycling chains. These policies can also help to reduce poverty, create decent jobs, and promote social inclusion.

Waste pickers' cooperatives and other SSEOs have been instrumental in formalizing and integrating their work into the recycling value chain. These organizations have given a voice to waste pickers and have made immense progress in fighting for the rights of waste pickers and getting them greater representation and recognition. In many nations, the condition of rag pickers is abysmal and requires an immediate address in the form of policy restructuring and legal validity of their profession. Social de-stigmatization of their occupation is also a must. Thus, a multi-faceted approach tackling social, economic, cultural, and administrative barriers all at once is required for bringing concrete and lasting change.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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