



Centre for Labour Research and Action



Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung-South Asia

NAVIGATING THROUGH WASTE



A Study on the Condition of Migrant Tribal
Families Engaged in Door-to-Door
Waste Collection Work

Anamika Singh and Piyush Mane
December 2023

Centre for Labour Research and action
Supported by Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung – South Asia

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ANAMIKA SINGH AND PIYUSH MANE

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CENTRE FOR LABOUR RESEARCH AND ACTION

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ROSA LUXEMBURG STIFTUNG – SOUTH ASIA



2 Navigating through waste



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Abbreviations:

AMC: Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation
GMC: Gandhinagar Municipal Corporation
GPS: Global Positioning System
MRF: Material Recovery Facility
RFID: Radio Frequency Identification
RTS: Refuse Transfer Station

SC: Scheduled Caste
SEWA: Self-Employed Women's Association
ST: Scheduled Tribe
SMC: Surat Municipal Corporation
SWM: Solid Waste Management
ULB: Urban Local Bodies

FOREWARD

Waste is one of the most urgent environmental crises of our time. The growing human consumption of products that are disposable, made of inorganic and non-renewable materials (e.g. plastic), or are designed to break and be replaced have led to massive increases in the amount of solid waste going to dumpsites around the world in recent decades.

Waste is often perceived and treated as a technical issue to be solved through scientific approaches and management practices performed by professionals and those deemed as technical ‘experts’. Yet, garbage is an urgent social and political issue, as well as an ecological and technical one. Researchers from academic and civil society spheres have long advocated for engagements with solid waste which center its social, cultural, and political dimensions as key to addressing this crisis.

In India, where I work with activists and communities of Dalit women informal recyclers (self-employed workers who collect and sell recyclable materials from roadsides, dumpsites, community bins, and households/businesses), the gendered, casteed, and classed social inequities of waste production and management are highly visible and continually reproduced in everyday life. Yet, despite stated inclusive intentions behind the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (Clean India Mission) and the 2016 revisions to the national Solid Waste Management Rules by the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, dominant policy approaches to managing urban solid waste involves a combination of technical expertise and corporate interests. Here, door-to-door waste collection services are being privatized through Public-Private Partnerships (PPP) in many cities across the country and the resulting displacement of informal workers from livelihoods in the creation of ‘new’ waste economies that are dominated by corporate firms.

In the state of Gujarat, where this report is situated, the COVID-19 pandemic prompted shifts in the labour force for urban waste collection services, as the relatively new PPP system broadened in scope and gained further legitimacy through lockdowns as informal recyclers were made to stay at home. The pandemic created a situation where this expansion of the privatized waste collection system occurred concurrently with the halting of work on construction sites, where regional migrant workers had been employed. Typically involved in urban construction work, garbage collection is a new field for seasonal migrant labourers and so little is known about their labour experiences in this emerging area.

This is why the Centre for Labour Research and Action (CLRA) is getting involved in issues of waste labour and is an important actor for understanding these ongoing shifts in the waste sector. CLRA has a long-held and important mandate in organizing and advocating for the rights of seasonal migrant workers coming to cities from the tribal borderlands of eastern Gujarat and western Madhya Pradesh. I first met Sudhir Katiyar,

who introduced me to many of his colleagues at CLRA in Ahmedabad in 2023 as my own work and observations led me to pursue questions about the new and highly visible prominence of migrant workers in door-to-door waste collection and visits to worker settlement camps at the outskirts of the city.

While I visited the CLRA office in Ahmedabad, we discussed the need for research to be done toward understanding worker experiences and the exploitations that are embedded in the current waste management system. Speaking with workers, building rapport in worker settlements, and establishing some baseline information about workers and their main concerns, we all agreed, were necessary for also beginning CLRA's bigger-picture goal of organizing and advocating for migrant workers involved in urban waste collection services. Finally, given that the workforce engaged in this new type of waste collection work is comprised of family groups/couples from Adivasi communities, the urgency of caste, migration, and gendered aspects of this labour and the intersections with workers' living conditions are particularly urgent areas of intervention.

This action-oriented report acts to initiate this work in providing an important baseline survey and information about the people and families involved in this work in Ahmedabad, Gandhinagar, and Surat. This study is an important first step in CLRA's plan to organize and advocate for worker rights in this space and the report which follows provides a detailed description of the local informal/contract labour systems and aggregate data about workers to support further research and analysis on the issues and politics of migrant labour as it emerges in India's waste sector. The report's particular focus on interconnections of gender, labour, and social reproduction is important and heartening to see as a central concern informing CLRA's work and activism.

This is an urgent time and space for understanding and intervening in the global garbage crisis and to develop multi-scalar approaches to grapple with and address the socio-cultural dimensions of waste as it relates to and reinforces capitalist, patriarchal, caste, and colonial exploitations in this time of climate, pandemic, and economic crisis.



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Postdoctoral Research Fellow
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Josie has undertaken extensive research on waste supply chain workers

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The objective of this study is to highlight the conditions of door-to-door waste collection workers in three cities of Gujarat - Ahmedabad, Gandhinagar, and Surat, with a focus on the gendered aspect of the occupation. These workers, who are Adivasis migrants from Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh, are a part of the informal and unorganised workforce, considered 'unskilled' despite carrying out the essential work of waste collection and segregation in urban areas. They work under verbal contracts with private entities, rather than being hired directly by the government, given the increasing privatisation under the current legal framework for waste management in India. Historically, waste management workers have faced oppression and stigma given their Dalit identities, and the societal perceptions around waste. In a caste-based social order, this discrimination extends to other groups who pick up the work of waste. Although the Solid Waste Management Rules, 2016 exist, these do not contain any substantial clause on the rights of waste management workers. The workers do not have any social security benefits such as provident fund, medical insurance, or pension, despite the hazardous nature of their work. While waste management work encompasses multiple occupations such as street sweeping, waste picking, door-to-door waste collection and segregation with specific working conditions and challenges, this research study focuses on the working and living conditions of

migrant tribal families engaged in door-to-door waste collection work in Ahmedabad, Gandhinagar, and Surat. This study highlights the health hazards faced by the workers, specifically the women workers who come directly in contact with the waste, on account of sifting through diverse materials such as household food waste, sanitary waste, bio-medical waste etc. These workers are not organised into collectives such as unions or cooperatives, which exacerbates their vulnerabilities. Multiple studies have been conducted on waste management workers, particularly, the community of waste pickers. However, the specific conditions of Adivasi women migrant workers in this sector has not been explored yet. Door-to-door waste collection is a newer occupation which is being contracted out by Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) across India under private contracts which reduces the state's accountability towards this workforce. In the current situation of rapid urbanisation and rural to urban migration, the role of these workers in ensuring urban sustainability, health, and hygiene cannot be debated. However, the caste hierarchy in Indian society and the stigma attached to waste puts these workers in a vulnerable position. The need for an organised workforce which can collectively demand labour rights and dignity is imperative at this juncture. Thus, this study serves as an initiation of CLRA's efforts to organise waste management workers in the urban areas of Gujarat.

CHAPTER 1



NAVIGATING THROUGH WASTE

INTRODUCTION



As one approaches the Thermal Power Station in Gandhinagar, the capital city of Gujarat, three towering structures appear in the form of smoke-guzzling coal-fired units. It is difficult to imagine staying in this area surrounded by toxic chemicals and contaminated air. Despite this, behind the power station sits a squatter settlement of migrant workers engaged in door-to-door waste collection work in the city. These workers are part of a labour force comprising around four million workers engaged in the waste management sector in India. Sixty two million tonnes of waste is produced annually in India, which has been claimed to be an underestimation by the World Bank which puts the figure at around 277 million tonnes (Majumdar, 2023).

The idea of waste management has taken on new dimensions due to the rapidity and diversity in the process of urbanisation to create 'world-class cities', which strive to become global destinations for exchange. This process has inevitably led to changes in systems of governance and mechanisms of labour, especially while dealing with waste management in urban areas, which encompasses occupations such as street cleaning, waste picking, door-to-

door garbage collection, sorting of garbage at waste processing centres, and processing and sale of reusable or recyclable waste (Josyula et al., 2022). The nature of work contracts also differs, with government-employed sanitation workers, door-to-door waste collectors who are on private contracts, and waste pickers in the informal sector forming part of the diverse workforce. It is envisaged that in developing nations, around one to two percent of the population, mostly the urban poor, is engaged in informal waste management work, supporting the local governments in sustainable waste management (Chaturvedi et al. 2015 as cited in Kanekal, 2019; Madhav, 2010).

Waste management workers are often engaged in informal work contracts or self-employed rather than being hired as permanent or regular workers, leading to various challenges and vulnerabilities. These workers face health and safety risks because of the nature of their work and financial challenges. Further, identities

such as gender, caste, religion, migration status, and language add to the intersecting layers of marginality. This informality and precarious nature of the work leads to exploitation and threats to a dignified life and livelihood. Further, there are limited avenues to leave the work as it is hinged on the caste based identity ascribed at birth. The onset of rapid urbanisation and the recent trends in urbanisation led by privatisation have made waste management a techno-managerial issue, isolating it from the social dynamics which have guided it for a long time now. This suggests that viewing waste management simply as an informed method of environmental protection can often result in the absence of the ‘social’ for which the environment is to be protected and which works to protect the environment (Wittmer, 2023). Another dimension which shapes the treatment of waste management workers by the state is the act of terming the work as ‘unskilled’. Rajendra’s (2022) study on understanding skills in the domain of so-called ‘unskilled’ waste work highlights how skills within waste work are acquired and learnt through social practices, but bureaucratically categorised and devalued as ‘unskilled’. Rajendra argues that “‘skilled’ work is politically and socially constructed and materially contingent.” The compulsion of getting used to the work in terms of training different senses to engage with the waste were indicated to have implica-

tions over the bodies and health of the workers. Categorization as ‘unskilled’ also affects the wages they receive for the work (Heslop and Jeffery, 2020 as cited in Rajendra, 2022). Hence, the management of waste is inherently linked with questions of labour and social security while addressing the temporal-spatial aspect of access among other relevant questions.

This report is divided into seven chapters, starting with an introduction about the context of the study and existing literature, followed by an understanding of the regulatory framework pertaining to waste management, value chain of waste, and a brief description of the waste management system followed in the three cities which are covered under the study - Ahmedabad, Gandhinagar, and Surat. Thereafter, the methodology of the study is explained, followed by the key findings of the study, to finally arrive at the concluding remarks and way forward.





CHAPTER 2

Review Of Literature

The waste management system in India is an integral part of the caste system. It depends on the manual labour of historically marginalised communities and social groups, which is true for several stigmatised forms of work (Mahalingam, Jagannathan and Selvaraj 2019; Rodrigues 2009 as cited in Rajendra, 2022; Pal, 2023). In a Brahminical social order, “polluting” tasks are assigned to Dalits. This was institutionalised under modernisation, which turned this oppression based on caste into

“waged occupations” (Shruti & Majumdar, 2021). Ambedkar elucidated that the caste system is not just a division of labour but a division of labourers as well (BAWS, Vol. 1, p. 47), which is true in the case of waste management work as well.

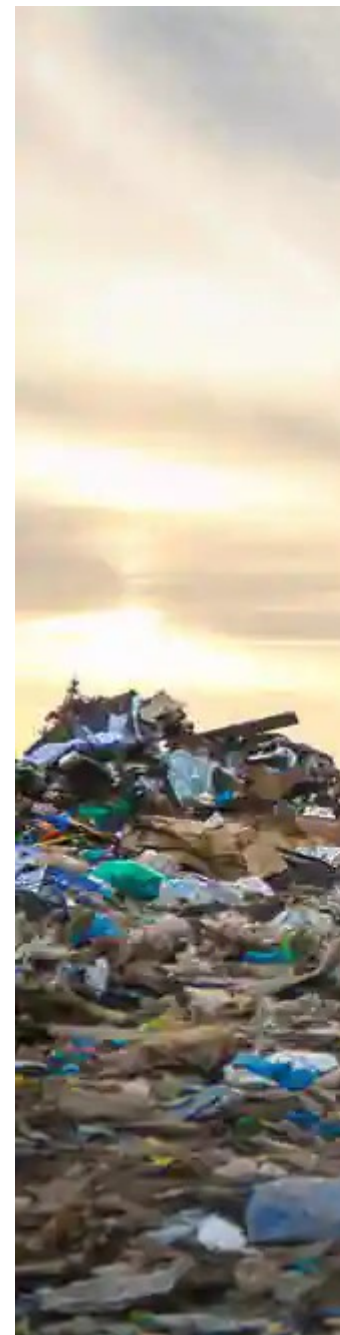
Organisations such as Dalit Adivasi Shakti Adhikar Manch have raised concerns about the State’s indifferent attitude towards the condition of workers engaged in waste collection in India, who mostly belong to Dalit, Adivasi, and minority communities (DASAM, 2022). While Dalits have formed the backbone of this system in both rural and urban areas, increasingly Adivasi communities have also been assimilated into this occupation (Arora, 2018). These workers carry out the important task of ensuring that the waste generated after every production, distribution, and consumption process is dealt with sustainably. However, their contribution is unacknowledged and they are relegated to the lowest end of the societal hierarchy.

The waste management sector in India is part of the informal economy with limited technological innovations, and with caste being the basis of designing the role workers play in the value chain of waste. Studies have also highlighted how this hostile view towards Dalits is the reason why municipal governments have not taken any proactive actions to improve the condition of the informal waste management sector (Chandran et al., 2009 as cited in Kanekal, 2019). This informality was indicated to be the reason why it is challenging to ensure justice for the workers under the existing legal framework. Caste has been indicated to be

the factor that shapes contractualization processes and informality of labour in India (Shruti & Majumdar, 2021).

Further, workers who are engaged in waste management in a particular region are mostly interstate or intrastate migrants, which increases their vulnerabilities at the destination. Their situation is exacerbated because of the adverse impacts of growing urbanisation and economic growth. These workers are poor, earning subsistence wages, and also lacking protection from occupational hazards and long-term health impacts. This informality and precarious nature of the work leads to exploitation and threats to a dignified life and livelihood. Further, they are also at great risk from the adverse impacts of climate change amplified by growing urbanisation and economic growth. Often residing in informal settlements close to dumpsites, with inadequate infrastructure, they have significant exposure to extreme weather events (Oates et al., 2018).

Their position in the caste hierarchy compounds these occupational challenges they face of health hazards, work insecurity, low income and harassment at the hands of civic authorities and citizens. The option to find alternate livelihood opportunities is also limited





and thus the workers are stuck in the cycle of intergenerational poverty (Chengappa, 2013 as cited in Kanekal, 2019).

The gendered aspect of waste management has also been explored by researchers. Around four lakh women are directly engaged in sanitation and waste management work in urban India (Dash, 2023). Studies have been conducted with regard to women waste management workers, especially those engaged in waste picking, and the intersection of gender, socio-economic, and

occupational risks that they face (Bagchi, 2016; Dias & Samson, 2016; Wittmer, 2021).

. As per a study in Bangalore in the 1990s, despite the low wages and health risks, waste picking provided an income source to women from lower castes including those from Scheduled Tribe (ST), Scheduled Caste (SC) and Other Backward Class (OBC). Most women migrated from villages in Tamil Nadu because of marriage, lack of employment opportunities, and drought, among other reasons.

In a study with Dalit women en-



gaged in sanitation labour, Chandvankar (2022) links the Gramscian concept of hegemony to analyse how the caste-based occupation divisions, which were constructed by dominant caste groups using caste ideology, limited the options for Dalit women by assigning them degrading forms of labour such as sanitation work. With privatisation, the issues faced by women waste collectors and sanitation workers have accelerated. This has been highlighted by Wittmer (2023) in her study pertaining to women recyclers (waste

pickers or rag pickers) in Ahmedabad, where she highlights the impact of the efforts to formalise informal recycling labour in India under the Solid Waste Management (SWM) initiatives. She argued that such privatisation efforts have in fact led to exclusion, in the case of women recyclers in Ahmedabad. With privatisation, informal scrap dealers, mostly women, have lost livelihood avenues as they find it difficult to collect and sell waste now. Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA), a central trade union, also found that



waste pickers had to bribe private companies to access transfer stations and landfills. Fifty percent of waste pickers lost their job upon the privatisation of waste picking services by the Delhi municipality (Mistry et al., 2020).

In another study, Wittmer (2022) studied low-income Dalit women recyclers in Ahmedabad and the impact of the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (Clean India Mission - a nationwide campaign initiated by the Government of India), Solid Waste Management Rules, 2016 (2016 Rules), and privatisation and

mechanisation of waste management work by Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation (AMC), on their livelihoods. Wittmer argued that these governance mechanisms were leading to “re-spatializing” and “masculinizing” waste labour in the city. The women found it difficult to access waste, leading to exacerbation of physical and financial burdens and a decline in daily income. Municipal authorities have largely not recognized the existing informal workers, who are relegated to the shadows within the current system (Kaneval, 2019). A study by Fulwani and Chandel (2019) highlighted the high prevalence of occupational health issues such as high blood pressure, cough, nasal irritation, nutritional deficiency, irregular menstruation, anaemia, and eosinophilia amongst women rag pickers in Ahmedabad.

However, there are limited studies available on the involvement of women workers in door-to-door waste collection in urban India. Thus, this study seeks to highlight the challenges faced by women, particularly Adivasi women, at one of the lowest ranks within the informal sector. The extent of their work burden, the arrangement of their employment, wages, conditions of work, safety at the workplace, and their access to public services at the destination of migration are mapped while shedding light on their critical role in the waste value chain.

CHAPTER 3

Regulatory Framework For Waste Management In India

The Union Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change (MoEF&CC) is responsible for SWM in India and the statutory body responsible for monitoring it is the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB). As per Kanekal (2019), this is an institutional challenge as this turns waste management into an environmental pollution issue. The 2016 Rules replaced the earlier rules in place since 2000. All urban areas in India,

including cities and towns, were directed to manage municipal solid waste as prescribed under the rules, and the 2016 update included all settlements and not just Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) (AMC, 2020). The Rules mandate aspects such as segregation at source, handling of sanitary waste, user fees for collection, and promoting composting (Kanekal, 2019). However, the rules do not speak about safeguarding the rights of the workers engaged in waste management work in India and take a mere techno-managerial approach. The waste management sector has been overtaken by public-private partnerships, with increasing control of private entities over the process and access to waste as a resource (Majumdar, 2023). Further, Kanel (2019) highlights how the 2016 Rules are focused towards centralised solutions such

as setting up waste-to-energy plants, and do not promote decentralised approaches to SWM. The rules provide a wide range of choices for the municipalities to set up their waste management system. This has resulted in the contractualization of work to private actors and threatened the security of livelihood for the workers due to the temporal nature of the work (Mistry et al., 2020). Instead of setting up an inclusive system which would give due recognition and protection to the informal workers and integrate them into the formal systems, the rules instead put them in a precarious position.



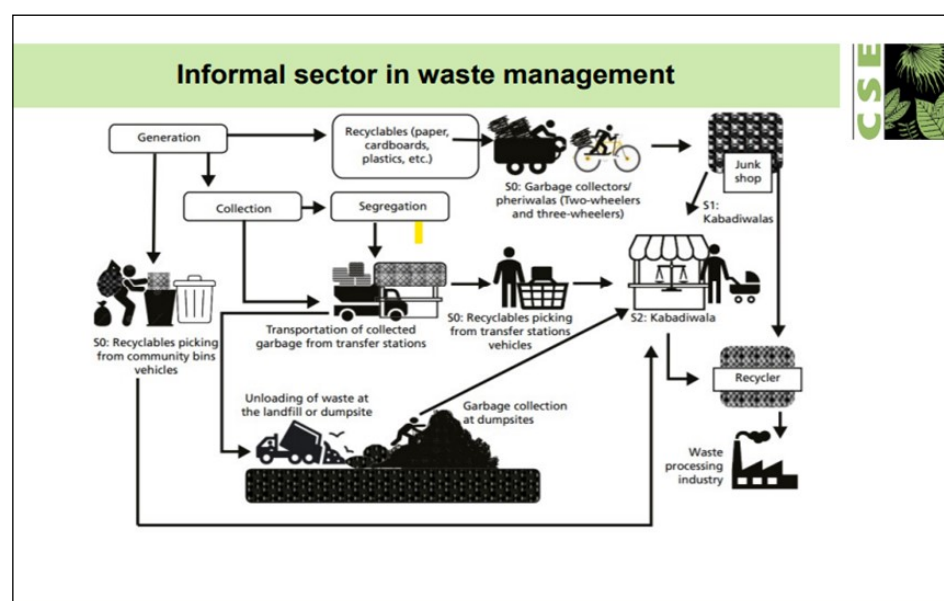
Swachh Bharat Mission launched in 2014, focused on making sanitation a key development priority. The renewed attention given to waste led to the formulation of the 2016 Rules. Sustainability is broadly considered a question of the environment,



with little to no regard for the human element. Harris-White (2015) highlighted that the labour force employed by municipal corporations for waste management work is increasingly male, and women who have worked as manual scavengers witnessed a decline in opportunities. Most of the jobs are based on verbal contracts and can even be termed bonded labour. Of late, with the introduction of various privatisation initiatives, various categories of work-

ers have faced exclusion from this informal system. This exclusion leads to the denial of

Diagram 1 - Depicting informal sector in waste management (Source: Website of Center for Science and Environment)



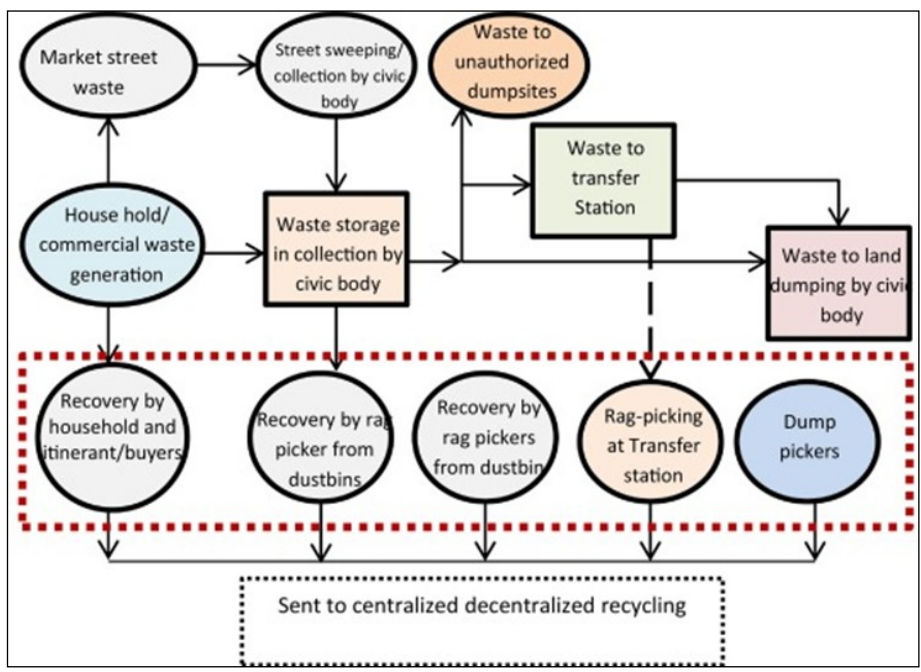
prospects of fair wages and asset ownership (Majumdar, 2023). Rather than recognizing their contribution as informal or self-employed workers in waste management and safeguarding their rights, these policies have led to them losing their livelihood and employment avenues without any alternative prospects.

Value Chain of Waste

One visit to the Pirana landfill in Narol at the fringes of Ahmedabad, with the air filled with smoke and a strong stench, tells the story of waste management in the city. The mounting garbage has been accumulating since the 1980s and is the final destination of solid waste in Ahmedabad. The health hazards of this landfill are felt by the migrant workers residing in the areas around it (Mahanty & Sugathan, 2018). The presence of this landfill at the margins of the city also reflects the reality of the workers who have historically been relegated to the periphery of society because of the notions of caste purity. Consequently, it becomes imperative to highlight the supply chain of this waste and the workers that are engaged at each node of the chain. The supply chain of waste begins at generation, after which comes door-to-door collection, collection from public bins, or spot collection. Un-

til 2020, door-to-door waste collection was followed in 1,863 ULBs in India out of 4,237 ULBs. Segregation of waste at source was reportedly followed in 436 ULBs. There as well, only wet and dry waste is effectively segregated, and biomedical waste such as sanitary napkins, diapers, hair, etc. are not segregated strictly. (Swacch Survekshan, 2020 as cited in Sharma, 2023). The collected waste is segregated then transported to Refuse Transfer Stations (RTS), and from there sent for processing or treatment. There are Material Recovery Facilities for recycling of solid waste. The remaining

Diagram 2 - Depicting value chain of waste (Source: Kumar & Agrawal, 2020)



waste is ultimately disposed of at landfills. In Ahmedabad, the waste collected by the door-to-door waste collection workers is deposited at the transfer stations in each ward and from there to the treatment plants. There are eight transfer stations of about 400 metric ton capacities each, which have been constructed in seven zones. 90 percent of the waste collected by AMC is un-

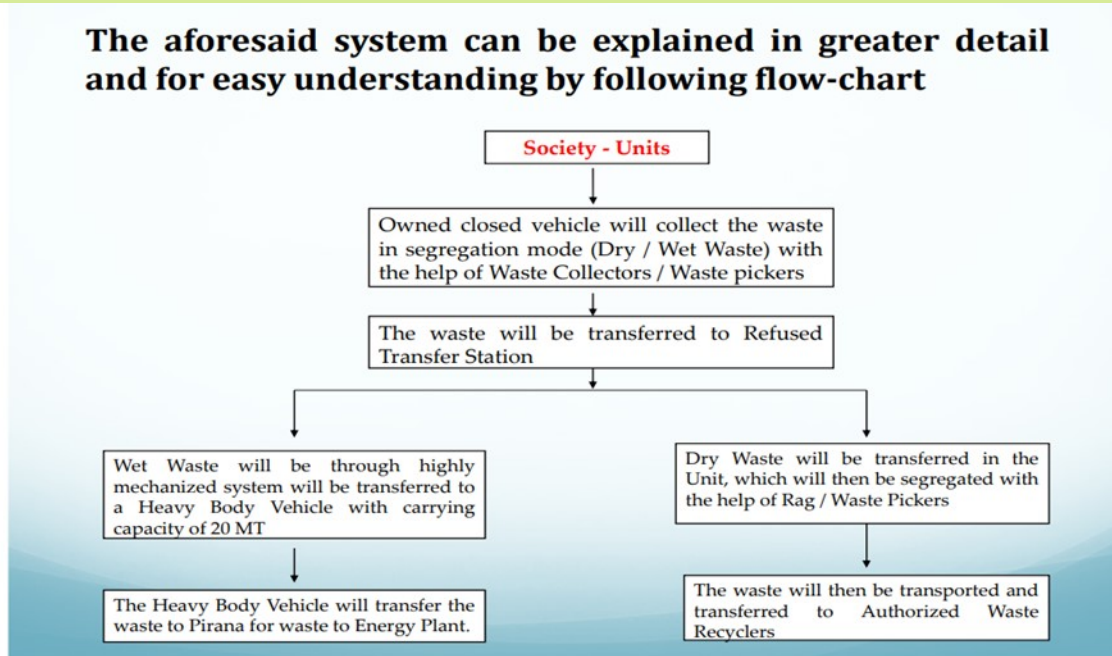


scientifically dumped at Pirana Landfill in Narol which is spread across 207.56 acres and is over 200 metres in height. The landfill has been forming since the 1980s and

currently receives around 2,300 metric tonnes of waste daily, with open burning being carried out (Mahanty & Sugathan, 2018; Oates et al., 2018).

Diagram 3 - Depicting door-to-door waste collection in Ahmedabad (Source: AMC)

The aforesaid system can be explained in greater detail and for easy understanding by following flow-chart



CHAPTER 4

Solid waste management system at the survey locations

Ahmedabad

Ahmedabad's 65 lakh population generates around 4,100 tons of waste on a daily basis and 1,10,667 on a monthly basis, out of which around 60 percent is managed by AMC which is responsible for handling municipal solid waste in the city. The jurisdiction under the AMC is divided into seven zones and 48 wards, covering around 466 square kilometres and a population of approximately 63 lakhs. The SWM staff comprises more than 13,000 workers. There are more than 1,500 vehicles or equipment. Further, the annual budget of the SWM department is around 800 crores (AMC 2020).

In 2008, waste management in the city was privatised with the AMC giving out contracts to private enti-



ties. At this time, some waste pickers lost their jobs as well (Padode, 2022). Door-to-door waste collection in Ahmedabad began in the year 2009 and has been outsourced to private contractors. The contractors in turn employ workers through a subcontracting system who collect the waste from residential units and commercial establishments. The share of the private sector in waste management has increased over the years. SEWA promoted a cooperative of women engaged in waste picking in 2004, which held the contract from AMC to collect waste from 46,000 households. However, with



privatisation, the work was tendered out to large corporations as small or medium-sized cooperatives or traditional waste pickers were not in a position to fulfil the conditions in the tender (SEWA, 2010; Whittmer 2021; Oates et al., 2018). Currently, under the tender a tipping agreement is in place for the collection of segregated waste. Workers collect waste from residential units in the morning and commercial units in the evening. 100 percent of the units are claimed to be covered on all days as per AMC. For door-to-door waste collection, closed-body Hydraulic Euro III vehicles have been de-

ployed within the city boundaries, with different compartments for wet and dry waste. As per the rules, segregated waste is required to be collected from more than 16 lakh residential units and five lakh commercial units, for which AMC collects a daily charge of one rupee and two rupees, respectively, included in the property taxes bill. The private contractors are responsible for drivers, fuel, maintenance, appointing one supervisor per ward, and painting a complaint number on the vehicle. According to a report on the SWM Collection vehicles in Ahmedabad dated March 2019, a total of 1,582

one and three ton Tata ACE and 407 Type Closed body vehicles, with separate compartment for collection of dry and wet waste were purchased in 2015 for daily collection of waste from 48 wards in Ahmedabad. In the East Zone of the city, Om Swachtha Corporation and Jigar Transport Company were indicated to be the vendors holding the contract for door-to-door waste collection.

The collected waste is transferred by the workers to RTS (a total of eight RTS are operating), and subsequently to treatment plants. As per the guidelines, the workers begin the collection process at seven in the morning. Within AMC's jurisdiction, around 1,700 metric tons of solid waste is collected through this method and the entire process is monitored. AMC claims that this entire process is mechanised, ensuring that the waste is physically handled only once. Thus, it is imperative to consider the conditions and experiences of the workers who come in contact with the waste daily. The Material Recovery Facility (MRF) is also claimed to be automated, with one MRF at each RTS. The RTS are constructed by AMC and operated by agencies who have received Operations and Maintenance contracts from the corporation. At the RTS, 600 women are hired to segregate the dry waste and transfer it to the MRF for processing, and around 2,000 rag pickers are indicated to be integrated into this system. The residual waste is dumped at the Pirana Dump Site, spread across 84 acres and another

dump site at Bopal-Ghuma (AMC, 2020).

Information and Communication Technology has been deployed to monitor the movement of the vehicles, through Global Positioning System (GPS) and Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) readers. The GPS monitoring is carried out through the 'Ecoskipper' application' developed by Infinium Solutions Private Limited.

Around 50 percent of the entire waste in Ahmedabad is collected from door-to-door collection and street sweeping exercises (AMC, 2020).

Gandhinagar

The Gandhinagar Municipal Corporation's (GMC) Sanitation and Environment departments are responsible for SWM in the capital city. As per GMC's website, around 95 metric tonnes per day of solid waste, including 10 metric tonnes construction and debris waste is generated daily, which is collected,





transported, treated, and disposed according to SWM Rules, 2016. The door-to-door waste collection work began in Gandhinagar in 2013, under which garbage is collected from residential, commercial, and institutional units and from public areas. Like Ahmedabad and Surat, the collection work is undertaken in closed vehicles with separate compartments for dry, wet, and hazardous waste. Around 50 RFID and GPS enabled vehicles were indicated to be deployed, covering 100 percent of the residential and commercial units on a daily basis. The collected waste is transported to RTS. Further, there are three MRFs for sorting and seg-

regating the waste. As per a report on the government's Smart City portal dated July 2019, Gandhinagar reported door-to-door waste collection from two zones and seven wards, with 43,295 households and establishments covered. GMC reported that segregation at source was carried out at 100 percent of the units. In Zone 2, where the *basti* surveyed during the study is located, Swachhata Corporation was the vendor appointed by the GMC for door-to-door waste collection work.

Surat

With a population of 46 lakhs (according to 2011 census) spread across nine zones and 30 wards, Su-



Name of Transfer station	Zone
Bhatar	South west
Katargam	North & Central (Part)
Varachha	East
Anjana	South-East
Pal	West
Bhestan	South
Kosad	North-East-West
Dindoli	South-East

rat city generated over 2,600 metric tonnes of MSW on an average per day in October 2023 as per Surat Municipal Corporation's official website. Out of this, 2,114 metric tonnes or 78 percent of the total MSW was collected through door-to-door garbage collection. SMC's SWM Department, which falls under the health domain, is responsible for handling solid waste in the city. The waste management takes place in three phases. The primary collection and transportation includes MSW collected through sweeping, scraping and brushing activity, hotel-kitchen waste, etc. Door-to-door waste collection is included in this phase. Door-to-door collection was started in 2004 in the city. Various agencies have been engaged for door-to-door

collection of MSW across zones. Secondary transportation involves the transportation of MSW collected through primary transportation to transfer stations from where it is eventually transported to Khajod landfill site. According to SMC's website, there are eight transfer stations in the city and all are operational.

SMC's website runs a portal that allows citizens to access the live tracking of vehicles collecting waste including the vehicles engaged in door-to-door collection. According to the portal, 643 vehicles are engaged in door-to-door waste collection as of November, 2023

CHAPTER 5

Methodology

The study is based on field research conducted in three cities of Gujarat - Ahmedabad, Gandhinagar, and Surat. Since the objective of the study was to understand the conditions of Adivasi women workers engaged in door-to-door waste collection, the workers that were engaged with, largely belong to this cohort. The fieldwork involved a household survey using structured questionnaires with 196 worker families, 100 in the twin cities of Gandhinagar and Ahmedabad and 96 in Surat, between August 2023 and October 2023. The team first approached some workers while they were working to learn where they lived; and later employed a snowball sampling method to identify more bastis where door-to-door waste collection workers were residing. Thereafter, meetings were held at the



bastis to seek consent for the study. The worker families were informed about the intent and scope of the study and were assured of confidentiality. Those who consented to participate were surveyed. The data collection was complemented by four Focus Group Discussions which were conducted with workers residing in four separate bastis in the cities. The location of the *bastis* has not been revealed to maintain anonymity. Along with this, insights in the report are based on field observations and discussions with the waste collector community. Almost all workers surveyed are Adivasi migrants from Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh, generally working in pairs, with the husband driving the door-to-door waste collection vehicle, and the woman collecting and segregating

the waste.

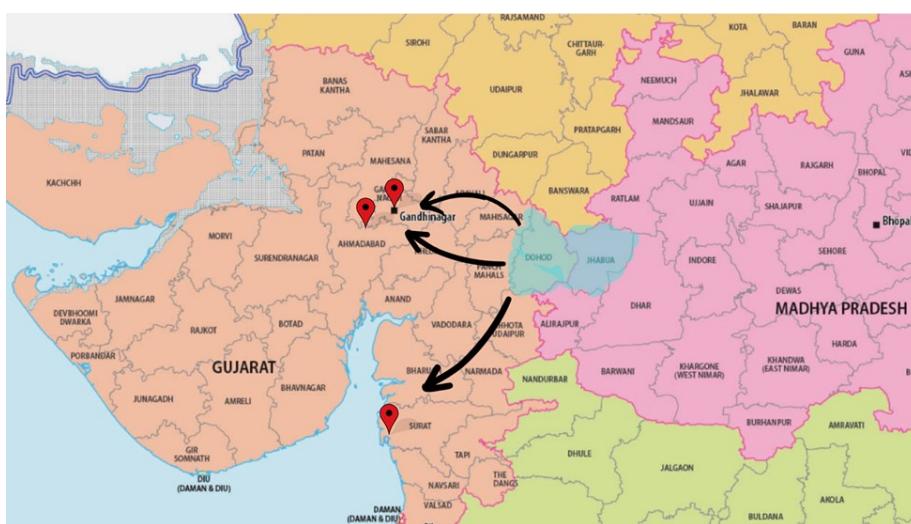
Before embarking on the field research, extensive literature review and secondary data analysis was undertaken to understand the processes involved in waste management, the situation in the cities covered under the study, and the role of gender, caste, tribal, and migrant identity in shaping labour relations within the waste management sector in India.

The study provides an understanding of the demographic profile of the workers engaged in door-to-door waste management work in Ahmedabad, Gandhinagar, and Surat, along with their wages, working and living conditions, and social security benefits. The focus of the study is on the specific challenges faced by Adivasi women who migrate with their husbands and perform a critical component of the work by collecting and segregating the waste, and the double burdens of waste collection work and domestic work that they face while navigating life in the city. The intersection of their gender and tribal identity is also explored. The politics of migration, gender and tribal identity, intertwined with the unorganised nature of the waste management workforce highlights the need for this study. Action-based research has been indicated to be one of the reasons behind progressive changes in the trajectory of SWM rules in India and other policy initiatives (Sharma, 2023). Thus, the aim is to use the findings of this study to advocate for stronger measures to safeguard the interests of the migrant workers engaged in the SWM sector.

CHAPTER 6

Key Findings And Analysis

Migration pattern and contractual arrangement



Map 1 - Migration corridor from Dahod and Jabhua to Ahmedabad, Gandhinagar, and Surat

A large proportion of the labour force engaged in SWM in Gujarat are migrants from Jhabua, Madhya Pradesh (Sreevatsan, 2020). Jhabua is a tribal district in western Madhya Pradesh (MP), where seasonal migration is very high because the tribal land holdings are small and not productive enough to yield adequate crop for survival. Mainly, cotton, maize and millets are grown in the region on small landholdings. Further, the forest cover in the region is



also declining, affecting the livelihood of the tribal population which gets embroiled in debt traps involving private lenders. The sixth schedule of the Indian Constitution related to the administration of tribal areas is not applicable in the state (Press Trust of India , 2023). Workers from Jhabua would earlier migrate intra-state to work as agriculture labourers in MP, however, after mechanisation within the agriculture sector, they were forced to take up construction work in other cities states such as Gujarat (Yadav, 2020). The other region from where workers predominantly migrate to Ahmedabad,

Surat, and Gandhinagar is Dahod, Gujarat. Like Jhabua, this region is also dominated by the Bhil tribe and the livelihood conditions are similar as in Jhabua (Ramachandran, 2023). Amongst the sampled population of 196 respondents across the three cities, 142 families i.e. 72 percent were from Jhabua district, and 42 families i.e. 21 percent were from Dahod district. On an average, workers stay at the destination of work for around 10 months, with the remaining two months spent at their source village.

Highlighting the role of existing networks in the way workers are re-

Chart 1 - Representing source state of respondents

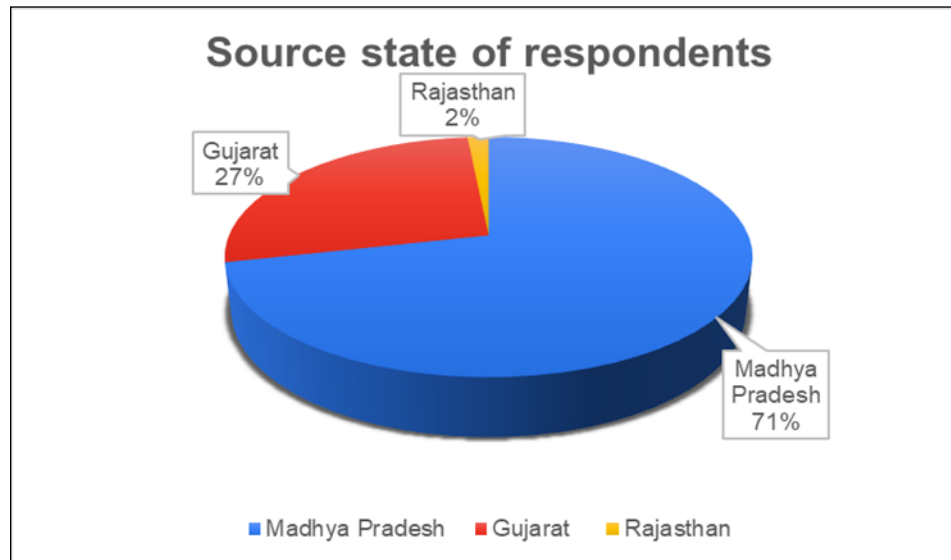
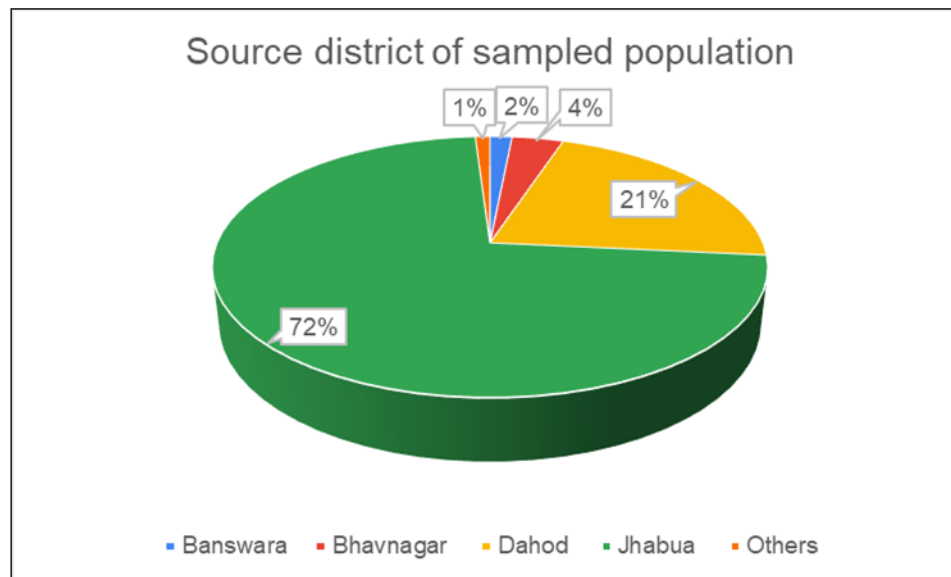


Chart 2 - Representing source district of respondents



cruited into door-to-door waste collection work, the workers in one of the *bastis* explained that they arrived in Gandhinagar from Dahod through a *mukaddam* with whom they came in contact at their village. They got to know of the work through information received from relatives and friends in the village who migrated for this work. The *mukaddam* gathered the workers and facilitated their move into this work. The workers shared that most of

them were initially engaged in construction work and gradually went into door-to-door waste collection. Some of the workers shared that they came together from the village around four to five months back to engage in this work for the first time. Workers at a *basti* in Ahmedabad indicated a similar pattern of migration. They were told about the work by an acquaintance who was involved in this work, and informed others in the village. The

Chart 3 - Depicting age range of respondents

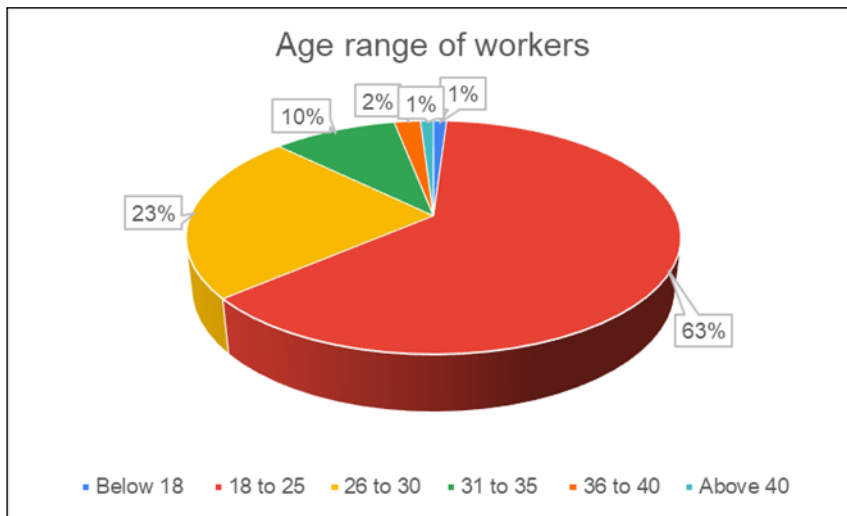
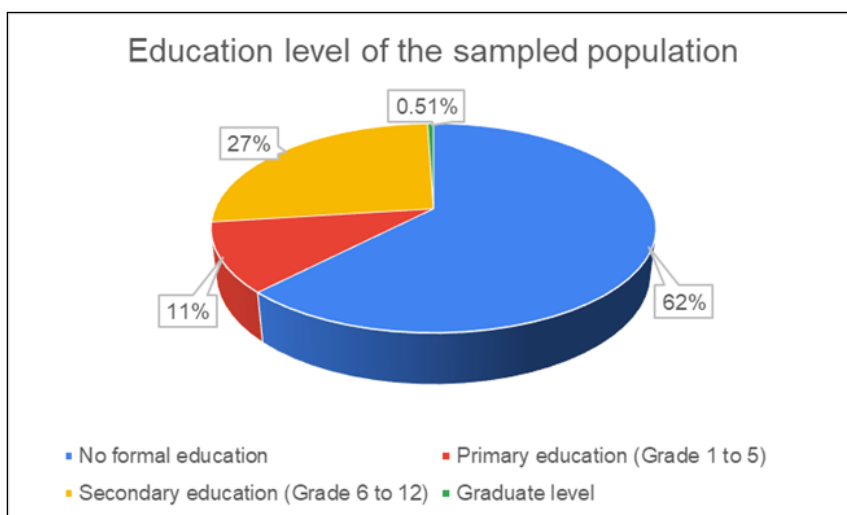


Chart 4 - Representing education level of respondents



workers shared that they had to leave their tribal hamlets behind to work in such conditions in the city because of livelihood insecurities and financial challenges in their villages. It is also pertinent to note that 63 percent of the sampled population is 18 to 25 years old, and around 62 percent of the sampled population has not received any formal education.

The workers at the Gandhinagar *basti* shared that currently, Swachta Corporation holds the door-to-door

waste collection contract from GMC for the area, and the workers report to the company's supervisor. Before this, there was another company which held the contract and had employed workers through their own contacts. Similarly, these workers were also earlier engaged by some other entity in another location. The workers added that while they are in contact with the supervisor, no official or representative from the company visits them at the *basti* for train-



ing or to monitor their work. The workers were not completely aware of whether there were any layers of entities between the contracting entity and the worker. However, they stated that there was a bigger contractor above the sub-contractor that hired them, thus indicating a chain of contractors between the workers and the principal employer, that is, the state. But they were not aware of their names or had any interaction with them.

At one of the *bastis* in Ahmedabad, the workers shared that the private companies which held the contract for door-to-door waste collec-

tion were Jigar Transport Company and Om Swacchta Corporation. The sub-contractor who hired them provided them with the land to build their hutments or *jhuggis* and is in contact with them over the phone and also visits at times. He stays in Naroda in Ahmedabad, and is also engaged in the waste management sector, but drives a “bigger vehicle”. On being asked, the workers shared that they did not sign any written contract before engaging in this work, and were not informed of any terms or conditions beforehand. Initially, they faced issues while navigating their way in the city, as the



routes were too long to remember. However, over time they have managed to figure out the localities given the nature of their work which involves riding in the vehicle and collecting waste from the zone assigned to them. Most of the rules and processes were learned or understood on the job.

According to the workers at one of the *bastis* with around 25 families, who migrated from a village in Jhabua, Madhya Pradesh, their *thekedar* or contractor is from their neighbouring village and still stays there. He only facilitates their movement from the village to the destina-

tion and does not visit the destination often. While the workers' labour is at the destination, the contractor earns by merely arranging the contract. The workers stated that they would contact this contractor in case their money got stuck or if they faced any challenges at the destination, as they did not know who else to reach out to. They also shared that the contractor's relative is also engaged in door-to-door waste collection work and stays with them in their *basti*. They believed that he would be able to facilitate any interaction required with the contractor. The relative of the contractor, *Rajubhai* (name changed) shared that he had earlier worked in the shipping sector in Vapi. His elder brother was engaged in door-to-door waste collection work in Agra, Uttar Pradesh. *Rajubhai* came to Ahmedabad when he was quite young and got in touch with the contractor responsible for hiring for this work. Later, he connected with this contractor and came to Gandhinagar. He shared that such an arrangement exists in another *basti* in Gandhinagar, where around 25 workers are staying with another relative of the contractor who is also working and staying with the workers. However, he was not able to shed light on how many such contractors exist and the layers of subcontracting that are in place.

At a *basti* in Surat, workers said that some workers migrated a few months back when they were approached by *Balabhai* (name changed) from their village who was then working as a driver with Om

Swacchata Corporation, while some were already working with him at Om Swacchata Corporation. After coming to Surat, workers along with Balabhai (who is now the supervisor) started working with Jigar Transport Company, and set up temporary shelters on private land, a few days back. Their work involves picking up waste from open garbage dumping spots. Balabhai is in-charge of managing 9-10 vehicles and also drives one, if any of the drivers is on leave. Upon asking, he said that he came into this work as his brother was a supervisor with Om Swacchata Corporation, highlighting the role of rural networks in the recruitment of workers. Balabhai said that the salary of the supervisors is based on the

through their existing networks back in the villages. He also shared that additional workers from the villages were set to join after Diwali and that he would be managing an increased number of vehicles then. Workers residing at another *basti* in Surat also reiterated that they came to know about this work through their friends and relatives who were already working. A few workers were already working in waste management at places like Jamnagar and Rajkot, but migrated to Surat in search of better wages.

Transition into waste management work

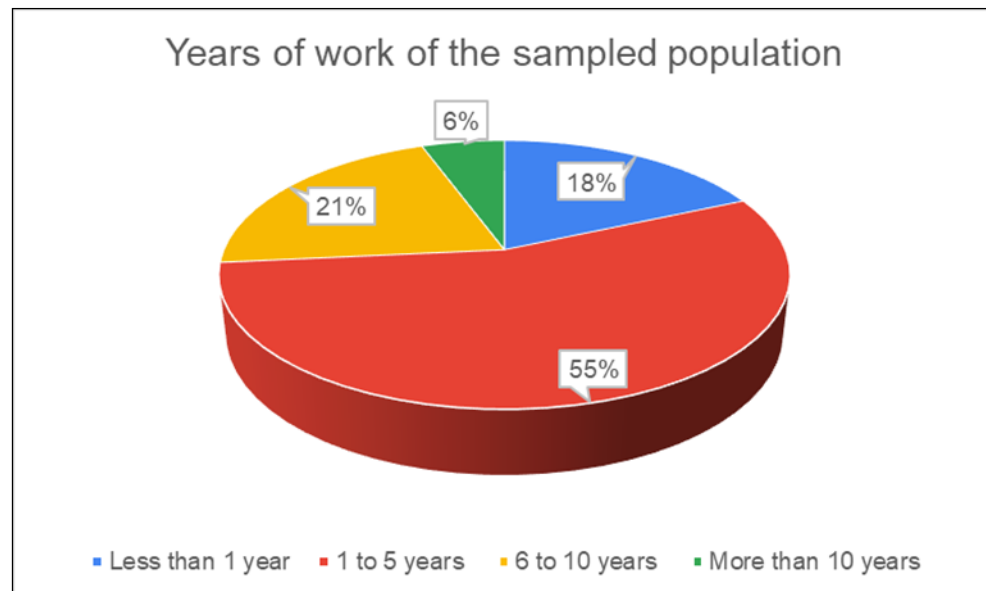


Chart 5 - Representing years of work of respondents

number of vehicles under his supervision. “*Jitna jyada log, utna jyada gadi denge, utna jyada paisa milega*”, thus the recruitment of workers acts as an incentive for the supervisors who then recruit workers

Around 55 percent of the sampled population entered this work in the last one to five years, indicating that this is a new area of work for Adivasis migrating to Gujarat. Workers at a *basti* in Ahmedabad shared

that they entered the waste management sector around two to three years back, and before that, they were working at their smallholdings in the village. A worker shared that at the time he would seasonally migrate to Bharuch, a city in Gujarat, to work as a driver and then go back to the village. Others in the village would also go to towns and cities to work as construction workers or drivers for a few months and then migrate back. The reason for getting into door-to-door waste collection work was indicated to be the stream of regular salary they would receive under the contract and the possibility of earning a daily income through the sale of scrap. A study by Sannabhadti (2019) indicated that

of waste generated in these complexes.

The workers also shared that this work is not as physically taxing as construction work, which requires them to climb heights with heavy loads of bricks and other construction materials. The possibility of getting injured was also higher in construction labour. Further, while seeking work at the labour nakas, the workers were not sure where they would be 'picked up' for work and oftentimes the distance of the workplace and their *basti* were far away, and the women were sent to a different location. In comparison, with door-to-door waste collection, they have a specific route to cover daily, there is less uncertainty, and



high-rise gated complexes in cities do not have the space to store waste or sell it directly to *kabadiwalas*. This allows door-to-door waste collectors to acquire more waste to sell as scrap, given the large quantities

the couple can work together and keep the children with them without fearing for their safety. According to the workers at the *basti* in Gandhinagar, in this work, they were able to save their monthly salary for contin-

gencies such as medical expenses or periods when they are looking for work. They manage their day-to-day expenses by selling the *bangar* or scrap. The workers are engaged for a period of five years under the tender held by the contracting entity from the municipal corporation.

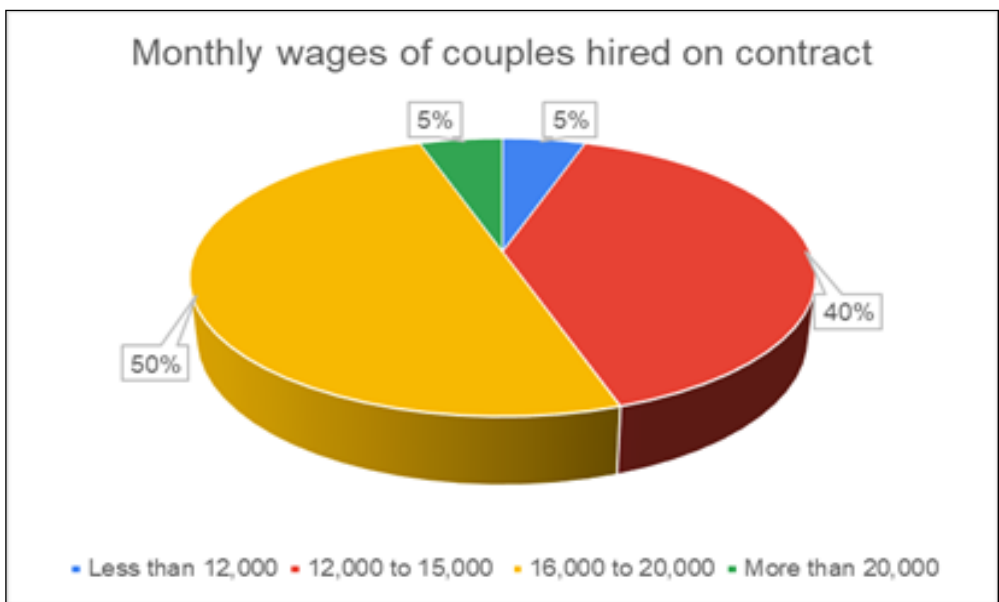
According to some workers at a *basti* in Surat, the transition happened during the pandemic enforced lockdown in 2020. Workers were engaged in construction work

thaa tab, par kachra uthane ka kaam chal raha thaa, voh kabhi band nahi hoga”.

Wages and Social Security

Since the workers are not municipal employees, but independent contract workers, they face specific challenges when it comes to wages and social security benefits.

Chart 6 - Representing monthly wages of couples hired on contract



at cities like Ahmedabad, Surat and Vadodara. As the lockdown began, all construction activity came to a halt and no other work was available. However, this line of work suddenly became available as they were contacted by their relatives who were already working in door-to-door garbage collection. Workers expressed that though everything was closed, waste collection was going on - “*sab kuch band*

These workers are hired in pairs, majorly consisting of a husband and wife. Amongst those working in pairs, around 90 percent were earning monthly wages of around Rs 12,000 to 20,000. The range was depending on the weight of the waste collected in some cases. This comes out to be around Rs 6,000 to 10,000 per person, or Rs 200 to 333 per day for 30 days of work, which is below the minimum wage.



The workers at Gandhinagar *basti* indicated that they receive their pay on the 15th or 16th day of each month. While the workers at the *basti* in Ahmedabad shared that the workers who are under Om Swachatha Corporation receive their pay every two months and those with Jigar Transport Company receive monthly salary. The workers at this *basti* indicated that while some of them receive a fixed compensation, some receive an amount based on the weight of the waste collected. It is not a fixed amount and can fluctuate between Rs 15,000 and 20,000 every month. If the weight is more, then they receive more. A worker shared that at times some people earned only Rs 5,000 to

7,000 in a month despite putting in the same hours of work.

To supplement the low monthly pay, they also undertake extra work of sorting out the collected garbage and selling the scrap to wholesalers to get a daily income of around Rs 150 to 400, which is known as *bhangar*. This additional income helps them sustain their daily living expenses. Some of the workers indicated that while they receive the salary in their bank accounts, the amount is withdrawn by the supervisor and cash is handed over to the worker families. The ATM card and passbook of the workers are held by the supervisor. This creates a situation wherein the supervisor can deduct some amount in the name of

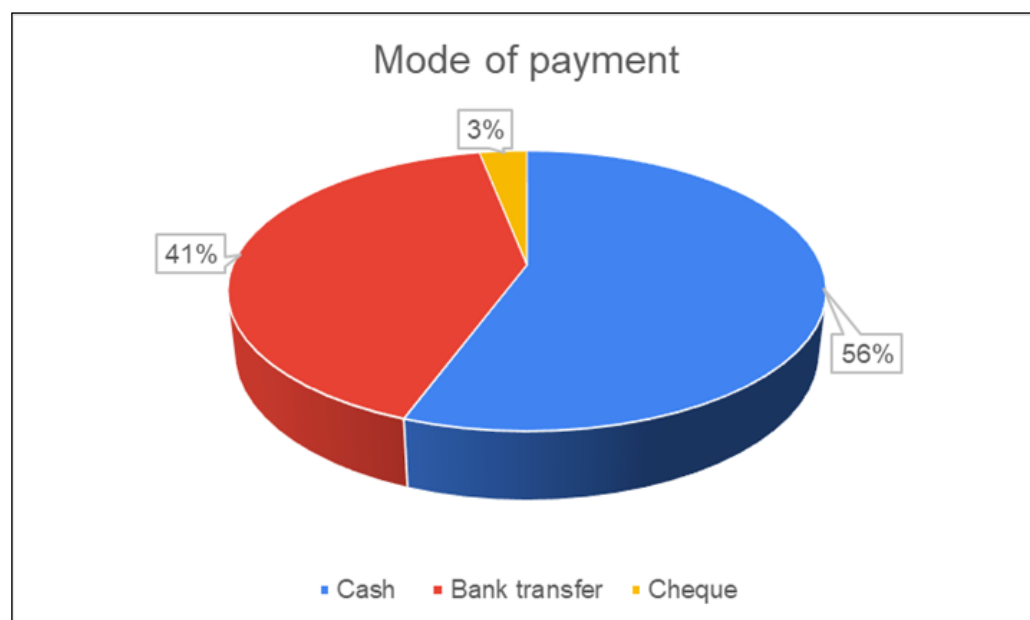
provident fund and hand over the remaining cash to the workers. Fifty six percent of the workers indicated that they were receiving money directly in cash, while 41 percent shared that it was being deposited in their accounts first and later being given to them in cash.

Similar situations were found at bastis in Surat. At one of the bastis, the passbooks and ATM Cards of the workers have been withheld - "*Bass Aadhar aur PAN Card diya hai hume, baki supervisor ne rakh liya hai*". All documents have been withheld, except for the Aadhar Card and PAN Card. Across Surat, it was found that workers in this basti were being paid the least; Rs 5,500 for the waste collector and Rs 7,000 for the driver. Also, salaries for the last six months were pending and were not paid to the workers. "*Kachra bechke kharcha nikal lete hai*"- workers expressed that they were able to meet

their daily expenses by selling the scrap. It is important to note that it is obligatory for the workers in Surat to sell the scrap at the transfer stations only. Workers said that if someone is seen selling the scrap "outside", then they are removed from the work immediately. A supervisor formerly working with Om Swachatha Corporation claimed that the company pays Rs 22,500 per vehicle, i.e, for three workers (one driver, two helpers). But since the documents are withheld, supervisors pay them only Rs 18,500 in cash.

During discussions it emerged that some of the workers were told that provident fund was being deposited in their name, hence an amount of Rs 1,000 to 2,000 was being deducted from the cash handed over to them each month. However, the workers shared that the contractors or supervisor had not provided any account number to them

Chart 7 - Representing mode of payment to workers



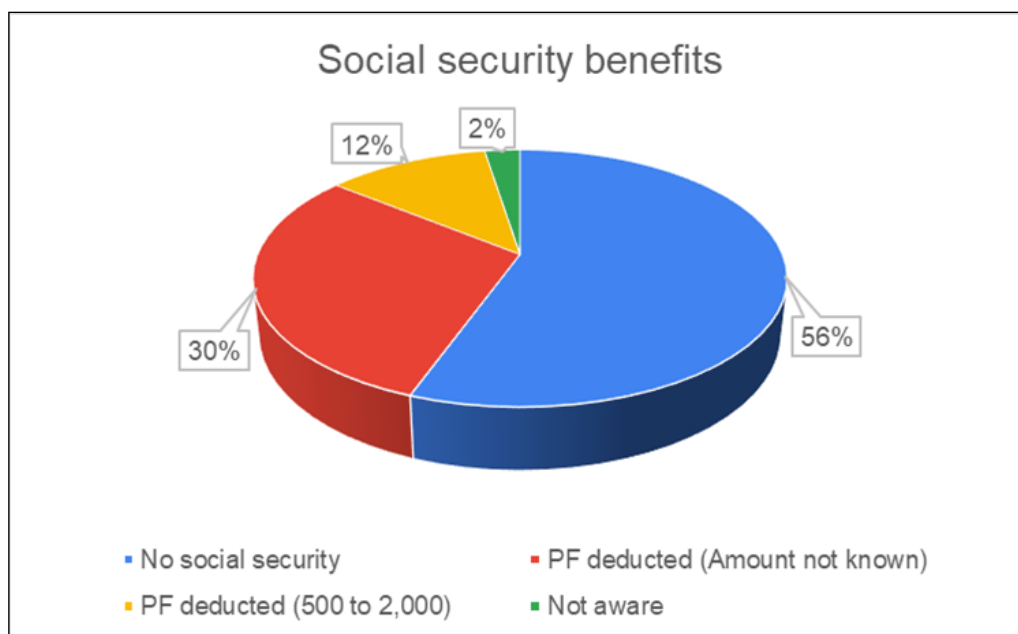
through which they can confirm if the provident fund is being deducted and how much balance has accumulated in their account. Around 56 percent of the respondents shared that no social security benefits were being provided to them. While 30 percent indicated that they were told about provident funds being deducted, however, they were not aware of the amount nor were they provided with any account number or details for the same. Around 12 percent of the sampled population shared that they were told provident fund in the range of Rs 500 to 2,000 was being deposited in their name.

On being asked if they felt the wage was sufficient for their family, one of the workers from Jhabua, MP opined that it is enough for them to manage the one meal a day that they cook. They can give

some money at home as well when they go back during festivals. Workers at the Ahmedabad *basti* shared that they have to somehow sustain in the city with this amount and they do not believe it is sufficient for the value of their labour. A woman from Jhabua, MP added that given the importance and labour involved in this work, they should get at least Rs 50,000 every month. She shared that given the conditions under which they work and the insufficient pay, they do not even get to eat all meals properly - “*Din mein roti bhi nahi khaate hein. Sirf paani peete rehte hein*” (We do not eat in the afternoon, just keep drinking water to fill our stomachs). Workers at the Gandhinagar *basti* reiterated that they have to survive on one meal a day.

The workers at the Ahmedabad *basti* also highlighted that in case

Chart 8 - Representing social security benefits received by respondents



the tyre of the vehicle gets punctured or the clutch plate gets ruined, the expense to get that fixed is also borne by the workers. The company or the contractor does not pay for that and only gives the amount for diesel. The workers expressed that they suspect that the amount for this comes from the government, but does not reach them. Further, if they get into an accident, the blame is entirely on the worker. The expense to procure the equipment for announcing that the waste collection vehicle has arrived - including the microphone, tape, and whistle, is also borne by the workers. The company has only provided the vehicle.

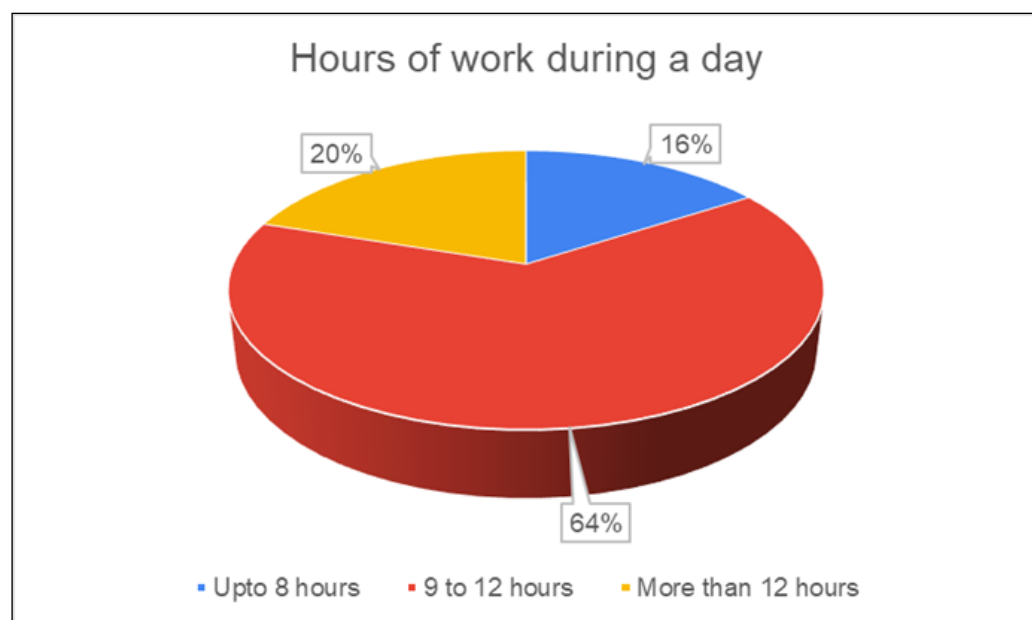
The workers further opined that had they been directly employed by the government, at least they would have received job security and social security benefits such as healthcare, insurance, and pension. A worker expressed that in a private contract, there is no accountability of the em-

ployer to ensure their rights are safeguarded. In a government job, there is secure employment and a surety that in the future their family and children will have something to stay afloat in case anything happens to the worker and can have a secure future.

Working conditions and occupational health and safety hazards

Workers from Jhabua, MP residing at a *basti* in Ahmedabad shared that some of them leave at 4 AM for work, while some go around 5-6 AM depending on the area they have to cover. Often, the duty extends to around 12 hours. They prefer not to rest during the day as continuous work would enable them to come back to the *basti* on time. Amongst the sampled population, average

Chart 9 - Depicting hours of work during a day

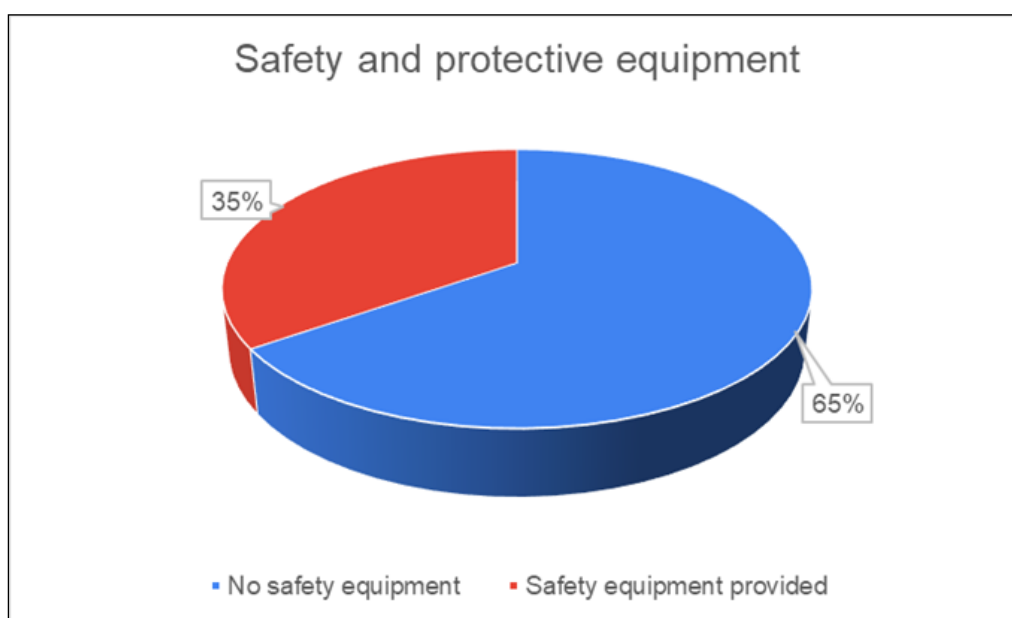


length of the work-day was indicated to be approximately 11 hours, with around 85 percent indicating that their work day extends beyond eight hours. Workers shared that they do not get any leave during the week and if they take leave to travel back home during festivals, they do not get a salary for that time and have to keep a replacement to carry on the work in their absence.

The majority of the workers surveyed indicated that they were working without any protective gear, such as gloves, masks, or boots. Of the sampled population, around 65 percent indicated that they were not provided with any safety equipment, while the remaining 35 percent indicated having received equipment such as uniform, gloves, boots, mask, and soap. Women at the *bastis* in Gandhinagar and Ahmedabad shared that sometimes their hands get pricked by syringes, needles, and glass. They opined that people do

not have a sense of how to dispose of these things. Most of this waste is directly handled by women, putting them in a vulnerable position. To sort the waste, they have to keep a stick with them to avoid touching the waste directly as much as possible, however, it becomes inevitable. Some of the women shared that at times people throw waste after four to five days of stocking it up, which increases the stench, making it difficult for them to work and also exposing them to ill health. Further, the gloves that the workers were provided with were made of cloth and were of inferior quality and ill-fitting. They used it during the initial days, however, it was cumbersome as wet waste would ruin the glove and make it difficult to work while wearing them. Because of this reason, no one wears gloves during waste collection and segregation. They felt that rubber gloves would have been better. The workers were

Chart 10 - Representing safety provisions to respondents



given masks as well however it was uncomfortable to continue wearing given the weather conditions. One worker shared that they were given only one mask, which was disposable and could not be reused. A worker said, “*diya tha suraksha ke liye, phir photo kheech ke chale gaye*” (Yes, they gave things to us for safety. But they took a photo and then went away). Workers in the Ahmedabad *basti* also shared that they received some safety gear initially, including gloves and masks, but it was not feasible to use them and after they got ruined because of initial use it was not replenished by the company. Further, the company provided a uniform to them, for which they asked for a charge from the workers. Around 98 percent of the 196 workers surveyed shared that they did not receive any training for this work and had to learn all the skills on their own along with how to ensure their own safety.

Workers indicated that the work has often led to them falling sick, which increases their medical expenses. Because of the inefficiency of the public health system and poor quality of care, they have to visit private facilities which increases their out-of-pocket expenses. One of the women workers shared that she visited a hospital because of high fever and body pain and was prescribed an injection which cost Rs 600. It is not possible for them to avoid falling sick with this work where they constantly come in contact with toxic waste. High fever, stomach infections, skin issues, and breathing is-

sues are common ailments that they suffer from. Further, their living condition also puts them in a vulnerable position. Caring for their health and well-being given their circumstances is not something they have scope to prioritise. Given the low wages and time constraints, they only have one proper meal a day which does not help them in fulfilling the nutritional and caloric requirements. They did not receive any health insurance or social security benefits and had to arrange for their own healthcare costs. The workers shared that in the last year, only one health camp had been organised at their *basti*, where one doctor came to cater to around 250 families. The workers shared that the effects of these issues might be visible over time and not immediately. “*Bimaar toh hona hi hai. Abhi pata nahi chalega.*” (There are bound to be health issues, which might be visible over time).

Specific challenges faced by women waste collectors

Women workers engaged in door-to-door waste collection work experience the dual burden of domestic work and the task of collection and sorting of waste that they undertake, while their husbands drive the vehicle. Despite undertaking these critical tasks, women are rendered invisible as the sub-contractors hire pairs of husband and wife with all dealings



happening in the name of the husband and the women do not receive wages directly. This also reflects the gendered bias in perceiving work wherein the work of driving heavy vehicles is looked at as “skilled” and that of collecting and sorting waste is relegated to “unskilled” labour.

Most often, the workers are accompanied by their children under the age of four as their families ask them to take them along. The older children stay back at the source location for education. The children at the destination, given the lack of Anganwadi or schools, accompany the parents in the vehicle. Although the women expressed that taking the

children in the vehicle for this work is easier than carrying them to construction sites, there is still the fear of contracting diseases given the proximity to toxic waste. However, they cannot be left back in the *basti* as dogs might bite them if they are left on their own in the open. The workers were also told by supervisors to not take the children with them in the vehicle, but they did not have other options as no Anganwadi or schooling facility was provided. Workers at the *basti* in Ahmedabad shared that if an Anganwadi is arranged for their children with a trusted person ensuring the safety and nutrition of the children, they



would prefer to leave their children there. Only two out of the 196 workers surveyed indicated any form of maternity benefits being received.

The work of sorting waste to collect the scrap is undertaken by women while the man drives the vehicle. This work is essential as it earns them the daily amount by selling the *bangar*. During this process, often the women end up hurting their hands because

of the presence of glass, blades, or syringes and needles in the waste. Even dealing with food waste is done by women by hand, and at times the waste is four to five days old, making the stench unbearable. On being asked what they do if they have to use a toilet during the day while they are out collecting waste, women workers in the Ahmedabad *basti* shared that they do not have access to toilets on the way as there are hardly any functional public toilets and they are not allowed to use the toilets in the societies, barring a few societies which provide them access to a toilet if required. Consequently,

in a majority of cases they have to relieve themselves in the open.

During conversations with the women workers, women at the *bastis* shared that they have to get up at 4 AM every day. In the morning, after filling up the water from the common tap, they make tea for the family and they leave for work around 6 AM. Some women shared that since they have to cover longer distances, they are not even able to make tea in the morning and have to drink tea and eat something from the shops outside. Each van covers around five societies on average. Some might have more to cover and it takes them longer. The men drive the vehicle and the women get off and fill the vehicle with the waste collected from each house. When the waste is not collected in one place, the process of walking to each house to collect the waste gets tiring for them. At shopping malls and larger housing societies, the waste is kept outside in big bins. The housekeeping staff hired by these societies collects the waste from each house and deposits it in the common bin. However, in other localities, waste has to be collected from each house. After the collection of waste, the women segregate the waste in the vehicle, sometimes while the vehicle is moving.

One of the women workers shared that some households even dispose of sand and other heavy materials as waste, which they have to collect. It is physically challenging. Another challenge is to pick up hygiene products such as sanitary napkins and diapers - contaminated with blood, urine, and faeces, which



are often not disposed of properly. In the vehicles provided to the workers, there is a bucket that hangs behind for sanitary waste. However, according to the workers, it fell off when the vehicle was in motion. Hence, the sanitary waste also goes into the same compartment as the other waste.

After reaching home from work, the women carry out the other tasks of cooking, cleaning, tending to the children, and washing the clothes and utensils. They sleep around 11 at night. *“Humein aaram se baithne ka koi time nahi milta. Aadat padh gayi hai toh karte rehte hein”* (We do not get any time to rest. We are used

to it so keep going on). On an average, the women who were part of the sampled population indicated to be spending two to three hours on domestic work.

Harassment and stigma faced by workers

The prescriptions of caste upheld on the notion of purity and pollution have stigmatised the work of waste-pickers, who are generally Dalits or Tribals. Thus, along with the stigma associated with the work they also

face caste-based discrimination (Kornberg, 2019; Ranganathan, 2022; Sreenath, 2019, as cited in Wittmer, 2021). A study by Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) on waste workers highlighted that 47 percent of the waste workers indicated harassment on the job as one of the most affecting issues hampering their work (Chadha, 2020; also see Wittmer, 2021).

Discussions with the workers indicated more instances of discrimination in their interactions with the residents of the houses from where they collected waste rather than in their interactions with the contractors, supervisors, or corporation officials. Harris-White (2015) writes about discrimination being faced by waste management workers as a result of the realities of their work, and not necessarily the ascribed group-based identity. This is visible concerning the door-to-door waste collection workers who form a part of this study. Belonging to the ST communities who have historically not been engaged in waste management work, the discrimination they face during their interaction with the urban residents they encounter daily seems to be a product of the nature of their work which relegates them to an inferior position in the social hierarchy. Not just at the place of work, workers also spoke about experiencing this discrimination among their communities at their source villages. People in their villages who are not as financially vulnerable criticise them for picking up this work. While the material and social



conditions faced because of their group-based identity are leading them to the work of waste, the individual discrimination they experience on a day-to-day basis is enhanced because of the conditions of the work and not merely because of their tribal identity.

On speaking about the reasons for moving to this work, despite the stigma attached to it, women workers from Jhabua district, Madhya Pradesh shared that construction work was more laborious and risky as compared to door-to-door waste collection. Further, because of the daily income they can earn by selling scrap, the monthly salary received can be saved, which is not possible in the daily wage work in the construc-

(Chadha, 2020; also see, Wittmer, 2021)



tion sector. The women further shared that taking their toddlers to the nakas and construction site was proving to be challenging as compared to taking them in the vehicle for waste collection work. They found this work to be more feasible physically as compared to construction work which involves loading heavy materials and working under risky circumstances. Workers at the *basti* in Ahmedabad also shared that in terms of employer violence, they faced more verbal abuse at the construction site as compared to their daily interactions with the supervisors from the waste management company. However, workers added that despite this the work is “dirty” because of the attitude of the people,

and poses a lot of challenges. Women workers at the *basti* in Ahmedabad also shared that they do not view the work as “dirty”, but it is the people’s perception of the work that leads to the challenges they face in navigating the work. To add to it, the salary is also insufficient, and they survive because of selling scrap.

The workers also shared instances wherein people used foul language and screamed at them if they forgot to close the gate after collecting the waste. Some even spoke of physical abuse such as slapping, at times, when the house occupants have been intoxicated. To continue the work and not lose their jobs, the workers have to remain polite and not retaliate. If they retaliate even feebly, they



are told that they are getting money for the work so they should keep quiet and continue working. Nobody from the contracting entity would support them in case they get into an altercation during their work, hence they generally endure. If they request for waste to be collected at a commonplace, rather than collecting from each house, the men in the societies insult the women and tell them to do the work since they are taking money for it and the society residents pay taxes for this work to be done for them. A worker stated,

“Waisey toh hum bhi jangal ke rehne waley hein, hum kisi se nahi darte, par ab kya karein majburi hai. Koi chota baccha bhi darayega toh darana padhta hai” (Although we are also residents of the forest, we are not afraid of anyone. But what to do now, we are helpless. If even a small child says something we have to be scared). There are very few households which give them water if they require it. One of the workers stated that ultimately they are outsiders since they have migrated from another state for work, and will nev-

er have a feeling of belongingness in the city because of the stature of their work.

Living conditions

The *bastis* of the waste management workers that were visited by the research team were squatter settlements situated in the areas provided to the contractor for parking the vehicles deployed in door-to-door waste collection. The settlement comprises hutments or kutchas houses made from bamboo and tarpaulin sheets. The workers shared that during rains water seeps inside the house, and water logging in the basti also makes it immensely challenging to carry out daily tasks. In one of the *bastis* in Gandhinagar, smoke from the nearby power plant is a perpetual reality which makes it difficult to breathe and also causes itching in the eyes and skin. Ninety-four percent of the workers surveyed across all the three cities indicated to be living in kutchas houses.

For their accommodation in the *basti*, the workers at the Gandhinagar *basti* shared that the contractor provided them with the land to set up their hutments, and they were not required to pay any amount for the rent, water, or electricity. However, some of the workers in the Ahmedabad *basti* have taken semi-pucca rooms in the one of the *bastis* for a rent of Rs 500 per month. Most of the *bastis* surveyed as part of the study lacked access to a safe toilet and the residents had to resort to open defecation, exposing them to

Chart 11 - Representing housing condition of respondents

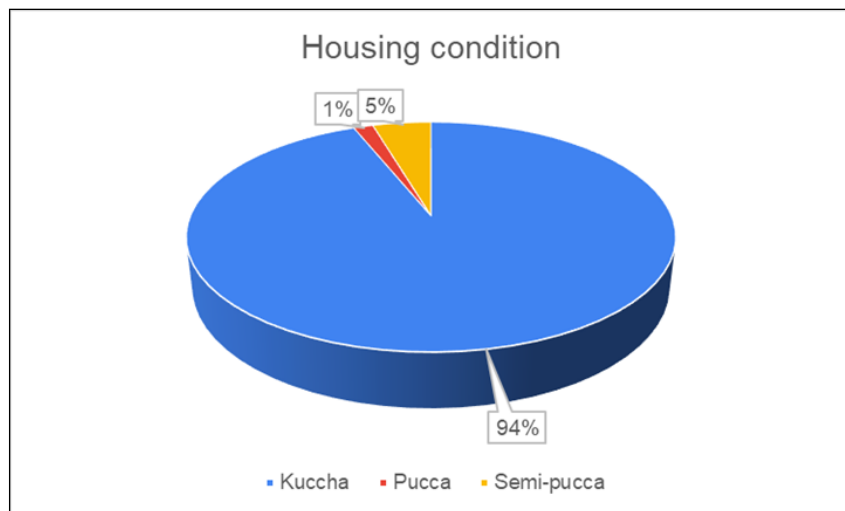
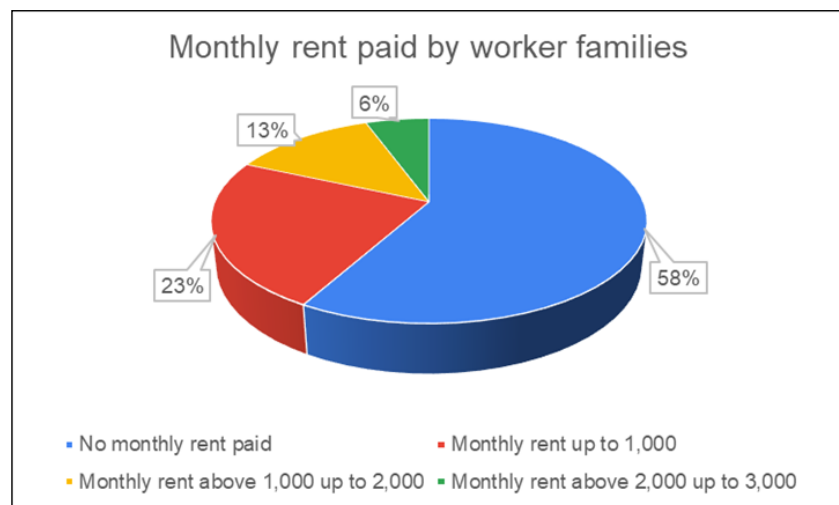


Chart 12 - Representing monthly rent paid by worker families



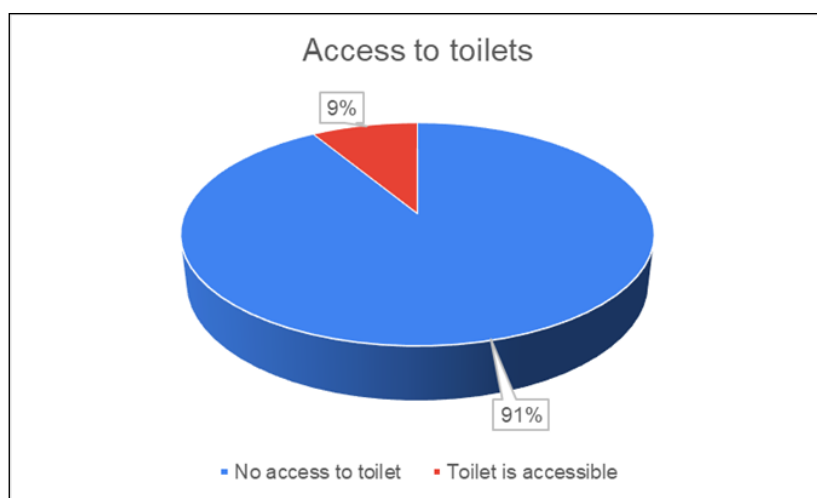
health hazards. Around 91 percent of the families surveyed shared that they did not have access to clean toilets at the *basti*.

Further, three out of four of the squatter settlements visited by the research team in Ahmedabad and Gandhinagar lack access to electricity. Some residents procure batteries for basic needs. Cooking happens in the light of the stove. The workers lack access to regular water supply at these settlements and rely on alternate sources such as water tankers

and private taps. The burden of collecting and storing water in the morning fell on the women of the household. They mentioned that ensuring the availability of water was one of the most critical challenges they were facing in terms of living conditions. Sometimes when their regular supply gets affected, they have to walk to some other area to look for water. Workers in the Ahmedabad *basti* shared that since

workers in Ahmedabad, out of which it has organised around 30,000-40,000. More than 25,000 women waste pickers in Ahmedabad are associated with SEWA (Oates et al., 2018). However, there is a lack of unions, collectives, or cooperatives of door-to-door waste collection workers. In fact, within the entire waste management sector, no recognized Trade Union Federation has formed a trade union (Eswaran & Hameeda, 2013). Of the 196 worker families surveyed, only five indicated to be a part of any form of organisation or union. The lack of unionisation is critical as the workers feel it will help them in putting forth their issues and demands. Workers shared that it would only be possible for them to join a movement to demand their rights if the majority of the workers were a part of it. Otherwise, they would be identified, singled out, and end up losing their source of income and would have to go back to their village. Despite knowing this, the workers were aware of their collective power and the value of their work to the city and its citizens. During conversations, the workers often spoke about how their work of collecting waste is what ensures that the city remains clean, and they were not being paid fairly for it. On being asked if they would be willing to join a union, they agreed and stated that it would help them to put forth their issues in front of the government. However, the current fear of losing their jobs at the hands of contractors was stifling the opportunity to collectivize.

Chart 12 - Representing monthly rent paid by worker families



they have to sleep in the open they get bitten by mosquitoes which leads to regular ill health. Nobody from the corporation has ever visited the *bastis* for fumigation or to check the living conditions of the workers. During the course of the research, one of the *bastis* in Ahmedabad received an eviction threat, however, no action was taken by the authorities at the time of drafting this report.

Unorganised workers

As per a study by SEWA, there are around 50,000 informal waste



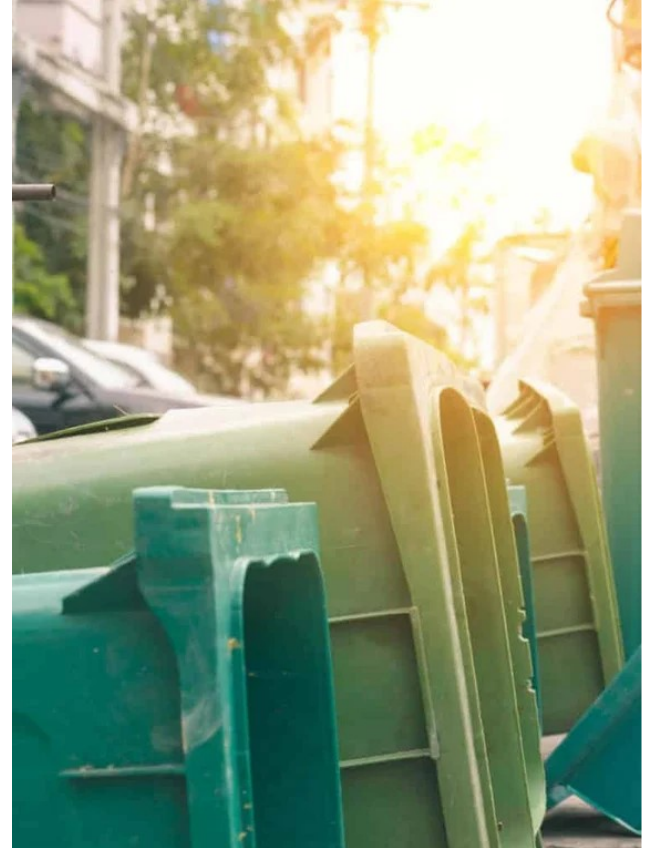
CHAPTER 7

Conclusion And way forward

The important role of waste management workers in mitigating the effects of climate change through the work of collecting, sorting, and recovering recyclable materials from

waste generated from households and establishments is undeniable. However, the study highlights the dire working and living conditions of the workers in the sector. As Harris-White (2015) contends, political will is lacking when it comes to ensuring the dignity and improving the social and employment conditions of workers involved in waste management work. The reason for that is the entrenchment of caste in the waste management domain. It is imperative to include the voices of workers in setting the policy trajectory and political economy of waste in India. Caste-neutral jobs, requisite technological upgradation, and the opportunity for education and the choice or mobility to undertake other work should be policy priorities.

While it is true that Dalits have dominated the occupation of waste management, other groups have also started working in the sector on ac-



count of diminishing opportunities in other industries and due to the lucrative business that waste management has proven to be in general. This becomes apparent in this study which highlights the migration pattern of Adivasi families from Jhabua and Dahod to cities in Gujarat, and the choice they employed in shifting to waste management work from other forms of labour. Some studies have indicated that while non-Dalits have found entry into roadside waste-picking, they still find it difficult to work as home cleaners or door-to-door waste collectors. Caste prescriptions and the existing client-patron relationship prefer the employment of Dalits for such roles. In Ahmedabad's Ramapir No Tekro *basti*, Dalits have pithas, which are designated shops for buying segregated scrap material from scrap pickers or directly from domestic households. The pithas run with the support of other Dalit scrap collectors. However, their acceptance as

pithawalla came after being in the business for 10-15 years (Sannabhadti, 2019).

It is also important to consider that the loss of livelihood opportunities for informal labourers because of privatisation within the sector depends on their access to occupational spaces. Mitra and Bagchi (2017) in a study on Kolkata's SWM system, bring forth several critical points about the question of access to space. Efforts to formalise door-to-door waste collection have also reduced the waste available on the streets to the rag pickers for sorting and selling. The formalisation of household collection of waste stems not only from environmental concerns but also from the potential of profit which can accrue from extracting energy out of waste (Wittmer, 2023; Luthra and Monteith, 2023).

. Moreover, the drive to formalise the waste management system dehumanises those who are categorised as unskilled labourers. This requires



power. In a study on Thailand, migrant workers from Myanmar in the informal waste collection industry receive their daily earnings through scrap selling, without having to wait for their monthly salary and this motivates them to be associated with the occupation in

us to consciously deal with sustainable inclusion of the informal labour force in the formal sector, especially in countries like India where both traditional and modern aspects of labour systems exist parallelly in societies.

The modern system of rights and opportunities give rise to and are backed by legal apparatuses which may create a deeper schism between informal and formal labour if efforts to formalise the labour system proceed without necessary safeguards. Another aspect of understanding informal labour in the waste management industry would be through the lens of controlling one's work input as being self-employed (Agarwala, 2016). The informal waste management industry has conventions set by years of practice which thrive on trust-based relations between waste buyers and waste collectors and sellers. Since they are self-employed individuals, they have control over their labour input and bargaining

in addition to their aversion to capitalist norms of production (Campbell, 2018). This helps them deal with the financial burden even if their earnings are minimal. This is not to deny that their social status hinders their economic opportunities or increases the requirement for their labour input manifold.

There have been movements in the sector, some leading to positive changes for the workers. In 2016, waste management workers went on a strike in Ahmedabad demanding permanent positions, with large participation from women workers (Sinha, 2016). A strike was also carried out by sanitation workers in Ahmedabad in 2020, demanding compassionate jobs for their kin. Pune's self-employed women waste management workers, who organised themselves into Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakari Panchayat (KKPKP), a trade union of paper, plastic and bottle recyclers in 1993 and in 2006 started SWaCH (Solid Waste Collec-

tion and Handling), their worker-owned cooperative, provide a model for sustainable and inclusive SWM in urban areas. In 2008, SWaCH was appointed by the Pune Municipal Corporation for door-to-door waste collection. Despite there being room for improvement, the organised women workers earn a salary along with social security benefits, additional income from selling recyclable materials, and the identity of a 'public servant'. The workers participated in marches demanding an identity card, to begin with, and get them registered as waste management workers which led to a decline in child labour. The union also demanded Below Poverty Line ration cards, affirmative action for the children to get admitted to schools and health insurance (Brook, 2014; Gadgil and Menon as cited in Kanekal, 2019). Further, the NGO Hasirudala in Bengaluru which was established in 2013, has made efforts to advocate for the rights of waste pickers. Owing to their efforts, by 2019, around 7,500 waste pickers were registered as municipal workers with official identification cards in Bengaluru (Kanekal, 2019).

This study indicates that currently, the door-to-door waste collection workers in Ahmedabad, Gandhinagar, and Surat do not have any union which can help them advocate for their rights. Because of the State's lack of commitment in ensuring labour standards and legal regulation in waste management and sanitation



work in India, collective mobilisation through unionisation and advocacy seems to be the only space for negotiation. Union membership has helped sanitation workers in demanding higher wages, safety equipment, and social security. Organising workers into worker-led and worker-run cooperatives to end the oppression by contractors has also been suggested as a possible model (Shruti & Majumdar, 2021).

Thus, the importance of unionisation needs to be discussed with the help of trade unions in these areas. Registration as waste management workers, decent housing, education and social security, and decentralisation of the waste management sys-



tem are some of the demands which can be put forth by organised workers. It is high time the state recognizes the invaluable role played by waste management workers in ensuring sustainability, and protects the dignity of the workers by directly catering to their needs rather than ceding control to private profit-seeking entities. A report on the health and well-being of waste workers in India contained policy recommendations pertaining to the health of waste workers. The particular context of each category of waste workers needs to be understood along with dissemination of health related policies to the workers. Accessible health care facilities, maternity entitlements, basic entitlements such as

water and sanitation, and enrollment with Employee State Insurance Corporation for all workers, and delinking documentation requirements from access to services were also suggested (Lakshmi et al., 2021).

The findings of this research study points towards the dire need of including waste management workers in the realm of formal policy making, to ensure that the realities of their daily labour and lives are considered. It is important to recognize that in a caste society, group identity plays a critical role in determining occupations and the inherent labour relations, and ultimately this needs to be dismantled by ensuring avenues for alternate employment and education for the children for future social mobility.

While the study focused on female Adivasi workers engaged in door-to-door waste management work, it opens up new avenues for research along the entire value chain of waste. Such research study would aid policy makers and ULBs in formulating more inclusive rules and policies for workers. In the US, in 1968, sanitation workers in Memphis went on a strike. Their picket signs read “I am a man”, a claim for recognition of equal personhood from which all other rights based claims arise. It is time we realise the personhood of the workers engaged in the historically dehumanising work of waste along with the changing political economy of the sector, and secure workers rights.

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