

Health Hazards and Social Stigma Faced by Rag-Pickers in Delhi - A Review

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Abstract: Waste is an unavoidable by-product of human activities. Economic development, urbanization and improved living standards in cities contribute to increase in the quantity and complexity of generated solid waste. Thus, Solid waste management has become a major environmental issue in India. Rag-pickers help in waste management of a city. Rag-pickers are the people who rummage through garbage bins to pick out 'rags' for their livelihood. Rag pickers sustain themselves by collecting, sorting and segregating waste and then trading it. Their life and working conditions are extremely difficult. Due to social stigma across India, rag pickers face terrible discrimination and their communities are often blighted by alcoholism, literacy and drug abuse and are highly vulnerable to sexual abuse. Every day rag pickers are exposed to a cocktail of toxic substances and, working without protective clothing, are at high risk of infection. This paper discusses the fact that despite performing a very useful social service at great risk; what are the social stigmas associated with Rag Pickers in Delhi and the health hazards faced by them on daily basis. Lastly, unfulfilled health needs of this underprivileged workforce who contributes to the ecology and economy of the city need to be addressed. This in turn may help to alleviate poverty and environmental degradation which is occurring due to rapid and unplanned urbanization in India.

Keywords: Health Hazards, Solid Waste Management, Social Stigma, Rag picking.

1. Introduction

The legal origins of modern public solid waste management can be traced to 19th-century English legislation, which introduced the concept of waste collection as a public service. The modernization of waste management systems was driven by the objective to improve public health and promote social order. Conventional approaches to urban solid waste management have led to largely ignore the contribution of waste pickers to formal solid waste systems.

Millions of people worldwide make a living from searching; collecting and processing materials that someone else throw away. The term rag picker used is someone who made a living by rummaging through refuse in the streets to collect material of salvage. Rag-Picker did not recycle materials themselves, they would collect plastic bottle, paper, card board, scrap metal, glass etc. and turn it over to master rag picker or businesses or transform waste into new products. They are too poor, illiterate and belong to rural area or scheduled caste. Rag picking is a job for the lowest of the working classes. Rag pickers are working in informal sectors. They live at the bottom of economic

pyramid but they play an important role in sustainable development.

Rag picking as a profession comes with its own set of utterly inhuman challenges. Rag picking is probably one of the most dangerous and dehumanizing activity in India. Rag pickers are working in filthy environments, surrounded by crows or dogs under any weather conditions and have to search through hazardous waste without gloves or shoes. Using the dumping ground as a playing field the children run the risk to come upon needles, syringes, used condoms, saline bottles, soiled gloves and other hospital wastes as well as ample of plastic and iron items. They suffer from many diseases, such as respiratory problems, worms, anaemia, fever and other problems which include cuts, rashes, dog bites.

2. Discussion

A. Delhi's dilemma: present situation

With Delhi's population more than doubling since 1990, the city's waste management infrastructure has been stretched beyond its limit. Every day Delhi produces around 10,000 metric tonnes of solid waste - roughly the weight of the Eiffel Tower. Official estimates predict that in five years the waste produced by the city will almost double to 18,000 tonnes a day. Thousands of tonnes of rubbish are dumped on open landfills where children as young as five work to scavenge through it. Currently, there are three large landfill sites in the city - Ghazipur, Okhla, and Bhalswa. All of them are overflowing and despite the predicted increase in waste, no alternative site has been offered by Delhi's civic authorities.

Actual waste generation in the city could be much higher, as a bulk of the waste is managed by the informal sector. According to an estimate, there are about 150,000 rag pickers in Delhi. Worst, the three landfill sites are not designed as per specifications mentioned in the Solid Waste Management Rules, 2016. According to the Master Plan for Delhi, 2021, these landfill sites had exceeded their capacity way back in 2008. Most of these sites have contaminated the aquifers and groundwater in and around their neighborhoods. Estimates of the total number of waste pickers in the country are not easily available. There are an estimated 1.5 million to 4 million waste pickers in India, who pick up, clean, sort and segregate recyclable waste and sell it further up the value chain. Some studies estimates that the numbers of waste pickers in Delhi

alone would be approximately 500,000.

B. Working conditions of rag pickers

Rag pickers earn their livelihood by collecting trash from the garbage mountain every day and don't mind living in unhygienic condition. Even under the challenging circumstances, these rags go out to the garbage mountain daily to collect waste because they have no other option. The place is the only source of livelihood for hundreds of rag pickers. Besides insanitary surroundings and continuous stench, what annoy people living near landfill areas more is the spontaneous fires at the landfill set off by gases, such as methane.

Mostly the rag pickers are migrants. Migrant who mostly are uneducated and not having any skill for doing any good type of work start working in bad type of occupation like waste-worker, and other minimal type of work. So in this way poverty, migration, less education, religion, income becomes the predisposing factor for their bad health condition. Illiteracy, poverty, indebtedness and migration of their family are the main causes for the poor working condition for rag picking activity, which has become one of the important social problems. Direct enrolment in Rag-picking is due to non-eligibility for other works which require skills and also because of the easy daily income.

Generally, there is no employer-employee relationship in this trade even though it is possible that some of the waste picking activity is organized by contractors. Waste pickers are self-employed workers with no formal legal relationship with the municipality or the recyclable traders. They also face regular harassment and extortion from both the police and the municipal authorities. No social security benefits are available to workers in this sector.

According to a report by UNICEF, about 12 percent of children in India aged 5-14 are engaged in child labour activities, including Rag Picking. In 2001, waste-picking was included among the hazardous occupations banned under the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986. But apart from this very brief mention, Rag picking is ignored in legislation regarding child labour. Contrary to most child labourers, ragpickers are self-employed or working with their parents and therefore not answerable to any employer.

In a study that PRIA recently undertook under Democratizing Urban Governance: Promoting Participation and Social Accountability, it was revealed that in Patna and Raipur about 26-20% of total rag pickers in the city are children between the age of 5-14 years, while 40% of the total dump site waste pickers were children, which is a huge percentage. These are children who do not have access to education and are subjected to intense health threats. Every day rag pickers are exposed to a cocktail of toxic substances and, working without protective clothing, are at high risk of infection. Studies suggest rag pickers in Delhi, were severely anaemic, have worms and suffer from recurring fevers and multiple injuries.

C. Wages

Ragpickers have remained out of the formal system of employment or benefits, and their condition is getting worse due to alienating policies. Given that rag-picking is a totally informal sector it is hard to quantify how much waste is collected in this manner. A lot of garbage clearing thus is the done informally, by ragpickers who work without any job security, salary or dignity. Not just that, they are regularly exposed to cuts, infection, respiratory diseases and tuberculosis apart from poverty, humiliation, harassment, and sexual abuse on the streets.

In Delhi a large number of people who belong to poor family and scheduled caste are engaged in this work of rag picking. They live in slums areas and as a group. They have no proper houses. All family members are engaged in rag picking.

D. Health hazards faced by rag pickers

Rag picking is probably one of the most dangerous and dehumanizing activity in India. Rag pickers are working in filthy environments, surrounded by crows or dogs under any weather conditions and have to search through hazardous waste without gloves or shoes. They often eat the filthy food remnants they find in the garbage bins or in the dumping ground. Using the dumping ground as a playing field the children run the risk to come upon needles, syringes, used condoms, saline bottles, soiled gloves and other hospital wastes as well as ample of plastic and iron items. They suffer from many diseases, such as respiratory problems, worms, anaemia, fever and other problems which include cuts, rashes, dog bites.

Rain or shine, for these rag pickers, garbage continues as their source of living till a concrete solid waste management plan is in place along with a rehabilitation plan. They work, eat, sleep and spend every moment of their lives in its vicinity. From five-year-old child to elders, all members of the families move in the yard from morning to evening. They collect waste plastic, iron scrap and glass bottles, sifting the mountains of litter dumped there and sell to commission agents. These wastes were responsible for occupational health risks to workers and health risks to residents; including risk from contact with human fecal matter, paper that may have become saturated with toxic materials, bottles with chemical residues, metal containers with residue pesticide and solvents, needles and bandages from hospitals etc. The most commonly experienced diseases among rag pickers are Tuberculosis, Bronchitis, Asthma, Pneumonia, Dysentery, Parasites and Malnutrition.

Rag pickers tend to have very poor health due to the consumption of unhygienic food and working in polluted environment can lead to diarrhea, cold and scabies. They were highly exposed to tetanus and other infections caused from cuts by sharp metal pieces, broken glass and other solid wastes. Rag pickers were reported to have headache to have at many dump sites.

Substance abuse itself is one of the mental disorders present among Rag-pickers. Study found that mental disorder such as

mild depression and mild anxiety is common among Rag-pickers. Majority of them are associated with mild depression and mild anxiety as common mental disorder. Monotonous work has been associated with psychological distress. Static posture & heavy work in turn may lead to depression and anxiety.

The rag pickers showed a higher prevalence of low hemoglobin, high circulating eosinophil and monocyte counts, unhealthy gums, frequent diarrhea, and dermatitis, when compared with controls. Their sputum showed an abundance of alveolar macrophages, siderophages and inflammatory cells, and a very high frequency of squamous metaplasia and dysplasia of bronchial epithelial cells, suggesting inflammation and cellular changes in the airways. The rag pickers thus suffer from a multitude of health problems which seem related to their occupation.

1. Ergonomic hazards faced by rag pickers include walking long distances on foot, often pulling heavy carts and in awkward positions as they collect and separate waste.
2. Biological hazards reported by rag pickers included bandages, disposable diapers, toilet paper, sanitary napkins, disposable needles or syringes, and condoms. In addition, wastes from small clinics, pharmacies, and labs, and even hospital wastes, may also be found mixed with residential trash and carrying microorganisms responsible for more serious diseases.
3. Safety hazards include risks from working amid heavy traffic, as trash collection schedules often coincide with intense traffic hours. When combined with poor compliance with traffic laws, high workload, and fast pace of work, there is a substantial risk of rag pickers being hit by traffic. Some of the most common injuries to workers who handle solid wastes are cuts and punctures by glass, cans, and sharp objects. Many of these injuries are caused by inadequate storage of trash.

E. Social stigma associated with rag picking

Rag picking as a profession is associated with a social stigma. Rag pickers recycle almost 20 per cent of India's wastes. Yet they are unrecognized, face discrimination and are not entitled to government schemes. Since waste pickers are not recognized under Indian laws, they face numerous forms of discrimination. Their basic rights are repeatedly violated disregarding their contribution to society. Rag pickers often targeted and harassed by police and anti-social elements as they are seen as vagrants and thieves. Rag pickers are not legally permitted by state municipalities to collect, segregate and sell waste from garbage dumps across the country, and they are deemed to be committing theft under the Indian Penal Code, 1860. Non-recognition had made migrant rag pickers ineligible for government schemes, in addition to facing insurmountable difficulties in obtaining ration cards, electricity and water facilities. This had a significant negative impact on their

standard of living as well as on their mental and physical wellbeing.

Moreover, their jobs are highly insecure. Waste pickers previously had an informal sharing system that allowed a large number of them to collect waste within the same area. However, post-privatization, fewer people were able to earn a living from the same volume of waste. Also it is found that privatization had a negative impact on their access to wastes as well as their capacity to earn a livelihood.

There is a lack of:

- Mandatory provision of identification cards that acknowledges the right of Rag pickers to access, collect and sell waste in the country.
- Mandatory provision of subsidised waste picking gear, including shoes with metal plated soles, gloves, protective and sorting tools through a public distribution system.
- Anodal body under the aegis of the department of labour for all matters pertaining to the rights and welfare of Rag pickers.
- Inclusion of Rag pickers in all social welfare schemes.

3. Conclusion

Solid waste management issues represent major problems to the governments of developing nations. Rag picking is an inferior and exploitative economic activity in the urban informal section. It is a critical source of livelihood for the working poor and that informal rag pickers make relevant contributions to city. Public policies and public perceptions are still based on misconceptions about rag pickers that largely ignore their contribution to the environment, to public health, and to urban economies.

Though the waste pickers play a significant role in the entire process of waste management, yet their services go unnoticed and issues concerning their livelihood go unaddressed. Issue of protective equipment's, immunization, and focusing on the vulnerable population among the ragpickers such as women and children should be an issue of prime concern. Efforts should be put to develop training materials on occupation and environmental health and injury issue for this vulnerable section. Government and nongovernment organizations should play a key role for targeting this population and ensure provision of accessible health care services.

It is a harsh reality that children start working as rag pickers very early and are subjected to all kinds of negative environment. The children come from a very poor socio economic background. Not all have families. Some have come to the city alone and sleep on pavements or shacks along with other street children, while many others have rather weak links with their families and are, by and large, on their own. In Delhi thousands of street children are engaged in rag picking, especially it is one of the area where large number of girls are found to be working and apart from being exposed to several types of health hazards they are also exposed to risk of sexual

harassment and physical exploitation by the people of outside world. Because of which their moral and psychological development is at stake.

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