

Chapter 1: Waste Pickers From Around the World

Waste pickers are often ignored and treated as invisible. Here we profile some remarkable waste pickers from around the world, sharing their inspiring stories and providing insight into their lives and struggles. Their stories show that waste pickers come from many different backgrounds. Some come from long lines of waste pickers and entered the profession because they knew it was a good way to make a living; others are the first in their families to do this work. Many have little formal education and started waste picking as they had few other options. However, others obtained high levels of formal schooling but cannot find employment elsewhere or prefer waste picking to other forms of income generation available to them. What all of these waste pickers share is a commitment to work that they know will support not only themselves and their families but which also makes important social and environmental contributions. Many have played key roles in forming organisations that help to improve the conditions of waste pickers and which fight for respect and recognition for their work.

Some questions to consider while reading this chapter include:

- What led each person to become a waste picker?
- How do gender, race, caste and class influence their position, choices and struggles?
- What are some key commonalities and differences in their personal stories?
- How have their personal histories affected whether and how they are involved in organising other waste pickers?
- How has organising changed their experience as waste pickers?

John Kibaara in Kenya – The Oldest Salvager at Nakuru Dumpsite, Kenya by Patrick Mwanzia, *Practical Action, Kenya*

John Kibaara was born at Ngachura, Nakuru in 1954 as the seventh in a family of nine children. His parents were squatters on a settler's farm. His father herded the farmer's cattle and his mother was a casual labourer on the farm. In 1965 the farm was sold to a co-operative society and John's family became homeless. They moved to Lakeview Estate in Nakuru municipality and rented a house owned by the council. John's father died, and soon after the houses were demolished to make way for new ones. The municipality provided plots for those who were evicted. However, his mother could not afford the fees for the plot or the monthly payments and they found themselves on the streets again. His mother then went to live in a low-income area where she stayed until her death in 1981.

John started school at the age of 13 when a member of the St Nicholas Anglican Church agreed to sponsor his education. He was a bright student, always near the top of his class, but when his sponsor went back to England he could not afford to

continue studying. He explains, “When the school administration started sending me away, my performance dropped. I felt discouraged and dropped out. I then decided to salvage waste in Lakeview where the dumpsite was initially located.”

John describes how he arrived at the Nakuru dump (which the salvagers refer to as ‘Gioto’) in 1978, soon after it was established:

We came here with my brother since we could not find any other work to do. It was in the same year when Jomo Kenyatta died. We found two other salvagers here. We collected scrap metal and bottles and sold them to buy food. When there was little to collect and sell we survived on salvaged food wastes.

His brother then obtained a driving licence and was employed to transport goods. However, he died in 2003, together with his wife.

Over the years John has watched new people arrive at the dump and seen others leave to live elsewhere, but he has stayed. He currently lives with his second wife, Wanjiku, and their son. They stay at the dump in a tent made of cloths sewn together and hung between large stones. Approximately 130 other people call the dumpsite their home. There is no water available at the dumpsite and salvagers buy water from mobile water vendors for the exorbitant price of Ksh 10-15 for 20 litres. Salvagers are forced to relieve themselves in the open spaces of the dumpsite since there are no toilets available.

The number of salvagers has increased and consequently there are not always enough salvageable materials for everyone. As a result, John sometimes walks 12 kilometres to salvage in Lanet Kenya Army Barracks area. His income is irregular and falls below the poverty line. When other materials are scarce, the household members eat food salvaged from hotel waste.

Working as a salvager exposes John to many health hazards:

We often suffer from bruises and injuries from broken glass, sharp metals and needles from medical waste that are dumped here. We do not have protective clothing and shoes when doing salvaging work. I usually suffer from persistent coughs from the effects of smoke and the dust that I inhale. I fall sick sometimes and most often I am unable to meet medical expenses – it’s quite a difficult life in this place.

Rain is also a major problem as it destroys the carton papers that he sells to earn a living. Improved shelter, he says, would solve this problem. John proposes that if markets can be found for the salvaged items that he and others collect, they could benefit as they are usually exploited by middlemen.³ Despite his difficult circumstances he holds onto the hope of a better future.

³ Although ‘middlemen’ is a gendered term it is widely used by waste pickers and other people in the industry and is therefore used in this publication.

Jimmy Refes Cañas in Colombia – The Autonomous *Recicladores'* Alliance (*Fundación el Golero*), Bogotá, Colombia by Leslie Tuttle



Jimmy Refes Cañas
(photo by Leslie Tuttle)

As a child, Jimmy lived on the streets in an environment dominated by poverty, drugs and violence. When he was ten a priest put him into a religious reform school where he learned discipline and practical skills such as woodworking and auto mechanics. Seventeen boys left the reform school at the same time to find work and to live on their own. Because of how they had grown up on the streets, many were uncomfortable having a 'boss' or working in a group. They looked for work that allowed them more freedom and found that they were ideally suited to become *recicladores*. Ironically, they returned to the streets they knew so well, but with a viable occupation.

Four of Jimmy's former schoolmates formed a loose alliance called the *Fundación el Golero* to help them pursue their work as *recicladores*. In addition to working regularly as *recicladores*, they run a solid waste management project at a school. They work with teachers and students to create 'eco' clubs, training the children to look after the environment. They process the school's waste while educating the students, who have decorated collection bins for separating waste materials for recycling. The school provides the space they need for their work. In addition, organic waste is used as compost in a garden plot where the students grow vegetables and run a seed bank as a school research project.

Jimmy's childhood continues to influence the way he lives his life. While his income as a *reciclador* is three times the minimum wage, he explains that "I still feel an emptiness like I felt as a boy on the streets." To counter this Jimmy does volunteer work with boys of all ages at the YMCA. This has enriched his life in many ways. For example, the YMCA sent him to the United States for training. Most importantly, the day-to-day contact he has with boys who value his time gives him a great sense of personal satisfaction.

The four members of the *Fundación el Golero* have chosen not to formalise their association as a co-operative or to join Bogota's Association of Waste Pickers (ARB). The shared experiences of their youth still make them uneasy about committing to the demands of a larger group. Nevertheless, they are trying to improve the reputation of their profession and raise public awareness of the connections between the materials people discard and the quality of the environment.

Marife Jostol – Cavite, Philippines by *Lizette Cardenas, Solid Waste Management Association of the Philippines (SWAPP)*



Marife Jostol
(photo courtesy of Lizette Cardenas)

I am not ashamed of being a waste picker because it is an honest job, provides food for my family and enables me to send my children to school. But I don't want my children to be waste pickers like me. I want them to have a better life in the future – that is why educating them is important.

This is how Marife Jostal sees herself and her work as a waste picker.

Marife Jostol is a 36-year-old waste picker in General Mariano Alvarez, Cavite, in the Philippines. She is married with two children, aged seven and nine. Her husband is also a waste picker. They learned the 'business' from her father-in-law. When they were living in the province she was a housewife, taking care of her husband and children. However, when they migrated from the province to General Mariano Alvarez municipality in Cavite, she had to help her husband augment their meagre income by picking waste at the dumpsite. She explained that she had little choice in the type of work she could do, since she only finished 6th grade. She has been waste picking for six years.

Marife works eight hours a day, seven days a week. Her schedule starts at eight a.m. and ends at four p.m. with a one hour break for lunch. Previously, she and her

husband earned as much as P800 (\$17) a day. But now she notes that there has been a drastic decrease in their income from waste picking to P200 (\$4) every three days. This can be attributed to the municipality's enforcement of segregation of waste at the household level. With this segregation, the recyclables are immediately sold to itinerant waste buyers and/or junk shops. This decreases the amount of recyclables that are picked up by the collection truck and disposed of at the dumpsite.

When they started to work at the dumpsite they joined a group of ten other people. Today it includes three women, three men and six children. The children do not have parents and pick waste to earn extra income to buy school supplies. Her group sells their recyclables to the owner of the dumpsite. Another group sells their recyclables to the son of the owner of the dumpsite. The grouping of the waste pickers is informal and was created to avoid conflict. Each group gets one collection group (alternately) so the income from the recyclables benefits all members. They are also able to get a small loan (advance) from the buyer of the recyclables.

Santraj Maurya and Lipi in India — Tales of Two Waste Pickers in Delhi, India by *Bharati Chaturvedi, Chintan*

Santraj Maurya is a waste picker from Uttar Pradesh, where his family lives. He is a father of three and a worried parent. "They want to live in Delhi with me, but it's so expensive," he laments.

Santraj is one of the city's most successful waste recyclers. As a graduate of grade 4 he is one of the best educated waste pickers in New Delhi. His story is one of enterprise. He began picking trash in the elite Lodi Road. When the NGO Chintan organised a door-to-door waste collection system, he became the supervisor. In the next four years, Santraj not only supervised this doorstep collection, but also helped set up a new one. In addition, he trained in composting so that "no waste has to reach the landfill and people understand how useful a *kabari* can be." In this manner, he was part of a larger initiative to counter capital-intensive privatisation by building local capacity and enterprise.⁴

In 2006, Santraj was thrown off an Alitalia flight in Delhi because he was a waste picker. He was en route to Brazil to share his experiences with other waste pickers. The airline did not think he looked like someone who should be in first class and refused to let him take the flight. After pressure in the media, the airline compensated him with an apology and tickets. Santraj went to Cairo using one of the tickets; when he returned he spoke widely about his trip. "What I loved the best was their river," he explained. "It was so clean. I wish the Yamuna could be the same way." Most recently, Santraj has opened a string of small junk shops. He buys discards from nine waste pickers in a tiny, disused community dump yard. The rest of the time, he works with the *Safai Sena* (Brigade of Cleaners) recyclers' forum which he, along with others, helped set up.

⁴ See Chapter 4 for further information on this initiative.

Lipi⁵ was not as lucky as Santraj. Like Santraj, she began door-to-door collection. She cannot read well, but she is tough as nails and a natural leader. At one point she ran an entire wing of Chintan. She was proactive and took her work seriously. She would identify pickpockets and force the police to act on her evidence. “I have to,” she said. “Otherwise they’ll say the greedy waste pickers stole it.” As a door-to-door waste collector she felt powerful. “I know how everyone is doing when I see their trash,” she pronounced. By her own confession, she ran away from her home in Bangladesh to seek freedom in Delhi. “They’d make me sit covered from head to toe, at home. I hated it.” From a borderline poor family, she came to Delhi and found herself on the edges, picking trash. “I never want to go back, even though I don’t want to tell people what I do here,” she said. Her husband Mukhtar, an Indian, agreed. “What’s there for us?” he wonders about Bangladesh.

Lipi insisted India was her home. India didn’t think so. In 2004, a few days after Lipi delivered a daughter, the police took her away and detained her and her son. Her husband tried bringing up the baby alone for over a week, but she was ill and not recovering. He finally joined Lipi as a desperate measure to save their child. They were all deported to Bangladesh.

Lipi and Santraj were of the same generation, in the same city, doing the same work and with comparable opportunities. But Lipi met the fate of many of her other contemporaries as she was from the wrong country, with the wrong religion. Had she been a Nepalese Hindu, like thousands of security guards and domestic helpers in India, she would have been welcome. Being a Bangladeshi Muslim woman denied her the opportunity to live a secure life. By contrast, Santraj, a Hindu man, scraped through despite his lower caste, and met with some small successes. Much work remains to be done to address the religious, gender, ethnic and caste discrimination faced by waste pickers in New Delhi.

⁵ Lipi prefers to be known only by her first name. She even decided not to have her surname on her identity card.

Nohra Padilla in Colombia – Asociación de Recicladores de Bogotá, Colombia by *Melanie Samson*⁶



Nohra Padilla
(photo by *Melanie Samson*)

Nohra Padilla is a third generation *recicladora*. Her grandmother came to Bogotá, Colombia's capital, in the 1950s when many people fled to the city to escape high levels of violence in the countryside. Her grandmother was accustomed to rural life and brought cows, pigs and chickens with her to the city. She collected organic waste to feed the animals from garbage bins and streets in nearby neighbourhoods. Soon she realised that she could also find things like paper, metal, glass and clothes that she could sell. Nohra's mother's first job was in mud brick construction, but after having six children she couldn't go back to the factory. So she returned to the work of a *recicladora*, which she had learned from her mother as a child.

Nohra began working with her mother collecting recyclables when she was seven years old. She worked from four a.m. until ten a.m. and then went to school. Other children would call her strange and treat her badly. But Nohra fought back. As Nohra says, "in the first years of school this happened, but after that we became friends. They knew I lived in a house of *recicladoras*, that we had cows. They didn't bother me and I didn't hit them." Nohra won the respect and friendship of her classmates. She did well in school, finishing high school when she was 16, but couldn't afford to go to university so she too became a *recicladora*.

When Nohra left school she began to work at the dump, as there were more recyclables there than in the streets. She worked there for four years until the municipality announced that it was closing the dump. Nohra and others formed a co-operative to help them fight for the right to keep recycling. As Nohra explains, "the co-operative didn't start as an idea, it started as a necessity." With their eyes fixed on

⁶ This story is based on an interview conducted by Melanie Samson on January 14, 2009, with translation by Matt Nohn.

victory, the original twelve members named the co-operative “*Cooperativa de Trabajo Asociado el Triunfo*.” At around the same time, three other co-operatives were formed at the dump. In total there were approximately 200 *recicladores* working there. For two months the members of the co-operatives fought with the municipality. They set fire to the dump and the garbage trucks in order to force the municipality to recognise and talk to them. The municipality still closed the dump, but it gave the co-operative money to help finance its activities, as well as identification cards and uniforms so that they could continue their collection work in the streets. Today *Triunfo* has eighty members. It collects recyclables from the streets and has door-to-door collection initiatives. It also has a recycling centre where members sort and press their materials and collectively sell them directly to factories to obtain a higher price.

Nohra played an important role in bringing together the four co-operatives that were started at the dump to form the city-wide *Asociación de Recicladores de Bogotá* (ARB) in 1990.⁷ She is currently the Executive Director of the ARB. She is also the president of the national association known as the *Asociación de Recicladores Nacional* and is one of the two Colombian representatives on the Latin American Waste Picker Network (LAWPN).⁸ Three years ago, Nohra received a scholarship to finally attend university. She is completing a degree in administration, which is helping to strengthen the skills she developed through the struggle to organise *recicladores*.

Organising waste pickers has not been easy. Between 1991 and 1995 it was especially difficult as Nohra received threats from paramilitaries and intermediaries who did not want *recicladores* to organise. But the woman who has fought for her rights since her schooldays was not intimidated as she is committed to uniting and mobilising *recicladores*. Nohra’s organising work has also brought personal joy. At a national meeting in 1992 she met her partner, Silvio Ruiz Grisales, who is also a leader in the *recicladores* movement. He moved to Bogotá to join her and they now have two sons together.

Nohra reports that it is hard to get *recicladores* to work collectively and to give up their own time to build organisations. But particularly in times of crisis, *recicladores* see the benefits of organising. Although the global financial crisis is creating many hardships for *recicladores*, she hopes that it will also catalyse greater action. Nohra emphasises the importance of the work of *recicladores*, explaining that, “I believe in recycling. It sustains my life and is a contribution to others and to society as it helps to preserve the country’s resources and provides materials for industry.”

Suman More – KKPKP, Pune, India by Nalini Shekar, KKPKP

Suman More is a proud mother. Her son Laxman has completed his Bachelor in Arts and is currently pursuing his Master’s degree in journalism.

This did not come easily to Suman, a waste picker in Pune City, India. Her parents had migrated to Pune from their village in search of work and began waste picking,

⁷ See Chapter 3 for further information on the ARB.

⁸ See Chapter 3 for further information on the LAWPN.

and Suman started waste picking with them when she was around 13 years old. Suman married Mr More at the age of fourteen and had her fourth child when she turned 22. Their main source of income was waste picking. Suman's husband also earned money by performing on traditional drums and conducting religious ceremonies, although income from these activities was sporadic and irregular.



Suman More and her family

(photo courtesy of Laxman More)

When Suman started work she would pick up recyclable waste on the roadside, in local waste depositories, or public waste bins provided by the Pune Municipal Corporation. She walked long distances and worked from dawn to dusk. Her children helped to sort the waste at home as sorted scrap fetched a better price.

From 1992 to 1993, organisers of the KKPKP trade union of waste pickers came to her community to talk about the need to organise waste workers.⁹ They explained that the benefits of organising included getting access to waste at source, fewer hours of work for the same amount of money, cleaner working conditions and insurance. Many of her neighbours discouraged her from becoming a member saying that the benefits were unrealistic, and that it was a new way for some people to make money! However, she decided to join KKPKP with a few other people in the community and has never regretted her decision.

Now her working conditions have improved. Suman explains, "I work only four hours for more money, since I collect the waste door-to-door. The quality and condition of waste is much better." Door-to-door collection has other benefits. She builds relationships with people and engages in casual conversation over a cup of tea. Coming from a lower caste and class of society she never thought this would happen in her lifetime. She is happy that she is able to have a proper lunch break and that waste pickers are provided with soap to wash their hands and legs before they sit to have lunch in a cool, clean place in the residential complex where she works. A

⁹ See Chapters 2 and 6 for further information on the KKPKP trade union.

higher income has also meant that she can afford proper medical care instead of self-medicating with the help of a pharmacist to avoid going to the doctor.

Suman no longer takes the waste home to sort. The municipal corporation has provided a sorting shed where several waste pickers gather to sort their waste while engaging in conversation, which provides a social outlet and support. Once she goes home, she has time to watch some television at the end of a hard day's work.

As a member of KKPKP Suman took an oath to educate her children and KKPKP helped her to enrol her children in school. Both her first and last sons have received cash prizes from KKPKP for their achievements. Laxman now works with KKPKP as manager of its scrap shops. In addition, he is a part-time journalist for a local newspaper. Her daughter-in-law is a computer engineer from a Brahmin (upper caste) family for whom she wants to be a good mother-in-law. Suman is particularly proud that her daughter married only after she turned eighteen and the family did not give a dowry.