



Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing

INFORMAL WORKERS IN FOCUS: WASTE COLLECTORS



Waste collectors form a small but vital part of the informal economy. These workers – men, women, and children – make a living collecting, sorting, recycling, and selling the valuable materials thrown away by others. In nearly every city of the developing world, thousands can be found collecting household waste from the curbside, commercial and industrial waste from dumpsters, and litter from the streets, as well as canals and other urban waterways. Others live and work in municipal dumps – as many as 20,000 people in Calcutta, 12,000 in Manila, and 15,000 in Mexico City.¹

THE BENEFITS OF INFORMAL WASTE COLLECTION

Informal waste collectors perform an essential role in the economies and societies of developing countries. The benefits created by informal waste collection include:

- **Contribution to public health and sanitation.** In the fast-growing cities of the developing world, informal waste collection is the only way that waste gets removed from the many neighborhoods not served by municipal authorities. Third World municipalities only collect between 50 and 80 percent of the refuse generated in their cities.²
- **Employment and a source of income for poor people.** The World Bank estimates that one percent of the urban population in developing countries earns a living through waste collection and/or recycling;³ in the poorest countries, up to two percent do so.⁴ A significant number are women, and, in some cases, children.
- **Provision of inexpensive recycled materials to industry.** This reduces the need for expensive imports. The Mexican paper industry, for example, depends on wastepaper to meet about 74 percent of its fiber needs, and buys cardboard collected by Mexico's cartoneros at less than one-seventh the price it would pay for market pulp from the U.S.⁵
- **Reduction in municipal expenses.** Waste collectors reduce the amount of waste that needs to be collected, transported and disposed of with public funds—in Indonesia, for example, by one-third. And in Bangkok, Jakarta, Kanpur, Karachi, and Manila, informal waste collectors save each city at least US\$23 million a year in costs for waste management and raw material imports.⁶
- **Contribution to environmental sustainability.** In many cities, informal recycling is the only kind of recycling that occurs at all. It decreases the amount of virgin materials used by industry, thereby conserving natural resources and energy while reducing air and water pollution. It also reduces the amount of land that needs to be devoted to dumps and landfills.



HOSTILE SOCIETIES, HAZARDOUS WORK

Despite the considerable economic and social benefits they produce, waste collectors usually operate in hostile social environments. Public authorities often treat them as nuisances, embarrassments, or even criminals. They tend to have low social status and face public scorn, harassment, and, occasionally, violence.

Waste collectors are also vulnerable to exploitation by the middlemen who buy recovered waste material from them before selling it to industry. Waste collectors in some Colombian, Indian,



and Mexican cities can receive as low as 5% of the price industry pays for recyclables; middlemen pocket the rest.⁷ Accordingly, waste collectors generally have low incomes, and often live in deplorable conditions, lacking access to water, sanitation, and other basic infrastructure.

As a result of their poor living conditions and the nature of their work, waste collectors face tremendous health and safety risks, including:

- Exposure to the elements (extreme temperatures, wind, rain, and sun)
- Exposure to dangerous waste, including toxic substances such as lead and asbestos, as well as blood, fecal matter, animal carcasses, broken glass, needles, and sharp metal objects
- Exposure to diseases transmitted by vermin, flies, and mosquitoes
- Back and limb pain, skin irritation and rashes, and specific high risk of tuberculosis, bronchitis, asthma, pneumonia, dysentery, and parasites

It comes as no surprise, then, that high infant mortality rates and low life expectancies are common in waste collector communities. In Mexico City, for example, where overall life expectancy is 69 years, dumpsite waste collectors live for an average of 39 years.⁸ The community of waste collectors in Port Said, Egypt, has an infant mortality rate of one in three.⁹

ORGANIZING AMONG WASTE COLLECTORS

The good news is that, when organized, waste collectors can and do raise their income, their social standing, and their self-esteem. There is a growing organization of waste collectors into trade unions, cooperatives, and associations, especially in Latin America, and to a lesser extent in Asia.

Workers' cooperatives in several Latin American cities have successfully cut middlemen out of the recycling chain, raised members' incomes dramatically (sometimes well above the minimum wage), secured social services like medical care, and contracted with municipalities to provide waste management services.

In some countries, national alliances have been formed. However, organizations have had little opportunity to interact or come together globally, and the vast majority of waste collectors remain unorganized, unrepresented, and unprotected. Much work still needs to be done to strengthen and support waste collectors' organizations worldwide.

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¹ Medina, Martin. 2005. "Waste Picker Cooperatives in Developing Countries." Paper prepared for WIEGO/Cornell/SEWA Conference on Membership-Based Organizations of the Poor, Ahmedabad, India, January 2005. p. 12

² Ibid., p. 2

³ WIEGO. "Informal Recycling Around the World: Waste Collectors."
http://www.wiego.org/occupational_groups/waste_collectors/index.php.

⁴ Medina, p. 2

⁵ Ibid., p. 14

⁶ WIEGO.

⁷ Medina, p. 10

⁸ WIEGO. "Informal Recycling Around the World: Waste Collectors."
http://www.wiego.org/occupational_groups/waste_collectors/index.php

⁹ Ibid.

HOW WIEGO HELPS

Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing is a global research-policy network that seeks to improve the status of informal workers, especially women, by:

- Conducting research and collecting statistics on the informal economy
- Strengthening the organizational capacity and increasing the visibility of informal workers' groups
- Promoting policy processes that include representatives of informal workers' groups
- Promoting policies that benefit those working in the informal economy

WIEGO supports waste collectors with various research and organizing activities. In addition to studying how urban policies affect waste collectors and other informal workers through its Urban Policies Programme, WIEGO is playing a lead role in organizing an international conference of waste collectors' organizations to be held in early 2008.