



Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing

Waste Pickers

There is growing recognition that waste pickers contribute to the local economy, to public health and safety, and to environmental sustainability. In some countries, waste pickers provide the only form of solid waste collection. However, they often face low social status, experience deplorable living and working conditions, and receive little support from local governments.

In cities located in developing countries, the informal sector plays a key role in waste picking and recycling. In Brazil, for instance, the national official statistical system found that over 229,000 people did this work in 2008. These waste pickers are responsible for the high rates of recycling in Brazil – nearly 92 per cent of aluminium and 80 per cent of cardboard were recycled in 2008 (Dias 2011)¹. In Bamako, Mali, the informal sector is responsible for 85 per cent of the waste management processes (Scheinberg 2012)². A 2007 study by the German Corporation for International Cooperation (GIZ) found waste pickers recovered about 20 per cent of waste material in three of six cities studied. The study found more than 80,000 people were responsible for recycling about 3 million tons per year of waste across the six cities.

Frequently Asked Questions About Waste Pickers

Why do people pick waste?

For centuries, waste has been a resource for poor workers. Waste picking may begin in some contexts as a coping mechanism in conditions of poverty but it can constitute an important income source and cheaper inputs for industry (Dias, 2014³; Medina, 2007).⁴

What is the importance of waste pickers for the cities?

Waste pickers' economic contribution to cities is significant since they reduce cities' costs of waste collection by providing a service that in many places is not available at all, which helps conserve resources. Moreover, their work significantly decreases greenhouse gas emissions in the environment, reduces air pollution, and mitigates the impact on climate change (Dias and Samson, 2016).⁵

Do waste pickers hinder the work of more modern and formal waste systems?

No. In fact, waste pickers subsidize formal solid waste systems in many cities of the developing world, and their informal recycling collection systems provide raw materials at low prices to recycling industries.

Are waste pickers organized?

Although it is true that one of the main features of this work is that it is done most often on an individual basis (or as family work), in several parts of the world waste pickers are increasingly forming organizations which take various shapes: local cooperatives, associations, unions, national associations, and regional networks, and they are also connecting internationally through networking processes. Organizing can be an important dimension for minimizing waste pickers' personal security and health risks. It is also an essential path for strengthening workers' identity and collective action.



"Waste picker sorts the different types of materials at a recycling warehouse, in Belo Horizonte, Brazil" Photo by D. Tomich

Are informal waste pickers only found in developing countries?

Waste picking is also a feature of developed countries, though to a lesser extent. In Vancouver, Canada, waste pickers have organized under the "Binners' Project". In New York, USA, they may be called trash pickers, canners, or magazine scavengers and are credited with recycling up to 60 per cent of recyclable materials – yet they are not acknowledged publicly. Some argue that waste pickers and vendors in New York work in complementary ways, and their presence enhances social order. Waste picking activity has been reported in other cities such as San Francisco, USA, Tokyo, Japan, and many others. In some cases, they are organized, such as in cities in France, Serbia and Italy.

Are there more men than women in the occupation?

A significant number of waste pickers are women, and some are children. In some cities in India, for example,

about 80 per cent of the waste pickers are women; in Brazil, a small-scale study found that 56 per cent of waste picker organizations' members are women. Recently, waste pickers' organizations have been mainstreaming gender issues and women are creating spaces to voice their concerns and interests regarding attaining gender equality in the workplace and in increasing their political participation.

Why are waste pickers not connected to the formal economy?

Actually, they are. According to a survey by the Informal Economy Monitoring Study (IEMS), 75 per cent of waste pickers reported that formal businesses are the main buyers of their products. There are extensive backward and forward linkages between them and formal actors with examples of the formal integration of their work within solid waste systems. Waste pickers reported a range of services that they provide, including transportation, recovery of recyclables, semi-processing, and, in one of the cities, also composting and biogas production.

How can governments better support waste pickers to achieve higher recycling rates?

Waste pickers face a variety of challenges that impact their working conditions and livelihoods. According to the

findings of the Informal Economy Monitoring Study, the two main concerns are related to (1) value chain dynamics and (2) city or government policies. Low prices and price fluctuations were common complaints across the cities related to value chain forces. Lack of policies to protect informal workers and improve their working conditions was also mentioned as significant negative city drivers. A good strategy for accessing government support to boost waste pickers' work performance is to build formal partnerships with local authorities. In Belo Horizonte, Brazil, the municipality has a formal partnership with waste pickers' organizations and supports waste pickers with access to waste, infrastructure, subsidies, and worker education.

Are there examples of cities that have adopted inclusive approaches to recycling?

There are a variety of ways that inclusive recycling can be implemented. But the common departing point is the public authority (local, subnational, or national) recognition that waste pickers work generates a public good – and, thus, they deserve to be compensated. Examples of good practices for inclusive recycling are Bogotá, Colombia, and Buenos Aires, Argentina. Despite their ongoing challenges, they have managed to forge an agreement with public authorities and they currently get compensation for the public service they provide.

Facts from WIEGO's Informal Economy Monitoring Study (IEMS)

WIEGO conducted a quantitative research survey with 760 waste pickers in five cities – Belo Horizonte, Brazil; Bogota, Colombia; Pune, India; Nakuru, Kenya; and Durban, South Africa – who were divided in 75 focus groups. The study generated the following findings:

Issues

- 25 % reported having another work activity
- 80 % of waste pickers had some primary or secondary schooling
- 63 % of waste pickers in Belo Horizonte said they have experienced support from the city, compared to 26 % or less in the other four cities
- 97 % of waste pickers in Bogota and Durban said social exclusion was a problem in their work.

Contributions

- 75 % of waste pickers reported that formal businesses are the main buyers of their products
- 34 % of waste pickers use municipal services as part of their work, generating revenue for cities
- 65 % of waste pickers said that earnings from their work were the main source of household income
- Almost 90 % regulations and by-laws regarding waste are a problem, and about 80 % said harassment is a problem.

References

- ¹ Dias, S. (2011). Statistics on Waste Pickers in Brazil. WIEGO Statistical Brief n° 2.
- ² Dias, S. IPSA Congress 2014 (2014). Waste and Citizenship Forum's Trajectories – Achievements and Challenges.
- ³ Dias S. and Samson M. (2016). Informal Economy Monitoring Study Sector Report: Waste Pickers. WIEGO.
- ⁴ Medina, M. (2007). The World's Scavengers: Salvaging for Sustainable Consumption and Production. Plymouth: Altamira Press.
- ⁵ Scheinberg, A. (2012). Informal Sector Integration and High Performance Recycling: Evidence from 20 Cities. WIEGO Working Paper (Urban Policies) n° 23.

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