



# Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing

## INFORMAL WORKERS IN FOCUS: WASTE PICKERS IN BRAZIL <sup>1</sup>



In the current economic downturn, the job of waste picker has taken on new importance as an employment opportunity for those with limited education and skills. Moreover, waste picking is increasingly recognized as making a valuable contribution to global environmental efforts and the development of cities.

Brazil has been at the forefront of efforts to organize waste pickers and to improve their situation and livelihood. Research and activism by NGOs and worker cooperatives on behalf of waste pickers has been ongoing in Brazil for many years. This work led to the official recognition of waste picking in the Brazilian Classification of Occupations (CBO). The definition of the category was developed in a seminar with representatives of municipal environmental groups, waste picker cooperatives and national statistical authorities. Together they identified all of the activities carried out by waste pickers. Since its adoption in 2002, the waste picker category has been used in all relevant data collection efforts in the country.<sup>2</sup> This includes both the National Research by Household Sample (PNAD<sup>3</sup>), which is the main source of social and economical data in the country, and the Annual Listing of Social Information (RAIS<sup>4</sup>), which provides data on commercial establishments, including those that employ waste pickers. In addition the national statistical agency in Brazil has made statistics available by means of CD-ROM and the Internet. All of these initiatives provide unique information on waste pickers.

In the past, waste pickers in Brazil worked mainly on their own on streets and in dumpsites. However, more recently waste pickers have worked under more varied arrangements. Three types of waste pickers can now be identified:

- 1) The **unorganized** or **autonomous** waste picker who makes a living picking or buying recyclable materials on the streets or in waste dumps and selling it to junk shops. These workers are not connected to waste pickers associations or cooperatives, although they may sometimes sell the collected materials to these associations
- 2) The **organized** waste pickers who work through cooperatives and associations. Many of these waste pickers have worked in the occupation for more than ten years, as opposed to having begun the work recently during the economic downturn.
- 3) The **waste picker with a contract** who works mainly in junk yards or in the metallurgic industrial sector, but also in the public municipal sector or in associations and cooperatives.<sup>5</sup> Workers with contracts is an often unrecognized category of waste picker. The data on enterprises in the RAIS database provide a new and rich source of information on this category (Crivellari, Dias et al., 2008).

Data collected by Brazil's official statistical system show that over a quarter million persons in Brazil are engaged in waste picking. While perhaps small in numbers considering the size of the country, these workers are responsible for the high rates of recycling in Brazil. CEMPRE,<sup>6</sup> a not for profit association dedicated to promoting recycling within the context of integrated waste management in Brazil, published data<sup>7</sup> showing nearly 92 per cent of aluminium and 80 per cent of cardboard in Brazil was recycled in 2008. The organization's database, Ciclosoft 2008, also shows that only 7 per cent of municipalities have implemented official source-segregation schemes. Thus the high rates of recycling are achieved mainly by waste pickers (be they organized or non-organized) working outside municipal recycling programmes.

Data also show that 5 per cent of waste pickers have a contract and work under relatively good conditions, most working with pay that is three or four times the national minimum average. Almost two-thirds of waste pickers are men and the predominance of men is even greater (80%) among those working with a contract. However while official data is not available on the second type of waste pickers described above – those in cooperatives and associations – small scale studies show that over half of these workers are women.



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**All types of waste pickers (from PNAD):**

- Waste pickers: 229,568
- 67 per cent are men and 33 per cent are women
- 25 per cent are 50-64 years and 7 per cent are over 65 years
- Only 14 per cent of men and 6 per cent of women attended school
- Approximately 4.5 per cent have a formal contract.

**Waste pickers with a formal contract (from RAIS):**

- 11,781 waste pickers have a formal contract
- 95 per cent have a contract for an undetermined period of time
- 80 per cent are men and 20 percent are women
- 98 per cent of those receiving between three and four times the minimum wage are men; women are only 2 per cent of this group.
- 80 per cent of waste pickers with a contract have levels of education beyond 4th grade and over 60 per cent have an 8th grade or higher education
- Organizations employing waste pickers are spread throughout the various branches of economic activity: waste and junk retailers are the largest at 17 per cent of the total, followed by material and recovery class businesses and the metallurgic industry.

**Waste pickers in associations and cooperatives (small scale studies):**

- 56 per cent are women and 44 per cent are men<sup>8</sup>
- Increasing numbers of women are employed as waste pickers in associations and cooperatives – from 18 per cent in 1993 to 55 per cent in 1998.<sup>9</sup>

- 1 Based on Helena Maria Tarchi Crivellari, Sonia Maria Dias and André de Souza Pena, “Informação e trabalho: uma leitura sobre os catadores de material reciclável a partir das bases públicas de dados” in: V.H. Kemp, & H.M.T. Crivellari, *Catadores na Cena Urbana: Construção de Políticas Socioambientais*. Belo Horizonte: Autêntica Editora 2008.
- 2 In the 2002 Brazilian Classification of Occupations (CBO), waste pickers – category 5192 – are defined as those who pick, select and sell recyclable material such as paper, cardboard, glass, ferrous and non-ferrous and other reusable materials, whether working on their own or organized in associations or cooperatives as employees. This contrasts to the category in the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO), which includes not only the collection of recyclables but also other types of solid household waste. In Brazil, household waste collection is done by formal solid waste systems, not by informal refuse collectors.
- 3 PNAD is carried out by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) annually between the Censuses. It provides information on work, population, education, income, etc. Because it is household based, it permits identification of persons who work informally, including waste pickers.
- 4 RAIS is a national administrative register of the Ministry of Labour and Employment updated annually. Employers are obliged to declare the occupational status of each employee in continued employment. With the inclusion of waste picking as a category in the Brazil Classification of Occupations, waste pickers formally employed by commercial establishments are now identified in RAIS.
- 5 In Brazil a worker with a *Carterira de trabalho* (CT) is covered by a body of labour laws – *Consolidacao das Leis do Trabalho* (CLT) – which contains rules for fair labour relations, including a minimum wage, work hours, 30 days of vacation per year, entitlement to insurance, retirement pay, six months unemployment wages and other rights. Workers with a CT are in formal jobs and have the CT for life whether in temporary or continuous employment
- 6 Business Commitment for Recycling - CEMPRE is a 15 year old Brazilian association. Its members include: ALCOA, GERDAU, Coca Cola, Gessy-Lever and others ([www.cempre.org](http://www.cempre.org))
- 7 Source: Technical Notes series (“Ficha Técnica Alumínio” and “Ficha Técnica Papel Ondulado”) at [www.cempre.org](http://www.cempre.org). The recycling rates for aluminium are based on data collected by Abal and Abralatas, the Brazilian Association of Aluminium Recyclers.
- 8 Data were collected in 2007 by CATAUNIDOS – a commercial network of nine cooperative enterprises in the Belo Horizonte Metropolitan Area and published in INSTITUTO NENUCA DE DESENVOLVIMENTO SUSTENTÁVEL. *Perfil sócio-econômico dos catadores da rede CATAUNIDOS – 2007*. Belo Horizonte: INSEA/UFMG/FELC, 2007. 31 p. Relatório.
- 9 S.M. DIAS, *Construindo a cidadania: avanços e limites do Projeto de Coleta Seletiva em parceria com a ASMARE*. 2002. Dissertação (Mestrado em Geografia) - Instituto de Geociências, Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, Belo Horizonte, 2002

**HOW WIEGO HELPS**

The WIEGO network seeks to improve the status of the working poor in the informal economy, especially women, through support for increased organization and representation; improved statistics and research; more inclusive policy processes; and more equitable trade, labour, urban planning, and social protection policies.

WIEGO's Urban Policies Programme supports waste pickers through research, policy analysis, good practice documentation, and policy dialogues. WIEGO's Organization & Representation Programme supports the building and strengthening of national, regional, and international alliances of waste picker organizations. In addition, WIEGO and many partners are part of a global project called Inclusive Cities, in which organizations of waste pickers and other urban informal workers are key partners.