



Women in Informal Employment:  
Globalizing and Organizing

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# The Art of Recovery

## A Johannesburg Reclaimer's Story

*by Leslie Vryenhoek*

Ernestine Mohloboli has long been a supporter and active participant in organizing workers, like herself, who make a living collecting waste in Johannesburg. For years, many reclaimers were skeptical and reluctant to join. But when COVID-19 shut down their livelihoods, the African Reclaimers' Organisation became a lifeline.







*Ernestine Mohloboli (cover, above and opposite) once designed jewellery for a living, but her business was stolen. Now, she earns her income by gathering and reselling waste paper and beverage containers from Johannesburg betting shops.*

*All photos: Jonathan Torgovnik/Getty Images Reportage*



**E**rnestine Mohloboli was an artist with a passion for designing her own jewellery. And she was good at it—good enough for sales to keep a roof over her head. Good enough, in fact, to be awarded an opportunity to travel and display her unique African designs in Montreal, Canada—a city far away from her South African home.

Good enough, it turned out, to attract the attention of unscrupulous buyers from foreign markets who came to buy her jewellery and then mass produced it and sold it at a much cheaper price.

“We thought they were just customers,” she recalls. “We didn’t know they were duplicating our work.”

Before long, competition from the cheap replicas destroyed the business Ernestine and a few others had spent seven years building. She tried a few other ventures, but nothing worked out.

It was during this bleak time, more than five years ago, that Ernestine made the acquaintance of an older woman who seemed to live “more comfortably”—though all Ernestine had ever seen the woman do was collect used cardboard. When she asked about it, the woman invited Ernestine to tag along. It only took a few days for Ernestine to see the value of collecting what others had tossed away. And in those few days, the older woman recognized in Ernestine the tenacity required to survive as a reclaimer.<sup>1</sup>

“It’s all up to you,” Ernestine recalled the woman telling her. “It’s your own strength that will pay you.” She taught her willing pupil how to make a living in a competitive industry. Most importantly, she told Ernestine to secure a place for herself, to find her niche.

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<sup>1</sup> In Johannesburg, waste pickers typically call themselves “reclaimers”.



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Ernestine did just that. She set her sights on betting establishments and the proliferation of white paper waste they produce. White paper is a material that tends to hold its value<sup>2</sup>; the only better bet in fluctuating recycling markets is steel. She went from betting shop to betting shop, talking to managers, until she found two that had plenty of scrap paper at the end of each night, along with bottles and cans, and no one else collecting their waste. There was just one catch: betting took place every day, so she had to commit to working every day.

Ernestine agreed, and a reclaiming career was born. “When I started, I didn’t think I’d be doing it long,” she admitted. “But I’m my own boss, I do things my way. Slowly, I fell in love with it.”

### Long and tiring days

Ernestine shared this story in November 2018, when she agreed to be interviewed and photographed during WIEGO’s General Assembly in Johannesburg.<sup>3</sup>

Back then she made a decent living, but her days were long and arduous. She collected in the evenings, walking 45 minutes to the furthest establishment and then dragging 40-50 kilograms of material on her trolley back to her sorting facility.

That facility is really an abandoned, low-slung warehouse that she and a few dozen others have taken over, each carving out space for their storage. The interior is dark, even in daylight. There’s no electricity and no running water—no place to wash up when the work is done.

Just having such a place is fortunate. Storage is crucial to a reclaimer’s success because buyers pay more for larger amounts of most materials. Ernestine waits until she has accumulated a few hundred kilograms—the heaviest load she can pull—before taking it to sell at a local scrap buyer.

She rarely made it home to the apartment she shared with friends much before midnight. She would eat and finally get to bed, only to be awoken as other apartment dwellers began closing doors and clattering down stairs in the early hours. By 8am she’d be back at work, sorting the materials from the night before.

<sup>2</sup> In late November 2018, white paper was fetching about R2.50/kilogram (USD .175). By 2020, it was up over R3/kilogram (USD .187).

<sup>3</sup> *Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing*—WIEGO—is global network of membership-based organizations, along with researchers and development practitioners, that engage with informal workers. Every four years, WIEGO holds a General Assembly where its members vote on strategic direction.

While she didn’t mind the seven-days-a-week schedule—her days had a rhythm that suited her energy—she was often very tired. A few hours of afternoon rest on the weekends was her only respite from the grind.

Her only respite, that is, until everything ground to a halt at the end of March 2020, when South Africa imposed one of the most stringent lockdowns in the world in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Getting organized

In 2018, reclaiming wasn’t the only thing keeping Ernestine busy. A few years earlier, she’d learned about a project that was helping to organize reclaimers.

WIEGO had launched the project, called Waste Integration in South Africa<sup>4</sup> (WISA), in partnership with the NGO GroundWork and the national South African Waste Pickers Association<sup>5</sup> (SAWPA). At the time, there was little formal organization among Johannesburg’s thousands of street reclaimers. Like Ernestine, most prefer to work independently and manage their own affairs; many have learned to distrust anyone who shows up promising to help. But in 2016, when WISA organizer Eli Kodisang came to where Ernestine sorts her material and explained the project and its benefits, she was intrigued. Her colleagues suggested she attend a meeting and find out more.

“I was chosen because I speak English,” she recalled. In fact, Ernestine’s English is impeccable. Raised in the Free State province, she is the daughter of a school teacher and an auditor, and her articulate manner and sharp intellect point to a solid education. “I said, ‘let me go and hear.’”

She liked what she heard. Until she became involved with WISA, Ernestine said she didn’t realize the vital role informal reclaimers play in their municipal waste management system. The tens of thousands<sup>6</sup> of people who divert materials from the waste stream are responsible for as much as **90 per cent of plastic and packaging recycling** in South Africa (Harrisberg 2019) and **save municipalities about R750 million<sup>7</sup>** in landfill costs. And they do this work without any government compensation for their service.

<sup>4</sup> The WISA project, which received funding from the Commonwealth Foundation, was designed to operate for three years across the municipalities of Johannesburg, Tshwane (Pretoria) and Sasolburg.

<sup>5</sup> Founded in 2009, SAWPA is a national association with affiliates in eight South African provinces.

<sup>6</sup> South Africa’s Department of Environmental Affairs **has estimated that 60-90,000 people** earn income by recycling what others have thrown away (Godfrey and Oelofse 2017).

<sup>7</sup> Equivalent to about USD45.2 million, based on the rand’s 2020 average of about R16.6 to USD1.



*Ernestine found two betting shops that had plenty of scrap paper at the end of each night, along with bottles and cans, and no one else collecting their waste.*

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Learning this, Ernestine could see the potential power of reclaimers if they united with a common voice. She became enthusiastically involved. Many others, however, remained skeptical.

### A first victory against privatization

Soon after she became involved, a new threat galvanized waste pickers. Pikitup, the municipal-owned waste management service provider for the City of Johannesburg, contracted private companies to collect separated-at-source recyclables from residential areas (Carr 2017). Reclaimers organized a **massive protest in the streets**. It was an historic coming together and helped forge a sense of common identity.

Their demands included respect for their right to work, suspension of private contracts, and an end to harassment and violence by authorities. They asked for sorting and storage facilities. And most significantly, they wanted the city to undertake a registration programme that officially recognized them as part of the waste management system. This, they stressed, must include identification cards for all working waste pickers—South Africans and immigrants alike. It was a crucial point, since immigrants from Lesotho and other neighbouring countries make up a large majority of Johannesburg's reclaimers, Ernestine explained.

The protests swayed Pikitup. The signing of new contracts was halted, and Pikitup's managing director **acknowledged reclaimers as key stakeholders** in waste management and suggested a process of structured engagement (Carr 2017). However, the city remained unwilling to meet reclaimers' demands.

While ARO did have some access to a truck before the pandemic, they had to pay for fuel. The Japanese government's donation of this truck in October was a great help. The donation, part of a UN Industrial Development Organization initiative, covers insurance, maintenance and fuel for two years. Photo: Jane Barrett



### A new voice

Johannesburg's reclaimers, determined to create a strong, united voice, voted to form a new, democratic, membership-based organization. The African Reclaimers Organisation (ARO) was officially launched in September 2018. Ernestine became a key organizer and, due to her proficiency in communicating, helped provide administrative support.

In 2018, Ernestine said an official registration system was her greatest hope because it would provide recognition and legitimacy. One key benefit: armed with identity cards, registered reclaimers would be less vulnerable to harassment from police and other security forces.

The city finally began a pilot registration, with ARO doing much of the work. When ARO requested a stipend or other support, they were met with a bureaucratic refusal, so they stepped away. The city then put out a tender for a service provider—but the tender made it clear that only South Africans would be registered. Under pressure from ARO, the city stopped the process, but the relationship had soured.<sup>8</sup>

ARO shifted to a new tactic. Rather than engage with the city, they poured their energy into building alliances with corporations and relationships with residents and caretakers of residential complexes, schools and commercial properties to access waste.

This was no easy undertaking. Most residential neighbourhoods in Johannesburg were hostile to the reclaimers. Security forces, hired by residents, often drove them out. But after the collapse of the registration talks with the city in 2018, concerted **awareness, information and relationship building efforts** have been turning the tide (Creamer Media 2020). ARO has made countless presentations to residents and has provided recycling bins and bags. They have started a recycling programme in schools, in partnership with Coca-Cola. They have also actively partnered with suburban residents to clean up the city's rivers, alongside which many reclaimers live.

All of this helped shift perceptions. That shift accelerated during the COVID-19 crisis, when the relationships ARO was building became lifesavers.

### Finding support under full lockdown

South Africa announced its complete lockdown on March 23, 2020. Although reclaimers demanded they **be deemed an essential service**, citing their crucial role in reducing landfill loads, the government again

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ARO members deliver relief parcels. Photo: Jane Barrett

<sup>8</sup> Information from a conversation with Jane Barrett, Director of Organization and Representation for WIEGO.



Many reclaimers' households experienced severe hunger during the first phase of the lockdown, but if they went outside in search of recyclables or food, reclaimers faced police violence.

refused to recognize their work. This left thousands of reclaimers like Ernestine with no earnings at all.

"Because their livelihood is day-to-day income, the rug was just pulled out from under them when the lockdown was announced," said WIEGO's Vanessa Pillay. Despite how vulnerable they were in normal times, she said, reclaimers always knew they could go out again tomorrow and earn something to survive. Suddenly, that lifeline was severed.

The situation was dire. Many reclaimers' households experienced severe hunger during the first phase of the lockdown, but if they went outside in search of recyclables or food, **reclaimers faced police violence**.

And then alliances began paying off. When ARO set up a **Go-Fund-Me campaign**<sup>9</sup> to support relief efforts, donations poured in. And after both SAWPA and ARO consulted with the national government, reclaimers were **included in the Solidarity Response Fund**, which provided emergency food parcels during the lockdown. ARO was given permission to **deliver food packages** in association with the Department of Environment and Coca-Cola South Africa.

### Life as lockdown eased

After a month in lockdown, reclaimers were finally allowed to go out to work when the South African government reduced its crisis response level.

But for Ernestine, all bets were off—literally. In mid-June, she explained that betting houses remained closed, cutting off her steady supply of white paper. She was collecting in the streets, mostly cardboard, but the price was very low. She'd survived for more than a month with no income at all; now she was just getting by.

She wasn't alone. Industry disruptions, closed borders and very low prices for material exacerbated the hardships for reclaimers. Some materials, notably reclaimed plastic, had lost all their value even before the pandemic hit due to the worldwide collapse of oil prices; this made it cheaper to manufacture virgin plastic.

### ARO steps up relief

ARO used the money it raised to deliver relief parcels to reclaimers and their communities. Jane Barrett, who led the WISA project for WIEGO, said ARO distributed over 7,000 parcels by the end of September (4,700 through its crowdfunding initiative, 2,000 as part of

<sup>9</sup> The campaign surpassed its R250,000 goal by June and kept growing. See <https://www.backabuddy.co.za/champion/project/aro-solidarity>



Reclaimers and ARO organizers Scelo Sithole and Luyanda Hlatshwayo at work in a Johannesburg neighbourhood.

the Coca-Cola/government relief project, and 650 in partnership with the NGO Gift of the Givers).

ARO Chairperson Eva Mokoena, who pulls a trolley herself when she isn't negotiating some of ARO's biggest achievements, explained that providing help to reclaimers does not depend on where they are from or even whether they are ARO members. "When we see a need, we go," she explained.

"We have to work together and put trust between the workers," Eva said. "We are all facing the same tragedy. I am willing to fight with all I have to make sure the workers get what they deserve."

### Residential relations lead to relief

After the global pandemic took hold, private contractors for the city's separation-at-source programmes—the ones who were supposed to get exclusive access to residential neighbourhoods—stopped collecting because most material had no value. Soon ARO began receiving calls.

"These are not the type of people who want rubbish piling up in their house for more than a week," explained ARO organizer Luyanda Hlatshwayo. "We found ourselves having to make solutions for residents."

Neighbourhoods that not long before had wanted informal reclaimers kept out were now inviting them in.

To manage the reclaimers' risk of contracting the coronavirus from contaminated waste, ARO arranged to pick up trash from the residential areas and transport it to a centralized

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Eva Mokoena—like women the world over—must juggle working and raising children. Eva relies on her mother, a reclaimer now in her seventies, to provide care while Eva earns an income.

drop-off spot. The material sits for a few days before reclaimers gather to sort it. At the site, team leaders communicate the risks and share prevention strategies such as social distancing. Hand sanitizer and masks are provided.

According to Luyanda, while few materials are marketable in 2020, the lack of privatized competition for residential waste allows reclaimers to find ample amounts of the metals and paper that do hold value. Reclaimers want to stockpile other materials until markets open up, though it is challenging without a sorting and storage facility.

The ability to adapt to a crisis is not just vital for reclaimers—it's good neighbourhood relations. Before the pandemic, ARO had established a mutually beneficial relationship in five residential areas. In 2020, that number grew to 11 areas across the city's suburbs.

### A thriving organization

Membership in ARO is expanding just as fast. Before the pandemic struck, ARO officially estimated its membership to be about 4,000 members. In June, however, organizers on the ground insisted the numbers were much higher—and growing. They were right. Membership had officially increased to about 5,360 by the end of September, and both Eli and Eva said they believe that membership could exceed 10,000 by the time the COVID-19 crisis is over.

Ernestine agrees. "We are growing—much more than before. Now we are stronger."

Ernestine was in a stronger position by September, too. Betting establishments had been allowed to re-open and white paper continued to fetch over R3/kilogram in 2020.<sup>10</sup> However, what had decreased was the supply. Ernestine pointed out that the economy overall has taken a hit and people have lost their jobs, so fewer are gambling. Those who do have money have the option of gambling online, to avoid the risk of infection.

Nonetheless, she feels more confident about the future. The COVID-19 crisis, she said, has convinced many skeptics to seek out the support of the organization that is run by and for reclaimers.

By being on the ground, helping in concrete ways—whether delivering food parcels, sanitizer and masks or bringing recycling to a centralized location so reclaimers

<sup>10</sup> The price did drop significantly in December, which happens every year as buyers plan holidays and prefer to slow their purchasing so they won't have to store materials while they are away. This annual decline hits reclaimers hard, since few are in a position to store a lot of material. Public funding for storage and sorting facilities is another key demand of reclaimers.

can work more safely—ARO has proven it can make an immediate and relevant difference in the lives of reclaimers while it continues the fight for longer-term change.

"There were people who were doubtful, who never believed much in the organization. But now they are having difficulties, they remember that...there is somebody who can help. They see they are not just alone," Ernestine said. "Now they so much believe."

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"We are growing—much more than before. Now we are stronger."





*Ernestine and a few dozen other reclaimers make use of an abandoned warehouse to sort and store the materials they collect.*



#### About the Author

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#### About WIEGO

Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) is a global network focused on empowering the working poor, especially women, in the informal economy to secure their livelihoods. We believe all workers should have equal economic opportunities, rights, protection and voice. WIEGO promotes change by improving statistics and expanding knowledge on the informal economy, building networks and capacity among informal worker organizations and, jointly with the networks and organizations, influencing local, national and international policies. Visit [www.wiego.org](http://www.wiego.org)