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## INFORMAL WASTE WORKERS: THE ISSUE OF FORMALISATION

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ISSUE BRIEF

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## ABSTRACT

This issue brief aims to understand the provisions to formalise the work of informal waste workers in India. It looks at the relevant policy actions and tries to identify existing gaps in the implementation of such actions. It also dwells briefly on the socio-economic precarity that is the primary feature of the work and lives of waste workers in India.

## INTRODUCTION

Of the 62 million tonnes of waste produced in India annually, around 75-80% is collected by municipal bodies and only 22-28% of waste is processed and treated (Sambyal 2018). Around 20% of this waste is processed and recycled by informal waste workers. Rough estimates indicate that India has at least 3 million waste workers, with estimates by The World Bank suggesting that 1-2% of India's population could be engaged in informal waste recycling (Alliance of Indian Wastepickers 2019: 4). Delhi alone has approximately 500,000 waste workers (Bose and Bhattacharya 2017).

The term “waste worker” or “waste picker” refers to a person or group of people who are informally engaged in the collection and recovery of reusable and recyclable waste from multiple sites of waste generation such as streets, bins, material recovery facilities, processing and waste disposal facilities for sale to recyclers directly or with the help of mediators in order to earn their living (Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change 2016). Informal waste workers play a critical role in supplementing solid waste management systems across urban areas, not just in India but also in other developing countries. Their activities help improve resource-use efficiency and are crucial to environmental protection efforts as they can recover up to 20% of municipal waste through a low-cost self-financing model (Gunsilius et al. 2011). It is estimated that Indian waste workers reduce around 6.8 megatons of carbon emissions through recycling every year, thus playing a key role in climate change mitigation (Alliance of Indian Wastepickers 2019: 5).

Formalising the work of waste workers and integrating them into municipal solid waste management can not only improve their living and working conditions (discussed in the next section) but also make waste management more cost-efficient, as waste handling and transportation costs are reduced, land use for garbage dumps is reduced, and recovered waste, particularly plastics, can be supplied to manufacturers (ibid).

## | SOCIO-ECONOMIC PROFILE OF WASTE WORKERS

A majority of waste workers in cities are Dalits, poor Muslims, and landless migrants, i.e. people at the bottom of the socioeconomic hierarchy who are forced to work with waste on a daily basis to earn a living (Doron and Jeffrey 2018). For instance, in Pune, waste workers overwhelmingly belong to Scheduled Castes (Chikarmane 2014). In Delhi, 80% of waste workers are Bengali Muslims; and it is observed that in this occupation, the lower the caste, the dirtier is the nature of waste work (Eswaran 2013). Additionally, women waste workers, facing the bind of double marginalisation, earn less than men (WIEGO n.d.). While the men occupy the “transactional” segment of this profession that involves buying and selling dry waste from households, women and children are involved in “retrieving and sorting” waste (Shankar and Sahni 2018).

As per the Informal Economy Monitoring Study (IEMS), most waste pickers cannot rely on any government grants or social security. The study shows that in Pune, 33% waste workers have access to health insurance; only 5% live in households that have access to pensions; and 13% live in households with access to government grants (Chikarmane 2014). Results from the IEMS also indicate that collecting and sorting waste is the main source of income for 65% of waste workers whereas 15% also rely on income from informal work done by other members of the household. Only 8% of waste workers live in households where income comes from formal wage employment (ibid.).

The nature of this work has meant that, traditionally, waste workers have been looked down upon by the rest of society, making harassment and abuse a routine feature of their lives. In a study by WIEGO, 47% of waste workers expressed that harassment was a key issue affecting their work life (WIEGO n.d.).

There are also obvious health impacts owing to the unhygienic working environments of waste workers. They are vulnerable to cuts, infections, and respiratory diseases, among other issues (Bose and Bhattacharya 2017). A cross-sectional study conducted with waste workers in Kerala found a high prevalence of respiratory diseases, eye diseases, dermatological issues, nail infections and other health problems (Jayakrishnan et al. 2013).

It is also vital to note that, currently, waste workers in India are not legally allowed to deal with waste by most state municipalities (barring places where their work has been formalised) and due to this, they are considered to be committing theft under the Indian Penal Code, 1860 (Naaz 2019). The presence of child waste workers is also a violation of the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986 (Mhaskar 2019). Since waste workers are primarily self-employed, unlike other professions, there are no legal provisions with respect to hygienic working conditions and workplace security in place for them.

The socio-economic reality of the lives of waste workers as well as the essentiality of their work for effective waste management necessitates legal, social, and economic safeguards through policy action. However, a brief look at existing policy pertaining to this section of the population reveals weak implementation even after the recognition of the issue and recommendations by successive committees and government notifications.

## I POLICY ACTION

The very first policy on waste management in India came in the form of the Municipal Solid Waste (Management and Handling) Rules (MSWM Rules) in 2000. These rules did not address waste workers in particular, their role in waste management, or any aspect of their work (MoEFCC 2000). Before and after these rules were put into place, however, various working groups and high-powered committees were commissioned that emphasised on understanding the role of the informal waste recycling sector in solid waste management. The following table gives a brief overview of such committees/reports.

TABLE 1: POLICY DELIBERATIONS ON ROLE OF WASTE WORKERS IN WASTE MANAGEMENT SINCE THE 1990s

Committee/Report	Recommendations on Waste Workers
National Waste Management Committee, 1990	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>One of its aims was to identify recyclable waste collected by waste workers (Joshi and Ahmed 2016:12).</li> </ul>
Bajaj Committee, 1995	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Recommended replacing the informal sector scavenging from dumps and disposal grounds by organised ward-level recycling and recovery centres which could be managed by NGOs (Chintan Environmental Research and Action Group 2018).</li> <li>Recommended that waste workers be employed by municipal authorities (Ibid.).</li> </ul>
Asim Burman Committee, 1999	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Recommended the formalisation of the work of waste pickers to collect recyclable waste from shops and establishments (Ibid.).</li> </ul>
National Environment Policy, 2006	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Emphasised giving legal recognition to the informal recycling sector (Ibid.).</li> <li>Recommended focusing on enhancing institutional finance and relevant technologies for waste pickers (Reddy and Kumar 2018).</li> </ul>
CAG Audit on Municipal Solid Waste, 2008	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Recommended states to focus on legal recognition of waste workers to provide them with better working conditions and make waste management more organised (Chintan Environmental Research and Action Group 2018).</li> </ul>
The National Action Plan, 2009	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Acknowledged that due to certain regulations by municipalities, the informal recycling sector faces various challenges with respect to finance and technology (Ibid.).</li> </ul>

Sixteen years after the MSWM Rules of 2000, the central government notified the revised Solid Waste Management Rules of 2016. The revised rules, along with the Swachh Bharat Mission (Urban) play an imperative role in supporting waste workers and have made specific provisions to formalise their work. The rules list out the following duties for urban local bodies (ULBs) as well as the secretary-in-charge of Urban Development in states and UTs regarding waste workers:

- Preparation of a state-level and local-level solid waste management strategy in consultation with representatives of waste pickers, self-help groups and other similar groups, which should acknowledge their primary role in reducing waste and provide broad guidelines for their integration in the waste management system.
- Setting up of a system to recognise organisations of waste pickers or informal waste collectors and to integrate these authorised waste-pickers and waste collectors to facilitate their participation in solid waste management, including door-to-door collection of waste.
- Provision of identity cards for waste pickers and self-help groups.
- Provision of training on solid waste management to waste pickers and waste collectors (MoEFCC 2016).

## IMPLEMENTATION SO FAR

As per the Swachh Survekshan 2019 report, three years after the rules were notified, only 537 out of 4237 surveyed ULBs in India have identified and integrated 1.2 lakh informal waste workers within their cities. Furthermore, a large number of these ULBs (87%) seem to have not followed through on the duties listed regarding the integration of waste workers in the 2016 rules (MoHUA 2019).

The reasons for this slow progress aren't as clear though. While Swachh Survekshan 2019 lists out best practices across top-ranked cities in the country in cleanliness and waste management, it doesn't dwell on the shortcomings of lower-ranked ULBs, or for that matter, where the best performers could improve. However, a look at existing literature could help one understand the possible reasons for the slow progress in formalisation.

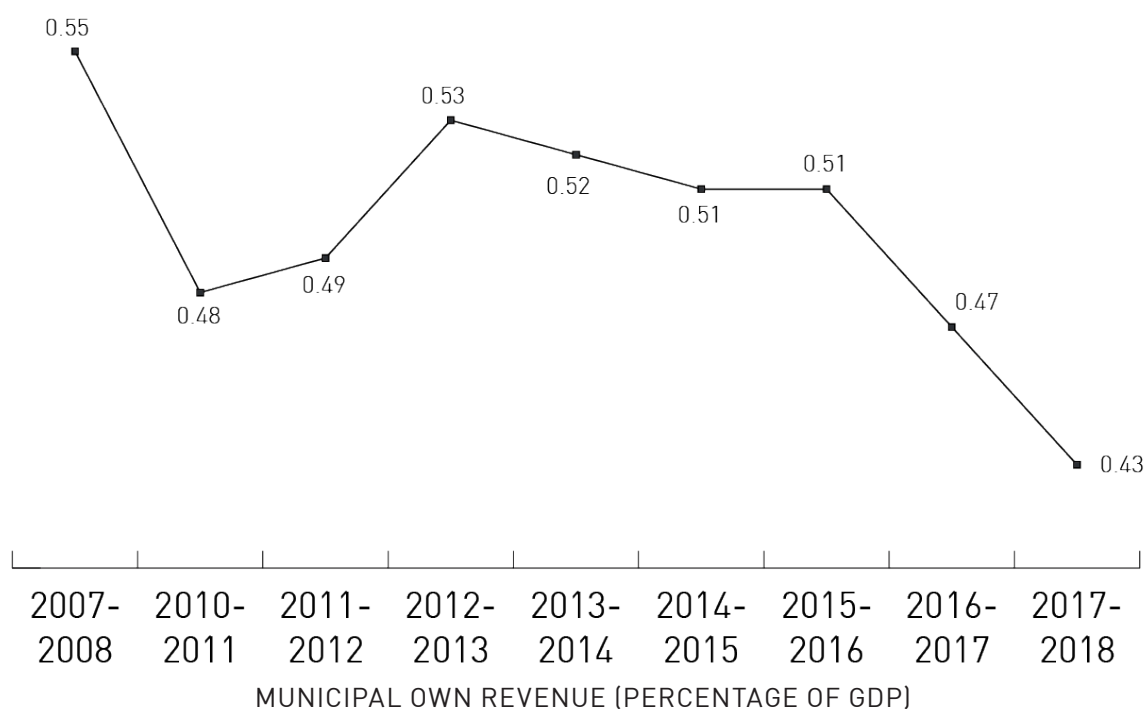
Formalisation and integration of waste workers into urban solid waste management systems require interventions at the level of policy, institutions, society, finance, and technology. The barriers to formalisation also fall within the same five levels of intervention. Though the MSWM Rules 2016 cover all five of these to varying degrees, the uptake of the rules depends on the willingness and existing capacity of urban local bodies.

In general, ULBs in India suffer from issues like inadequate funding, lack of appropriate technology, and lack of trained staff, among others (Rajkumar and Sirajuddin 2016). The estimated total municipal revenue for India is INR 1 lakh crore, most of which goes into payment of staff salaries, pensions, and operational expenses, leaving barely anything for capital expenditure and restricting the ability of ULBs to take up new projects (Ahluwalia et al 2019: 5).

Most ULBs fund their MSWM activities through government grants, internal revenues, or PPP arrangements; very few take up loans (Ministry of Urban Development 2016). Over the last decade,

declining municipal revenues (Figure 1) have been outpaced by the increasing needs of India's urban centres. This has also weakened the financial autonomy of ULBs and increased their dependence on state funds (Ahluwalia et al. 2019: 7). Thus, the lack of financial support for ULBs leads to a lack of infrastructure, leading to failed implementation of policy recommendations (Joshi and Ahmed 2016).

FIGURE 1: TREND IN MUNICIPAL REVENUE DURING 2007-2018



Source - Ahluwalia et al. 2019

Note - Data for 2008-2009 and 2009-2010, unavailable

There are other persistent barriers, too, that might disincentivise ULBs from implementing the measures under the MSWM rules. For instance, even among cities like Pune and Mumbai, where waste workers have been integrated into the MSWM system, financial and other barriers persist. While in Pune citizens have low willingness to pay waste workers for door-to-door collection of waste, in Mumbai, community participation seems to be lacking (Aparcana 2016: 8).

## CONCLUSION

Formalisation of waste workers is essential for their empowerment, environmental protection, climate change mitigation efforts, and making municipal solid waste management cost-effective. However, progress on this front has not picked up pace. There is a need for the government to evolve a mechanism whereby the performance of ULBs can be critically evaluated, particularly when it comes to recognising the work of and integrating informal waste workers. There are, of course, identifiable financial constraints for ULBs in this context which need to be addressed through policy measures that encourage ULBs to supplement their revenue through an increase in taxes as well as market investments.

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