Dusting the Dawn
A Participatory Research
Towards understanding Women Sanitation Workers and their world of work in Muzzafarpur, Bihar
1.1 million Sanitation workers keep Indian cities clean. They are primarily engaged in sewer cleaning, septic tank cleaning, railway cleaning, and community/public toilet cleaning. More than half a million urban sanitation workers are women who are mostly engaged in cleaning of toilets, drains and streets. Swachh Bharat Mission Urban (SBM-U) promises not only to make India clean but also to improve the lives and work conditions of sanitation workers. However, specific policy amendments and their enforcement are required to achieve this goal.

It is worth noting that important policy decisions such as PEMS (Prevention and Elimination of Manual Scavenging and Rehabilitation), 2013 which prevents the practices of manual scavenging have been enforced. However, the Act defines picking up the human waste as faecal sludge in sewer, septic tank and pit latrines only. This limits the application of Act and leaves out the sanitation workers dealing with human and animal waste on roads and drains as well as those who deal with solid waste, drain cleaning and street sweeping. The Act also fails to ensure that urban local bodies provide safe working conditions for these workers.

Policies that indirectly imply to scheduled castes such as Prevention of Atrocities Act, 1989 are unable to prevent discrimination against people belonging to these communities and continue to be employed as sanitation workers by the municipalities since generations. Under the directive of the central government, the government of Bihar has laid down provisions in order to protect the marginalised communities by providing scholarships for children belonging to SC/ST and OBC communities. The main objective of is to prevent the drop out of children from schools and colleges. Similarly, National Safai Karmchari Development Corporation (NSKFDC) has provisions to rehabilitate the manual scavengers and their dependents by promoting entrepreneurship and scholarships for children and tries to address their socio-economic deprivations.

While these are important schemes, their access by these workers are ridden with multiple challenges. Firstly, the eligibility criteria predetermined on annual income levels rejects poor households with minor increase in their incomes above the eligibility criteria. Secondly, people living in informal settlements do not have access to legal documents such as birth certificates, Aadhar card, address proof etc. which is a hindrance in applying for these schemes. Thirdly, and the most critical barrier in enforcement of these schemes is the lack of awareness and information about various policies and schemes amongst these workers, which makes them incapable of accessing the benefits of these schemes. Besides, the governments’ approach towards the issues of rehabilitating sanitation workers is paradoxical, evident from the fact that in the year 2013 the sanctioned budget for rehabilitating manual scavengers decreased from 500 crore rupees to 5 crore rupees . This reflects the apathy of the government towards the issues of these workers.

PRIA’s participatory research findings with the women sanitation workers in Muzaffarpur both reinforce some known challenges, pointed out by other studies, as well as add to new
insights and knowledge. We present glimpses of the findings and their implications on current and future policies.

The study was undertaken in the months of February to June, 2018 which included participatory interactions with the people in the sanitation value chain, analysis and validation. 70 women participated in sharing their stories. The findings of this research have been validated with the women sanitation workers as well as 50 municipal staff of Muzzafarpur Municipal Corporation.

Who are Women Sanitation Workers (WSW) in Muzzafarpur?

- More than 95% women sanitation workers belong to Mestar/Dom/Harijan/Paswaan/Musahar/Dusadh community and the rest belong to Economically Backward Classes (EBC)
- About 50% are in the age bracket of 30-40 years.
- More than 95% women sanitation workers are illiterate. Most of their families have been doing sanitation work for the past 5 generations.
- All the women workers in Muzaffarpur Municipal Corporation (MMC) do sweeping
- About 70% of all women sanitation workers are contractual labourers with MMC
- They work for 8 hours a day in two shifts. In the morning from 5-10 a.m and in the afternoon from 2-5 p.m
- They earn Rs 7800 per month, @ Rs 300 per day, which is the Minimum wage in the state of Bihar.

How does the world of work of WSWs affect ‘being a woman’?

- Women are assigned job role within the sanitation work chain as sweepers, from the MMC, denying them any choice of work. This is the reason why there are no women in the position of supervisors at ward or circle level.
- The workplaces are not equipped to support women when they are menstruating. There are no facilities such as toilets, resting shed, availability of sanitary pads at the work place etc. Menstrual un-wellness remains unrecognised and ignored.
- Pregnant sanitation workers do not get any leaves during pregnancy or post-delivery and live with the threat of losing their jobs for taking leave.
- There is no formal complaint mechanism which makes it difficult to express incidents of gender based harassment, assault or work related discomforts and thus make them vulnerable. The lack of such mechanisms often encourage practice of bribery by supervisors (more often than not who are males) when giving out salaries.

- Ward supervisors, sanitation inspectors and circle inspectors are all men because of which women find it difficult to share many of their difficulties

- Trade Unions are also represented by men, which never brings the voice of women to larger forums

- All women sanitation workers struggle and juggle between household chores (including care giving) and the demanding cleaning jobs. It leaves very little time for self-care. Most of them complained of continuous exhaustion, feeling stressed, anxious and angry.

**How enabling are the working conditions for permanent and contractual workers?**

- The permanent staff of Municipal Corporation earns approximately Rs.20,000-30,000 per month. They get pensions and arrears. The contractual workers in the same Municipal Corporation earn Rs.7,800 per month. They remain unpaid for Sundays and any extra work on the occasion of festivals and marriages.

- Permanent workers get holidays on Sunday; have earned leaves, casual leaves and maternity benefits. Contractual workers have no earned or emergency leaves. However, both categories of workers do similar work and are exposed to similar occupational risks.

- Permanent workers get allowance per month for buying brooms but contractual workers’ pay for their brooms too. Every month they require 5 kgs of broom, which cost them about Rs 500.

- Permanent workers receive their salary on time. Contractual workers receive salary once in two months impacting their economical sustenance and pushing them into a cycle of debt.

- Both permanent and contractual workers have no ESI or health insurance. There is no provision for Occupational health risk mitigation or support.

- There are no first aid boxes at the Anchal offices and at the Rautiniya dumping site, making their work riskier in case of onsite injury.
What are the social and economic side effects of their work to the Mahadalit community?

- About 90% women sanitation workers are illiterate.
- At least two out of every 10 Mahadalit students skip school and three out of every 10 students do not go to school at all to help their mothers frequently.
- Children with education from 10th to graduation are unable to find meaningful occupation outside sanitation work.
- Most children follow their parents into sanitation work as adults, keeping the future generation entrenched in the same vocation and conditions.
- They experience various forms of discrimination on daily basis at their workplaces.
- The practice of nepotism in the system is rampant, which favours those workers in close relations with supervisors and councillors.

What are the health effects of such an occupation?

- None of the women have access to masks, gloves, uniforms or ID cards.
- Nine out of every 10 women sanitation workers experience some kind of physical problem such as skin allergies, cough and breathing problems, hair-loss, high blood pressure, etc. which are exacerbated by the nature of their job.
- Women complained that sweeping the road has occupational health issues such as incessant pain in the body, sprain in shoulders ('haath ukhad jaata hai'), scratches in thighs ('dono patta chila jaata hai') due to sweating and walking for longer periods of time, weakening of eyesight, weakness of body, sinusitis, low blood pressure due to mental stress, allergy and infections.
- The medical problems of these workers are further compounded by various socioeconomic factors such as poverty, lack of education, poor housing conditions and poor diet.
- In the absence of any health benefits such as ESI they are bound to suffer in silence when they become chronically ill.
Have existing laws/policies improved the sanitation work related conditions?

- More than 70% women sanitation workers have no or very little awareness of the laws, schemes meant to protect or enable their lives.

- Few institutions (civil society, unions, municipality, etc.) are involved in sharing information and generating awareness of women sanitation workers on their legal rights and entitlements.

- Most importantly, raising voice, demanding rights and entitlements or even raising complaints seeks threats of losing jobs and induces fear amongst women disabling their collectivisation.

What Can We Do To Improve Health and Safety of Women Sanitation Workers?

- Atleast 4 prominent policies apply to the women sanitation workers in the state of Bihar, primarily because of their SC or Mahadalit status.


  - These policies have schemes on provision of health insurance and health card, promoting entrepreneurship, accessing skill development education for service based employment, scholarships for children.

  - In the absence of any specific provision for sanitation workers in particular, there is a need to look for convergence with the existing schemes by the Municipal Corporation of Muzaffarpur. This should be complimented with awareness generation activities by the city authorities, civil society, and other relevant institutions so that sanitation workers access these schemes.

- The dominant claims that education would lead to breaking of class caste barriers for these sanitation workers is ridden with a paradox. While many of their children are able to attain basic level education, despite that they are unable to find meaningful employment outside sanitation work. For their children good quality technical education through National Skill Development Mission (NSDM) should be made available through appropriate finance and municipality should play important role in encouraging their training. Adult literacy programme for these women should also be promoted.

- The Municipality should take into cognisance the ‘voices’ of the women and design enabling contracts with provisions for leaves, fair wages, include payment on 31st
working day, make workspaces responsive to the needs of menstruation, and provide maternity leaves.

- Despite acknowledgements by various authorities, provision of safety gears, ID cards, uniforms, a copy of written contract, ESI or health insurance benefits remains to become a reality. Hence, an immediate action is required. Municipality should provide good quality safety gears to the workers along with essential training on its use. They must have a regular dialogue with them to understand their issues, and the contactor should be heavily penalised, even when the principal employer is the municipality itself.

- The roads of the cities are workplaces of these women. A formal complaint redressal mechanism is absent from the Municipal work space according to SHW ACT of 2013. This leads to rampant bribery, firing of workers without prior notice, practices of nepotism and suppression of women’s problems of workplace harms. Hence, an ICC or Internal Complaints Committee should be constituted to address women’s issues with respect to sexual harassment. Since, PRIA has pioneered ‘Sexual Harassment at Workplace’, MMC in collaboration with PRIA can act on it immediately.

- Fair and independent workers unions should be encouraged to promote ‘substantive rights’ – wages, hours of work, working conditions, and minimise income inequalities between the different categories of sanitation workers and also represent women in these forums.

- Mandatory facilities (first aid kits, drinking water and toilets) and policies like menstrual leaves must be considered to promote mental wellbeing of women workers.

- While many women sanitation workers have been working for about 20 years with the municipality as permanent staff, they have not been promoted to the positions of supervisors such as ward inspectors or circle inspectors. This has nothing to do with their educational qualification, skill sets, physical capacity or choice of work. Hence, conscious efforts to include women in the role of supervisors should be considered.

- Trade unions are usually, dominated by men and in many cases by upper caste men. This never allows women’s experiences to gain centre stage in state negotiations. Fair and independent workers unions should be encouraged to promote ‘substantive rights’ with respect to wages, hours of work, working conditions, and minimise
income inequalities between the different categories of sanitation workers and also represent women in these forums, under their own leadership.

- While women sanitation workers do 8 hours of municipal work, it remains to be recognised that they labour in the household work, care work, and the work towards development and political mobilisation. Recognition of women’s multiple burden of work will go a long way in creating women friendly work environment for women sanitation workers.

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