Bodies of Accumulation
A Study on Women Sanitation Workers in Jhansi, Uttar Pradesh
**A brief policy background/dialogue:**

1.1 million sanitation workers keep Indian cities clean. They are primarily engaged in sewer cleaning, septic tank cleaning, railway 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. **What policy actions and their enforcements are required to achieve this goal?** Despite momentous rulings such as the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation (PEMSR) Act 2013, which decreed a ban on manual scavenging not much has changed. The technicalities of the Act, which included only human excreta in sewers, septic tanks and pits, thereby constraining the definition of manual scavengers to befit people who deal with only human excreta limited its applicability and consequently its practice. Quite incongruously, sanitation workers who handle solid waste, which is equally hazardous, have been kept out of the domain of the act. Thus, the provisions in the PEMSAR rules under the act, which mandate local self-governments to provide municipal scavengers with protective and safety gear, unfortunately, do not apply to the sanitation workers and sweepers.

The Uttar Pradesh Urban Sanitation Policy envisioned completely sanitised cities that were healthy and liveable. Its key sanitation issues covered the social and occupational hazards faced among sanitation workers among behavioural and infrastructural issues, however its goals were disjointed and did not cater to anything related to sanitation workers. As a part of the policy, all selected cities were to create City Sanitation Task Force – a group that would lead the policy’s implementation and had the provision of including sanitation workers union representatives. This was problematic as the representatives from unions cater to municipality’s agenda over worker’s agenda, and would not include representatives of contractual workers who need the most protection. Furthermore, on analysing the (very few) meetings of the Task Force before it became dormant, the only sanitation worker related representatives were contractors, inspectors and supervisors – who were above the layer of workers whose issues needed to be exhibited and responded to.

Indirect policies protecting backward castes like The Scheduled Caste and Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, fall nearly diluted with entire bodies of government and municipal employees which does scavenging/cleaning work continue to be sourced from the same caste whose ‘calling’ has been scavenging of this kind. In line with indirect policies protecting marginalised communities, the Government of Uttar Pradesh, under the guidelines of Government of India, introduced a range of pre-matric and post-matric scholarship schemes for SC/ST/OBC and General category students. The core objective of the scheme is to reduce the dropout rate of students from schools or colleges, a prominent reality especially among the community of sanitation workers. There are also multiple schemes under the PM Jan Dhan Yojana under Yogi Adityanath’s leadership. However, the eligibility criteria of these schemes are problematic as it depends on pre-capped annual family income, access to legal documents, etc. The pre-established caps to income dismiss poor families who may fall a little above the cap while access to legal documents is a distant reality for many slum dwellers who do not have the capacity to legally demand for these entitlements.

The biggest hindrance, which was confirmed by our study as well, was the complete lack of knowledge about these schemes or the procedures to avail them among the
SC communities. Similarly, National Safai Karamcharis Finance & Development Corporation (NSKFDC), an apex corporation for the all-round socio-economic upliftment of the Safai Karamcharis, scavengers and their dependants throughout the country, also provide various assistance. From financial assistance at concessional rates of interest for any viable income generating activities, education loan and imparting skill development training programme in a time bound manner as well as non-loan schemes and more, NSKFDC aims to promote self-employed ventures, educate children of safai karmis and bring their dependents out of poverty. However, their definition of scavenging echoes the limited one mentioned above. Furthermore, the same issue of lack of awareness and access of sanitation workers to these schemes persists and effects the implementation of these schemes. Parallel to these government efforts, there are policy contradictions such as the drastic cut in the Union budget for rehabilitation of manual scavengers to the current Rs. 5 crore from about Rs. 500 crore in 2013 says a lot about the low value our government places on the lives of manual scavengers.

There is a clear need to revisit policies aimed at ameliorating the life and work conditions of sanitation workers as the reality of caste underlines the limited reach and practicality of the few discussed policies above. The limitations are reflected in the findings of our research, below is a brief glimpse.

Who are these women sanitation workers?

- They are Scheduled Caste/Valmiki/Harijan community. Most of them wall within the age bracket of 30-50 years.
- Seven out of every 10 women are illiterate. Most of them got married as early as 12 – 15 years of age. Girls in the community often have to give up education to help their mothers in sanitation work, as their future as sanitation workers is taken for granted and therefore, deprives education opportunity and holds back other career options.
- Apart from external limitations, the community of sanitation workers seem to restrict their own unless equal opportunities and access is extended to all. There exists a sense of loyalty in communal suffering and those attempting to ameliorate their individual situations face resistance; perpetuating the vicious cycle of caste and education

How does the job affect ‘being a woman’?

- 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.
- There is no relief mechanism when they menstruate even when they experience severe pain or complications. On such days, they are often compelled to take their children along as substitute labour.
- There is no formal complaint mechanism which makes it difficult to express incidents of gender based harassment, assault or any discomfort 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 asked for payslips by the workers.
What are their working lives like?

- Most women enter sanitation work through caste affiliation, marriage and the lack of economic resources or other job opportunities.
- None of the women received any technical training to learn how to carry out their work safely before they start working.
- None of the women have formal membership in the unions. Most unions are often led and represented by the male jamadars. The voices of women sanitation workers, especially contractual/outsourced workers are not represented in these unions.

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

- The permanent staff of Municipal Corporation earn approximately Rs.25,000-30,000 per month. The contractual workers in the same Municipal Corporation earn Rs.15,000 per month while outsourced workers earn around Rs. 6-7000 per month. However, all three categories of workers do similar work and are exposed to similar occupational risks.
- Permanent and contractual workers get benefits like Employee Provident Fund (EPF), Employee State Insurance (ESI), Society Fund, free treatment at health centre, maternity leave, leaves (40 casual leaves for permanent workers, 16 for contractual workers, and 365 days of medical leaves in one’s service life for permanent workers).
- Outsourced workers do not get any benefits and work 7 days a week.

What are the social and economic side effects of their work to the Valmiki community?

- There is rampant unemployment, underemployment and alcoholism in the community.
- At least two out of every 10 Valmiki students skip school to help their mothers frequently.
- Nearly 2 out of every 10 women workers are educated but are still unemployed.
- Most children follow their parents into sanitation work as adults, keeping the future generation entrenched in the same vocation and conditions.
- Six out of every 10 women experience touch-based discrimination on daily basis with respect to access to public places and transport especially.
- Sanitation workers in Jhansi are forced to live in the dirtiest areas where access to basic services are limited.

What are the health effects of such an occupation?

- Nearly all women denied having received safety gears and uniforms. Those who did, said that they gears were not practical and easy to work with.
- Six out of every 10 women workers experience some kind of physical problem such as rusted nail and glass cut based infections, eye and throat
infections caused by dust, seasonal infections specially during monsoons, allergies and bruises, etc. which are exacerbated by the nature of their job.

- Twenty-one percent women sanitation workers use bare hands to clean human/animal excreta.
- First Aids are not available at workplaces which delay immediate care when accidents occur.
- All women had varying degrees of mental stress, anxiety and depression.
- More than half women sanitation workers consume gutka/tobacco to bear the stench of waste.

Have existing laws/policies improved the sanitation work related conditions?

- None of the women sanitation workers have any awareness or are benefitted by laws meant to protect them.
- Not too many institutions (civil society, unions, municipality, etc.) are involved in sharing information and generating awareness of women sanitation workers on their legal rights and entitlements.
- Instances of hostility and manual encouraging manual scavenging on the part of local leaders towards Valimiki workers were also noted through various discussions.

What can we do to improve health and safety of women sanitation workers?

- A comprehensive policy aimed directly at the protection of sanitation workers must be implemented which would cover entitlements, complaint redressal, rehabilitation as well as specific directives of occupational health for permanent as well as contractual/private sanitation workers.
- A policy aimed at bridging the gap between security and benefits available to contractual workers and permanent workers must be initiated. This should be complimented with awareness generation activities by the city authorities, civil society, and other relevant institutions.
- There should be a policy to provide financial support for quality education till higher secondary as well as skill building programmes and technical training through National Skill Development Programme for the children of sanitation workers. Along with this, adult literacy programmes should also be organised for sanitation workers and enable them to look at other vocational options along with their children.
- Fair and independent workers unions should be established to promote ‘substantive rights’ – wages, hours of work, working conditions, and minimise income inequalities between the different categories of sanitation workers.
- A thorough inspection of access to quality protective gears should be done by the municipalities and deficiencies should be met; followed by dissemination of kits at regular intervals. Contractors violating this must be penalised.
- Special facilities (first aid kits, drinking water and toilets) and policies like menstrual leaves must be considered to promote mental wellbeing of women workers. Established mandates such as maternity leaves, paid leaves and
medical leaves must be checked regularly and employers who fail to provide these should be deemed directly responsible and face strict action.

- A policy considering reducing work hours through single shift work instead of double shifts to help women sanitation workers balance the double burden of home and labour would be a start to informing policy with contextual realities.

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