Bodies of Accumulation
A Study on Women Sanitation Workers

Photograph courtesy Nilanjana Bhattacharjee
Acknowledgements

The crisis of sanitation in urban India has two aspects. The first one, which is the most discussed one, is the lack of access to sanitation - more than half of India’s population does not own individual household toilets. This leads into problems of open defecation, the rise of communicable diseases, safety hazards and more. The second aspect of the sanitation crisis, however, is neglected in all discussions, both at the State as well as societal level - the plight of sanitation workers and their abysmal working conditions. This is linked to issues like the perpetuation of caste-based vocation, violence and isolation.

The continued dependence on the Valmiki\(^1\) communities to undertake sanitation and scavenging work is appalling, given the background of national schemes like Swachh Bharat Mission. Municipalities as well as private agencies source entire workforces of sanitation workers sourced from the Valmiki communities (Economic and Political Weekly, 2012). Their working conditions, irrespective of they are working formally or informally, are abysmal with very little or no access to protective gears, medical support, basic labour rights and dignity. The involvement of sanitation workers in the planning, implementation and monitoring of policies and programmes related to sanitation work or workers is completely absent. The neglect of their voices suppresses them further, rendering them as invisible workers and citizens.

The Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA) uses participatory and narrative centric approaches to address this situation through ‘Bodies of Accumulation – A Study on Women Sanitation Workers’ under the ‘Engaged Citizens, Responsive City’ (ECRC) project supported by the European Union. In the prevailing situation, PRIA’s focus on narratives or the stories that come from the lives of sanitation workers, especially women, is critical to foster empathy among State and society and respect them as indispensable cogwheels of India’s sanitation system.

Data is a critical requirement to effectively seek interventions from municipalities, but is usually scantily available at the granular and qualitative level – especially in terms of details of the actual working conditions of the sanitation workers including employment benefits, occupational health, social security and emotional well-being. This study, therefore, focuses on accounts of lived experiences to enable an emotional understanding of an entirely neglected, ostracised and humiliated community. The power of lived experiences and qualitative narratives to expose the problems associated with sanitation workers, especially women, is a critical requirement to inspire empathy and coordination between the poor, middle class, municipality and other State stakeholders.

PRIA believes that one of the first steps towards such an understanding is to spread the stories of lived experiences, social isolation, political invisibility and economic depression of a community working relentlessly to keep India clean – keeping their voices as alive as we can. This is because in PRIA’s core methodology of participatory research, lived experiences is the basis of understanding one’s situation and surrounding relations of power. It is through this approach that people come together to change prevailing power dynamics. Such a change is critically required considering the lack of power omnipresent in the lives of sanitation workers in their places of work as well as across society.

\(^1\)Valmiki (also Balmik) caste, is a Dalit community who have historically experienced socio-political as well as economic exclusion, suppression and violence in India. They have been referred to as the ‘untouchables’ of the caste system.
To meet this goal, PRIA designed a narrative-centric (or life stories based), phenomenological study (or the study of structures of experience or consciousness) with women sanitation workers spread across the 60 wards in Jhansi. A mix of permanent, contractual and outsourced workers were selected to ensure representation.

We acknowledge the support of our team in Jhansi consisting of Sudhir Singh and Suruchi Sharma. We are grateful to our dedicated team of animators including Saroj, Seema, Sayra, Asha, Sanjay, Omkar, Shubham and Rajesh. The Settlement Improvement Committee (SIC)\(^2\) leaders facilitated local processes of trust building; we acknowledge the support of Neha, Bharti, Aneeta, Savitri and Gaya Prasad. Sanitation Inspector (JMC), Shri Manoj Shrivastava, spared valuable time for interviews.

We acknowledge the contribution and strength of all the women sanitation workers of Jhansi who welcomed us into their homes and shared their lives and difficult conversations with us. Their narratives are the backbone of this study.

Dr. Kaustuv Kanti Bandyopadhyay, Director, PRIA, provided direction, guidance and leadership for which we are sincerely grateful. Lastly, this report would not have been possible without the direction provided by Dr. Rajesh Tandon, President, PRIA. We sincerely acknowledge his contribution.

Nilanjana Bhattacharjee, Programme Officer, PRIA  
Sudhir Singh, Senior Programme Officer, PRIA  
Suruchi Sharma, Senior Programme Officer, PRIA

\(^2\)SICs are representative bodies established with nominated residents of the informal settlement community. SICs can act as bridges between the service providers and the community. These SICs work as organisations that speak in unison about the needs and rights of the communities. They are the focal points through which external stakeholders can connect with the communities.
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<td>BIMARU</td>
<td>Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh</td>
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<td>ECRC</td>
<td>Engaged Citizens Responsive City</td>
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<td>EMSCDLP</td>
<td>The Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition)</td>
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<td>ESI</td>
<td>Employee State Insurance</td>
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<td>EPF</td>
<td>Employees’ Provident Fund</td>
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<td>JMC</td>
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<tr>
<td>Km</td>
<td>Kilometre</td>
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<tr>
<td>MoSJE</td>
<td>Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment</td>
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<td>MDG</td>
<td>Millennium Development Goal</td>
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<td>MLA</td>
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<td>PRIA</td>
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<td>SBM</td>
<td>Swachh Bharat Mission</td>
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<td>SOCIO-ECONOMIC</td>
<td>Social and Economic</td>
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<td>UP</td>
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<tr>
<td>VIP</td>
<td>Very Important Person</td>
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INTRODUCTION

The sanitation crisis in India is obvious, understood, acknowledged but ceaseless. Despite India being the fastest growing economy, 65 percent of the population lacks access to adequate toilet facilities. Indian society is the victim of a cruel joke where more than half its 1.2 billion population has access to mobile phones but the same cannot be claimed when it comes to owning individual household toilets (Kelkar-Khambete, 2012). Furthermore, WHO/UNICEF’s Joint Monitoring Programme’s update on sanitation for the Millennium Development Goals (2017) confirmed that at least 40 percent of Indians still do not have access to toilets and defecate in the open instead.

The increasing pressure on urban India over the last two decades in terms of growth, migration, changes in family patterns and increasing number of slum dwellers, among other phenomena, have been making Indian cities brittle. There has been colossal failure in meeting the challenge of providing basic services, including but definitely not limited to sanitation.

The Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM) or Clean India Mission launched on 2 October 2014 by the Government of India came through, echoing Gandhian thoughts, to address the crisis of sanitation. It aimed to revamp the streets, roads and the sanitation infrastructure of Indian cities as well as its rural counterparts. It promised to eliminate open defecation through the construction of individual household and community toilets as well as establish an accountable system of monitoring toilet use by 2 October 2019, the 150th anniversary of Gandhi’s birth. In line with its promises, through SBM, 40,84,620 individual toilets and 2,34,161 community and public toilets have been constructed across India. Furthermore, 1,698 cities have been declared open defecation free while 100 percent door-to-door waste collection has been achieved in 51,734 wards (Swachh Bharat, Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs).

Despite its good intentions, there is enormous scepticism about how successful SBM has been and how authentic its systems of evaluation are (Sagar, 2017). This report based on PRIA’s study looks at another missing link. SBM along with related policies like National Urban Sanitation Policy and The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013 focus on making India clean. However, the people who actually make India clean, the sanitation workers, remain invisible in the participation, process or consequences of this national level movement.

“To clean the country, you have to address the problems of those who have spent a lifetime cleaning the country” – Bezwada Wilson

Why does India remain the world’s largest open lavatory (Economic and Political Weekly, 2012), in spite of one of the most expensive initiatives undertaken by the government towards sanitation? How does manual scavenging still persist (and go unreported) in most Indian cities (Sagar, 2017), despite a series of monumental policies such as The Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) (EMSCDLP) Act, 1993 followed by the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Employment (PEMSR) Act 2013 focus on making India clean. However, the people who actually make India clean, the sanitation workers, remain invisible in the participation, process or consequences of this national level movement.

Why is the question of indignity suffered by sanitation workers muffled and unaddressed? The answer is simple but rarely acknowledged – caste. In India, there has been, and continues to be, an inescapable link between occupation and caste; the occupation of manual scavenging or any sanitation work is married with caste. This marriage earmarks sanitation as the sole concern of just one caste – the Dalits or the Valmiki community (Economic and Political Weekly, 2012). The entire country’s garbage
collection, road sweeping, and cleaning of drains relies on the most entrenched functioning of the caste system.

Despite a multitude of legal provisions including those protecting backward castes like The Scheduled Caste and Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, the cleaning of drains and removal of faeces which was traditionally the vocation of the Dalit or ‘untouchable’ communities has conveniently been transferred to the formal sector. Entire bodies of government and municipal employees which does this work continue to be sourced from the same caste whose ‘calling’ has been scavenging of this kind (Economic and Political Weekly, 2012).

This perennial association has caused an entire community’s lived experiences to entail emotional trauma of social isolation, invisible citizenry and economic depression. Before setting out to clean India, it is crucial to dismantle the link between caste and occupation – cleaning a country’s streets is easier than cleaning its morality. The fact that the same communities are cleaning our country for the last 4,000 years, confirms that campaigns like SBM will remain a pipe dream, as it is yet to include bettering the lives of those who actually make Bharat swachh.

An even wider gap of injustice appears when the Valmiki communities are disaggregated by gender. While the community of sanitation workers in India is suppressed and neglected, inter-state disparities show differing degrees of discrimination based on rigid histories of gender discrimination (Mehrotra, 2006). Women sanitation workers live in a country still mired in patriarchy, imposing the double burden of labour specifically on lower caste women who have to work in order to survive. The unhappy kinship of gender, caste and occupation makes them the most vulnerable of the vulnerable.

A significant angle of SBM was the ‘empowerment of women’ by building toilets, the titles of which were to be vested in the name of women (The Hindu, 2017). What about the Valmiki women who clean those toilets without proper gears? What about their access to toilets, to an emotionally and physically healthy occupation? Such initiatives become technical fixes as they do not capture the gravity of how problematic the social, political and economic standing of Indian women is. The amelioration of the same cannot be reduced to titling toilets.

Titling toilets in women’s names will not empower women sanitation workers – valuing both their jobs - at home and outside - might. Understanding the politics of who these women are, why do they do what they do, how do they do it, and what can be done to make their lives better might. Caste, class, gender and all other external and internal identities mark one’s body – making it dependent on the physical and emotional environment of one’s existence. Bodies accumulate these identities and evolve constantly (Harvey, 1998). The bodies of sanitation workers, especially women, accumulate so much (garbage, plastics, glasses, nails, syringes, excreta as well as rejection, invisibility, humiliation and sadness), that their bodies become tools of accumulation. Their bodies are alienated and perform as the extension of their tools; divorced from the idea of letting go and living free.

Participatory Research in Asia’s (PRIA) history with women and work (PRIA, 1987, 1993; Jaitly and Vijay, n.d) since the 1980s led to the inception of the current study.

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3Double burden of labour is a term used to describe the workload of people, especially women, who work to earn money, but who are also responsible for significant amounts of unpaid and unacknowledged domestic labor.
looking into the new discourse of caste and sanitation in reference to women. Keeping the issues of women and labour and the need to include the voices of oppressed communities in mind, PRIA conducted the current study, a participatory research to explore the lives of women sanitation workers. The purpose of this report is to explore and their lives and expose the associated problems of dignity. Through their lived experiences, it attempts to articulate their voices and echo them through the state and society to cause ripples of discomfort and hopefully lead to self-reflection. The real purpose of this study report is to make the collected stories accessible to the wider society so that people begin to question their morality based on prevailing social structures and feel inspired to break them. This study report aims to curate life narratives of the women sanitation workers, map the socio-politics of their existence, the overlapping identities they perform each day. It aims to expose the lack of physical and emotional occupational health in a seemingly thankless job such as theirs. This study report hopes to not only give us an insight into the lives of these women, but also pave a path for instilling a deep sense of moral ethics which will ensure the sincere practice of sanitation policies and programmes and not just remain on paper.

This study was conducted in Jhansi, Uttar Pradesh keeping a two-fold logic in mind. The first one was Jhansi’s ancient origins and the influence of Uttar Pradesh’s conservative socio-political attitudes towards caste and women. Jhansi is also included in the list of Smart Cities – giving the study an interesting mix of the traditional and contemporary. The second reason was PRIA’s association with Jhansi where the Engaged Citizens, Responsive City (ECRC) project is being implemented for the last two years. The ready base of locally recruited leaders as well as the trust built between PRIA and the communities facilitated authentic information as this study is largely qualitative and relies on documenting the identity politics of the most vulnerable.

The report that emerged out of this study begins with establishing the methodology and the guiding principles of the themes that constructed the framework of analysis. The report then moves to the research findings followed by conclusion and suggested way forward.
METHODOLOGY

Research question

The study seeks to explore differing aspects of a woman sanitation worker’s life – all of which constitute her every reality. Following is the research question that guided the data collection and evaluation:

“To explore the lives of women sanitation workers and the problems associated with it, what are the predispositions and identity politics to be considered? Furthermore, how deep is the interface between these women workers and the State based on the status of their working conditions, rights and entitlements and emotional wellbeing?”

In exploring this question, our analytical framework was based on related issues and predispositions, exploring the themes of gender, caste, geography and education. “There are several contexts where identity has multiple contours, and every individual simultaneously has overlapping identities.” (Deshpande 2007). We are born with some identities while we achieve some. Each woman sanitation worker in our study has been two people in her life; the one she was born as and the one she became. She was born with her gender and her caste; she gathered multiple identities through her external environment. It was, therefore, essential for us to explore certain predispositions in a Valmiki woman sanitation worker’s life before establishing themes for our analytical framework.
**GENDER** is the first predisposition. It stood out as the most common and important variable across the sample of our study. Irrespective of caste, class, age, education, the female deficit in India (Sekher and Hatti, 2010) and its different forms and sources is something all women are acutely aware of. The social effects of this deficit and the undervaluation of women (PRIA, 1993), specifically of their dignity, could possibly be stronger in the case of women sanitation workers. Social perceptions of women as domesticated beings mould the role of working women. These perceptions institutionalise apathy towards those women who want to / need to break the public/ private division of labour because it challenges traditional roles.

**CASTE** is the second predisposition. Historically omnipresent, caste is one of, if not the most, dominating themes of Indian identity politics. This makes the focus on Valmiki communities indispensable in our study. It was important to explore, through this study, the continuing adherence to notions of purity and pollution at a societal level. The dominance of touch-based discrimination in the economics and polity of sanitation work was a vital consideration based on the socio-economic and political oppression of Dalit communities.

**GEOGRAPHY** or the geo-politics of state and residence is the third predisposition. Uttar Pradesh’s movement to mobilise Dalit / Valmiki, and other backward castes in its cities was an important vantage point to understand the role of residence in the lives of women sanitation workers. Capturing power was the driving motive behind the Dalit mobilisation but the gains to the lower castes have been symbolic in nature, benefitting the already well-off Dalits in the state (Mehrotra, 2006). Policies meant to ameliorate the condition of depressed castes fail due to Uttar Pradesh’s history of violence against lower castes and Valmiki women. It was, therefore, important to explore the linkages of caste-based politics with respect to location.

**EDUCATION** is the final predisposition. Caste becomes convenient in reiterating existing inequalities and the lack of education is the easiest way to maintain the imbalanced status quo. Gender differences in access to education has been a common trend in India (Chaudhuri and Roy, 2006) and the access is further complicated based on caste, class and age. Socially rooted notions as well as the economics of a household govern one’s access to education. The role of education (or the lack of it) in influencing occupation as well as the role of gender, caste and location in deciding one’s occupation was an important theme of consideration. To understand the interplay of the social, cultural, economic and political is to understand the (lack of) institutional changes in favour of women (PRIA, 1993). Keeping that in mind, the themes that emerged out of the four discussed dispositions constructed our framework of analysis. By looking into the relationships between all four factors, a comprehensive analysis of women sanitation workers in Jhansi was undertaken.

**Issues addressed**

Some of the basic questions we address include the following themes:

**Basic background**

Who these women are and how long they have lived in Jhansi; their average age, level of education and basic background profiles; the type of sanitation work they undertake, how remunerative their work is, their salaries and working hours.
Social Structures/ Institutional Networks

The entry points into such work and the ways of learning work; the different institutional factors and the way the changes in them affect the lives of these women and their children. The preference for formal or informal work among women workers and the kind of socio-economic pressures and types of discrimination faced by them as well as the networks of garbage in the city.

Social Security

The membership of workers’ unions, the kind of benefits that come with their jobs and their lives as sanitation workers.

Gender

The role of gender in their occupations, the various health factors associated with their work as well as their job security.

Occupational health

The role of employers (public and private) in facilitating a safe working environment; the condition of physical and mental well-being; the issue of drug or substance abuse.

Laws, schemes and policies

The access to information or the awareness of laws and policies meant to protect sanitation workers; the efforts of local leaders and officers in educating workers about their rights and entitlements and the effects of new policies focussed towards change.

The data set

This report reflects the first attempt to synthesize the findings from a series of personal interviews (numbering twenty), four focussed group discussions, shadowing exercises\(^4\) and analysis of daily logs\(^5\) of women sanitation workers. The research approach involved a mixture of participatory assessments of situations through a sociological lens and phenomenology. We began with a broad set of questions through semi-structured questionnaires specific to personal interviews, focussed group discussions and informal discussions\(^6\). Throughout our research, we iteratively refined our questions based on emerging data through the narratives. We intended to describe the situation of women sanitation workers through their voices, thus their stories and quotes guided our research as well as our analysis. Our sampling technique was purposive in nature. Our sample of those women personally

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\(^4\) Shadowing exercises refer to being a passive observer of daily routines and schedules of the people being studied/explored. It requires the researcher to melt into their daily activities like shadows and note the patterns and differences emerging out of the observations.

\(^5\) Daily logs are a compilation of accounts of the days of women sanitation workers. It is the account of each activity undertaken from the moment they rise until the moment they go to sleep to identify common trends and differences in the daily lives of women sanitation workers – the break up of their days based on working hours and domestic chores, etc.

\(^6\) The questionnaires specific to personal interviews and focussed group discussions are attached in Annexure.
interviewed consisted of seven permanent municipal sanitation workers, one permanent worker from the Indian Grassland and Fodder Research Institute (under the Indian Council of Agricultural Research) worker, five contractual workers under the municipality and six outsourced workers. There were combinations of all three as well as self-employed women sanitation workers in the focussed group discussions held through the data collection process, which covered a range of 25-30 women.

Content analysis

The predispositions of gender, caste, geography and education guided our content analysis. Multiple and recurrent themes of the same emerged in the interviews by a process of systematic content analysis. Content analysis, in its broadest sense, can be understood as "any methodical measurement applied to text (or other symbolic material) for social scientific purposes" (Shapiro and Markoff, 1997:14). In the case of this report, the methodical measurement applied to the text was a matrix analysis, customised to anticipated themes as well as potential ones. Different researchers have emphasised different aspects of content analysis, from its ability to generate quantitative descriptions by analysing word counts (Silverman, 1993), to its capacity to dismantling text into discrete units that can be reorganised meaningfully (Silverman, 1993). However, for the purpose of this report, we were less concerned with generating quantified counts than with locating – through systematised reading and coding of transcripts – recurrent themes connected to the central triangle of caste, gender and vocation. Further, we were interested in the patterns of relationships that might surface, especially those between women and institutions and education and socio-economic pressures, under the broader axis of identity politics. An inductive and iterative research process was used in which our themes and categories of analysis were constantly refined by what we found emerging from the data.

Limitations of the study

Well known limitations apply to our research. First, the insights available are limited to the purposive sampling. A large-scale study on qualitative life narratives required more time and labour, which the restrictions of this study did not allow. Second, while we tried to gather data from different types of sanitation workers, there is a possibility of over-generalising: that is a subject for further research. Third, human error can occur during analysis as the perspective of the coder governs the accuracy of established codes and the same follows for their summarisation. Accuracy was checked repeatedly by identifying data on non-related string searches and by going back to the original transcripts to ensure that the respective issues were recorded and examined exhaustively. Fourth, there always remains, in both quantitative and qualitative research, the potential of human bias. While the extent of this bias can be reduced by constantly being conscious of one’s own politics, the complete absence of bias cannot be proven.

Finally, since this study focuses on personal narratives as well as social ones, many topics that require a degree of trust may go under-reported, specifically in matters where the trust in the State and its affiliates is low. It is hard to report what a person does not say but hint towards, and while the researcher can read between the lines, the ethics of our study does not, and should not, allow interpretations of any kind. Despite these limitations, we believe our participatory methods can reveal unique insights into the complex and diverse problems in the lives of women sanitation workers. Furthermore, information from qualitative assessments can give policymakers as well as the wider society a much deeper and humanised
understanding of the socio-economic issues of sanitation workers, resulting in more effective public and personal strategies towards change.

**RESEARCH FINDINGS**

In this section, we will share the findings from the study using six kinds of issues addressed that would give us a holistic view of the lives of women sanitation workers. We will first present the basic profile background, including the demographic details and educational status. Then we will discuss the social and institutional networks followed by access to social security – both of which govern the entry of women into sanitation work and the socio-economic pressure points affecting them. After that is a perspective on the worker’s life through a gender lens highlighting the tangible and non-tangible effects of their biology, followed by related issues of occupational health. Finally, we discuss the access to information regarding laws, schemes and policies meant to protect women workers and the interface between them and their local leaders.

**BASIC PROFILE BACKGROUND**

“Ab bohot pudhe hog aye kuch mehsoos karne ke liye, yehi humari zindagi hai aur humne maan liya. Agar bhagwaan kisi aur ghar mein janam dete, toh zindagi alag hoti, lekin nahi hai (We are too old to feel now, this is our life, we have accepted it. If God gave us birth in another home, life would have been different, but the fact is... it is not)” – PI6

Sixty-eight percent of all women sanitation workers personally interviewed fell in the age bracket of thirty to fifty years, the majority being between the ages of thirty and forty years. All of them belonged to the Valmiki caste which has experienced socio-political isolation as well as economic discrimination, exclusion, suppression and violence. According to the 2011 Census, there is a stark imbalance of literacy between men (77.28 percent) and women (57.18 percent) in Uttar Pradesh. This extends to Jhansi, where male literacy goes up to 85.38 percent and female literacy is significantly lower at 63.49 percent. Our study showed that Valmiki women are worse off. Though there were a few cases of women who had studied until the fifth standard and above, 74 percent of the women interviewed were illiterate.

“Jaati ke alava aur bahut kuch hai jiske wajeh se humein dusri naukri nahi milti…hum anpad hai isiliye bhi nahi milti (Caste is not the only reason that we don’t get other jobs, it’s also due to our lack of education)” – PI14

The correlation between caste and education surfaced in most of our conversations. While most cases exhibited a clear discrimination against access to education for women, some cases showed the continued lack of professional agency despite access to education.

“Sabse bada dukh yeh hai ki padhai mein achcha hoke bhi, jhaaroo ke saath hi phas gaye (My biggest grievance is that in spite of having been good at academics I’m stuck with a broom)” – PI 19, Neelam

The Valmiki community continues to face discrimination in education at all levels, and the emotional humiliation of caste segregation leads to a high dropout rate (Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust, 2014). The relationship between caste and education influence each other,
perpetuating the historic violation of basic rights of the Valmiki community. However, the community of sanitation workers seem to restrict their own unless equal opportunities and access is extended to all. There is a sense of loyalty in communal suffering and those attempting to ameliorate their individual situations face resistance. This perpetuates the vicious cycle of caste and education, each becoming the source of discrimination in differing cases. Therefore, the source of discrimination does not only exist outside in the wider society but also within the Valmiki community.

“Hamare jaati ka shoshan sabse zyaada hamari jaati hi karti hai (It is our own community that suppresses us the most)” – Anonymous

Most of the individually interviewed women have been living in Jhansi for decades – 63 percent for over 30 years. All respondents of our focussed group discussions claimed their communities have been living in Jhansi for over 100 years.

**Type of work, wages and hours**

Despite the pay as well as benefits differing vastly among all three types of sanitation workers (permanent, contractual, outsourced), the type of work done by them are very similar. Sweeping streets, clearing garbage from smaller nallahs (drains), thela bharan/ chalana (collecting garbage on a cart and pulling the cart, and emptying it into JMC installed dustbins or certified dumping areas) are the dominant tasks carried out by women. On probing regarding manual scavenging, it was clarified that only male sanitation workers cleaned bigger nallahs or septic tanks – this was a strictly gendered domain.

Those working as permanent staff under the JMC earn approximately Rs. 25,000 a month, followed by municipal contractual workers at approximately Rs. 15,000 per month. Outsourced workers receive around Rs.6,000-7,000 per month. The figures are approximate due to the variations reflected in the data based on those availing certain benefits like Employee Provident Fund (EPF) or ‘Society Fund’. Women working as permanent staff under the JMC have the option to avail the EPF option, in which a small portion of their salary is deducted each month and acts as a retirement benefit scheme. ‘Society Fund’, on the other hand, is what is deducted from a permanent worker’s salary each month they take a loan from the municipality for personal reasons like children’s marriage, hospital bills, etc.

“Mera aadmi khatam ho gaya teen saal pehele...6000 mein ghar ke chaar pet paalti hun, ek ko school bheeti hu, aspatal ka kharcha deti hu...aapka ghar chalta 6000 mahine mein? (My husband died three years ago... In Rs 6000, I feed four people, send one child to school, pay hospital bills...can your house be run on Rs 6000 a month?)” – FGD 4

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**A day in the life of a woman sanitation worker**

- 5 am: Rise, do ablutions, freshen up
- 5:30-6:15 am: Cook breakfast, feed younger child, prepare older children for school, serve breakfast to family members
- 6:30: Leave for duty (round 1)
- 7-10 am: Work
- 10-10:15 am: Walk home
- 10:15-10:45 am: Cook lunch
- 11-12 pm: Work (round 2)
- 2-2:20 pm: Walk back home
- 2:30-5 pm: Bathe, serve lunch to family, eat lunch, clean the house, make *bidis* for extra income
- 5-7 pm: Take children to tuition/ help with homework, cook dinner, tend to other chores at home
- 7-9 pm: Make bidis, knit quilts, and rest or chat with neighbours outside
- 9-9:30 pm: Dinner
- 9:30-10:30 pm: Wash utensils/ clothes/ hang them out to dry
- 11 pm: Sleep
Women working as contractual workers under the municipality have the option of availing EPF but not the Society Fund. Outsourced workers, however, are the most vulnerable since they earn the least amount of money with no benefits whatsoever. What is of was concern is the lack of information among all three types of workers, especially the contractual and outsourced workers, regarding the structure of their salaries. While working on an average of seven to eight hours a day between two shifts (8am – 2pm), they have no or limited knowledge regarding the schemes that are a part of their salaries, what they are eligible for and what deductions are made through EPF/Society.

All women denied having received payslips. This explained the difference in responses from all three kinds of workers in terms of ‘cutting’ of salary and their inability to explain the exact amount of money that went into different schemes from their salaries. According to Section 18(3) of the Minimum Wages Act, 1948, the appropriate government should issue wage slips or wage books to employed workers in any scheduled employment for which minimum wages have been fixed. All but one of the women we interviewed said they had not received payslips; the only one who did not said that she used to receive payslips infrequently till four-five earlier.

“Society aur Fund toh kat ta hai har mahine, lekin koi payslip nahi milti (Society and Fund (PPF) is deducted each month, but I do not get any payslip)” – PI 2

“Payslip mango toh havaldar ghoos mangta hai (If I ask for a payslip then the supervisor asks for bribes)” – PI 10

“Paisa haath mein nahi dete, kehte hai fund me de diya (They don’t give us our money; they say that it has gone to the Fund)” – PI 2

On probing further, larger inconsistencies surfaced. Not only were most women unsure about what or why a portion of their salaries is deducted by the employer but, in some instances, when they tried to find out or challenge unfair deductions, officers demanded to see their payslips as proof. However, many women said that supervisors demanded bribes of around Rs 100-150 to give them these payslips. To avoid paying such bribes, these women settled for their salaries being credited into their bank accounts and do not ask for payslips. However, in stark contrast to recorded responses of women sanitation workers, one JMC sanitation inspector said payslips are regularly given to permanent workers working for the municipality, though he admitted that payslips were not given to contractual and outsourced workers. According to procedure, the payslips were to be collected from their dealing clerks.

“Humse zyaada khabar hai unko apne chuttiyo aur Fund cutting ko leke! (They are more aware about their leaves and fund cutting than us!” – JMC Sanitation Inspector

“Sabke mobile pe salary ka message aata hai, outsourced waalon ka bhi (Everybody gets a text about their salary on their mobiles, even the outsourced employees)” – JMC Sanitation Inspector

While none of the women interviewed personally or in groups mentioned anything about the salary alert text messages, they were certain that they do not receive payslips, and if at all they did, it stopped four or five years back. This discussion highlighted three significant issues:

a) women sanitation workers have very little knowledge about the employee insurance schemes available as well as their salary structures;
b) a payslip is a right for all formal employees, and it is problematic if workers under contract or outsourced by government approved agencies do not receive them; and

c) there is a clear communication gap between sanitation workers and their employers, as confirmed by two differing realities expressed by both parties on a common matter.

SOCIAL STRUCTURES AND INSTITUTIONAL NETWORKS

Entry Into and Learning Sanitation Work

“Humne apna alag rehna maan liya hai, hum ab dur rehete hai koi matlab nahi hai baaki'o se (We have internalised our exclusion so now we stay away from the rest)”

– PI 1

Five major principles define the caste system: marriage within one’s caste, restricted socialisation with upper castes, hereditary membership within one’s caste, adherence to caste-based vocation and the ranking of castes into a hierarchy (Rahul, 2015).

Our analysis confirms the same principles and its effect on entry points into sanitation work. Caste, poverty and marriage are the three main reasons for entry into sanitation work. Through the conversations probed by our interviews, a clearer understanding of the inter-relation between the three factors emerged. The Valmiki community, as a caste historically alienated from the wider Indian society continues to stick to its caste-based vocation - that of cleaning and scavenging. The lack of dignity of labour is influenced by and encourages a hostile attitude towards Valmiki communities across India. The lack of dignity of labour also affects the level of remuneration, keeping them poor and unable to afford urban rents and better residential areas. The cumulative effect is that caste identity, coupled with economic depression reinforce each other – keeping the Valmiki community in the tight shackles of poverty.

“Kya kare, padhe likhe nahi hai toh majboori mein karna padhta hai yeh (What to do, we are not literate, so we have no choice but to do this work)” – PI 3

The lack of social, economic and political agency along with the lack of education ensures the perpetuation of the caste-based occupation and gathers a sense of ‘destiny’ among these women who accept their work as what they are meant to do. The usage of the word ‘majboori’ (desperate circumstances) and the resigning of oneself to one’s caste as one’s identity surfaced overwhelmingly through each and every interview. When asked how they learnt sanitation work, the most common response was learning by doing. Many women admitted to having made mistakes, suffered accidents, fainted under the sun, cried until their eyes would not open and many other emotionally torturous experiences.

Caste-based occupations are carried forward through generations, with parents inheriting the occupation of their ancestors (Singh, 2010). The continuation of such inter-generational cycles was confirmed in our study, with multiple women admitting to having learnt sanitation work by watching their parents their jobs. All women also expressed the use of their gendered experience as girls in their paternal homes
where all the cleaning and cooking was expected out of them while their brothers went to school or did odd jobs. Such remarks strengthened the intersection of caste, occupation and gender roles and the constant recycling of the same. Such intersectionalities put women sanitation workers in an even more vulnerable position as their chance of entry into different professions are based on better education. A better education is based on the social and economic standing of one’s caste and gender – thus establishing a cause and effect based relationship that is difficult to escape.

“Aurat yahin toh dab jaati hai, bacchan ke vajah se (This is where women get stuck, with kids)” – PI 10

“Padhi likhi nahi hun toh yahi karna hai... taaki baccho ka poshan kar paye (I am not educated so I have to do this... so that I can bring up my children)” – PI 1

“Bachpan se aaj tak sukh nahi dekha (I have not seen happiness since childhood)”
– PI 1

Our analysis also draws attention to government efforts like the Safai Karmi Scheme; a scheme to appoint rural sanitation workers launched by the Uttar Pradesh government in 2008 (Tripathi, 2012). The scheme opened up sanitation work to all castes and intended to break the link between caste and occupation, specifically in sanitation and manual scavenging. While such efforts and change in attitude through the years have indeed weakened the linkages between caste and occupation, a closer look at the operation of such schemes expose the ways in which caste hierarchy and occupations override the best of policies and, in fact, reinforce the very practices that the policies attempt to destroy.

The futility of schemes like Safai Karmi was realised when we probed women workers about how permeable or easy to get into sanitation work is with respect to other castes, and if those new to the vocation may be vulnerable to exploitation. The interviewed women workers said that while upper caste candidates did apply and secure sanitation jobs, the actual work was ultimately outsourced to poor Valmiki sanitation workers. They were paid as low as Rs. 2,000 per month while the upper caste employees kept the rest of the salary (around Rs. 20,000-24,000 in the case of permanent workers and Rs. 10,000-12,000 in case of contractual workers) and sat at home.

“Upar waali jaati abhi bhi raj kar rahi hai (The upper castes are still ruling over us)” – PI 4

While on the one hand, there was some anger on the part of the Valmiki sanitation workers against the upper castes for refusing to destroy the caste system, on the other hand, a large section of the community, as reflected in our group discussions as well as personal interviews, were angry about ‘their caste’s job’ being ‘stolen away’ from them.

Agar hamara vyavsay kisi aur ko de do toh humare bacche road mein aa jayenge (If you give away our jobs to other castes, then our children will be on the streets)”
– PI 7

“Yeh kaam bhi humare liye nahi chora – duniya mein baaki saare dusre kaamon jaisa, iss kaam se bhi humein bahaar dhakel rahe hai (Even this job isn’t left for us. We are being pushed out of this job too like from most other jobs)” – PI 11
Further probing through discussions as well as our data analysis shows these apparently contradicting reactions. While sanitation workers do wish the structures of caste-based vocation were broken, they do not think it will ever happen. Hoping for such a breakthrough does not dilute their reality, which is dominantly a sense of resignation to what their and their children’s ‘destiny’ is. Toiling away relentlessly at work to save enough money to educate their children does not take away the sense of hopelessness and lack of trust towards the society that has always and continues to ignore them. In such a situation emerges the paradox of wanting to break away but at the same time holding on to their profession as the only thing that is truly theirs.

“Koi apne man se nahi lega yeh kaam lekin yehi apni roji roti hai (“Nobody would take this job from one’s heart, but this is our bread and butter)” – PI 18

Preference for Informality/Formality and Aspirations for Children

All women who were interviewed said if given a choice between formal and informal jobs, they would prefer formal jobs, specifically permanent jobs under the municipality.

“Hum kuchha waalon ko pukka se zyaada kaam hota hai, unko toh chutti bhi milti hai, humein who bhi nahi milta (As contractual employees we have more work than the permanent ones; at least they get holidays, we don’t even get that)” – PI 19

“Jharoo bhi nahi milta, khud kharidna padhta hai (We do not even get brooms, we have to buy it ourselves)” – FGD 3

The most common reasons for preferring formal jobs under the municipality were higher salary, access to Society Fund, uniforms, job security and the ability to pass on one’s job to a family member in the event of death. The notion of security associated with formal permanent jobs was also associated with the women and their children’s future. The study brought to the fore many contradictions as well as clarifications. The dominant aspiration was to ensure their children are educated and find better paying and more respectable jobs. This desire is understandable as Valmiki children have the tendency of dropping out of schools to join their parents in work (Jodhka and Shah, 2010). But precisely because of this and their scepticism towards an unsympathetic government keeps them tied to their existing reality and makes them want to protect their vocation for their children, as a backup livelihood option.

On an average, women had three children each. A few group discussions revealed that while the majority of the younger children go to school, those above eighteen years often help their mothers with sanitation jobs. However, based on the personal interviews, 16 percent of the children studying also skip school and help their mothers frequently, confirming the drop out trend among Valmiki children. The children of 21 percent of the interviewed women are educated but unemployed. Further probing revealed a common grievance of no support from the state for children from a vulnerable community.

“Mere parivaar mein chaar bacche hai, mera aadmi, uski maa aur main hu. Mera aadmi majdoori karta hai kabhi kabaar. Agar main apne saare baccho ko padhna chahun, toh ghar pe chulha nahi chalega (There are four children in my family, apart
from me, my husband and his mother. My husband does manual labour from time to time. If I want to educate all my children, we will have to stop eating)“ – FGD4

“Humare baccho ka koi kuch dekhta hi nahi hai (Nobody cares about our children)” – FGD 4

The common aspiration these women had for their children was that they should do anything but sanitation work, though the specifics differed. Many said that the reason they were sticking to sanitation work was to be able to give better lives to their children. Ninety-five percent of the women used the word izzat (dignity) when describing the kind of jobs they hoped for their children. The hunger for dignity in their lives was constantly emphasised – that the lack of it in their lives shall hopefully transform into an abundance of it in their children’s lives.

“Bacche chote hain humare, woh padhte hai. Agar unke bhavishya mein achi naukri milti hai toh unko yeh kaam kabhi nahi karne denge (Our children our small, they are studying. If they get good jobs in their future, then we will never let them do this work)” – PI 7

“Kuch alag karengey, ITI karke computer chalana sikha hai ladki ne (She will do something different, my daughter studied at an ITI [Industrial Training Institute] and learn to work on the computer)” – PI 1

“Humne itne din kar liya, ab bas ye hai ki bacho na pakadna pade (We did this work all these years, so that our children do not have to touch a broom)” – PI 1

Despite such hopes and aspirations and their struggles with such an inhuman vocation, a common sense of sadness unites these women who see their children faced with only two options – sanitation work, no matter how educationally qualified, or unemployment.

“Humare baccho ko hi yeh kaam kyu milta hai? (Why do our children only get this work?)” – FGD 1

“Kitna bhi padh lo, kaam toh bas tatti saaf karne ka hi milega Nagar Nigam se (No matter how much one studies, the only jobs we get from the Municipality is to clean shit)” – PI 1

Some respondents did talk about caste discrimination having relatively lessened in jobs, however the rampant underemployment in the residential patches of sanitation workers is difficult to ignore. There was only one case in the entire sample where all children from a house were educated and worked in different professions, reiterating the limited options for their community.

Socio-Economic Pressures and Types of Discrimination

“Ab kya kare, humko jab gareebi thi tab kuch nahi dikha. Iss kuen mein utar gaye toh utar gaye (What to do, when we were poor this was the only option before us and we took it)” – PI 10

Historically, Valmiki communities were pressured into sticking to their professions through tactics of fear, threats of violence and social boycott if they attempted to take up occupations associated with higher castes. Caste divisions dictate matters of marriage, housing, employment and general social interactions. These social
divisions reinforce themselves through direct or indirect methods of social ostracism, economic exclusion, physical and emotional violence (Human Rights Watch, 2015). However, when asked about whether any of the women sanitation workers felt social or economic pressures to continue their work, all of them cited economic pressure as the predominant reason. They admitted that there were subtle social pressures, but the hold of tradition was less in urban areas compared to rural areas. There was a prevalence of a sense of resignation to sanitation work as the only option to escape abject poverty due to their caste.

“Agar (kaam) karenge didi toh kha lenge, isme (samajik) dabao ka kaam nahi (If we work then we will eat, societal pressure has nothing to do with it)” – PI 1

“Jab ye hamara dhanda hai, toh yahi karna hai (When this is our vocation, this is what we will do)” – PI 5

“Hum khushi khushi karte hai, jab yahi kaam karne ke liye payda hue toh yehi karenge (We do it happily, if this is the work we were born to do, then we will do it)” – PI 7

The women workers interviewed gave examples of the indirect pressure they faced that limited their vocational options. At the heart of the caste system lies the denial of the right to free choice of employment for Valimikis (Human Rights Watch, 2015). They are often manipulated to work in “polluted” occupations. Many women pointed out that when members of their own communities start small businesses like teashops, members of higher castes refuse to buy from them, resulting in losses. The reason for such behaviour seems to be their association with ‘dirt’, which influences consumers, especially when it comes to eatables.

“Agar iss kaam se nikalna bhi chahe aur dukaan khol li jaise chai ki, toh koi humse kharid ta nahi kyunki hum Balmik hai (Even if we try to get out of this job and open shops like tea shops, nobody buys from us because we are Valmiki)” – FGD 2

When women workers were asked about whether they face direct social discrimination like untouchability from society at large, 63 percent of those personally interviewed as well as majority of those in group discussions affirmed to facing touch based discrimination in their daily lives.

“Uss din mandir se jab pandit ne dhakke maar kar nikala, mai bahut royi. Bahut beizzati ki, phir waapas nahi gayi (That day when the priest kicked me out of the temple, I cried a lot. I was really humiliated, I never went back again)” – PI 1

“Aapne interview ke waqt humare ghar ke paani piya, humein accha laga (During the interview, you drank water in my home, we felt good)” – PI 17 to PRIA researcher

The freedom of movement and residence for Dalit or Valmiki communities is also curtailed through residential segregation (Human Rights Watch, 2015). Our analysis confirmed a spatial discrimination. Sanitation workers in Jhansi are forced to live in the dirtiest areas where access to basic services is limited. During the course of data collection for this study, researchers noted the unhygienic conditions sanitation workers are forced to live in – overflowing drains, choked with plastic and pigs roaming freely. Their houses smell like urinals and their food has to be covered at all times because of flies and mosquitoes breeding in the dirt around.
“Jahan Brahmin reheten hai wahan humein kiraye ka ghar nahi milta, humein sabse gande jagaoon mein bhej dete hai rehene ke liye (We can't rent houses where Brahmins stay; we are driven off to the dirtiest patches of Jhansi)” – FGD 2

The cleanest and most posh neighbourhoods of Jhansi are inhabited by the upper castes. While these areas are unaffordable, even relatively affordable but better settlements are not accessible because of the unwillingness of upper castes to co-exist with the Valmiki community.

Apart from the geo-politics of residence, women sanitation workers also face severe discrimination in public spaces like temples, water taps as well as exclusion during religious festivals. After long hours of work, the porches and front steps of homes used as resting areas by women workers are washed by the house owners to ‘purify’ their homes again. Water is served to them from a distance without touching, or even refused in some cases. Left over meals at home as well as bought meals at restaurants are given to them in disposable plates instead of steel ones. Children are pulled closer to their parents while crossing women sanitation workers on the streets so that they do not touch their bodies or their brooms.

“Humara jharoo toh humara haath hi ban gaya hai, koi farak nahi hai. Haath bhi nahi chuenge na jhaaroo, lekin unke bacche beemar nahi padhte kyunki hum kachra saaf karte hai. Humare bacche bimaar padhte rehte hai aur koi nahi dekhta (Our brooms are an extension of our hands. They will not touch our hands or brooms, but their children do not fall ill because we clean all the garbage. Our children fall ill but nobody cares)” – FGD 1

However, it is encouraging to note that 42 percent of the women workers said that they do not experience such touch-based discrimination. A significant reason for this is that the neighbourhood they live in have relatively better-educated families and they see these women workers as important parts of their neighbourhood. Age also makes a difference - older women who work as permanent staff under the municipality command respect and are looked upon as motherly figures by other residents. Many of these women sanitation workers have seen the young adults grow up around them and have built bonds of affection and care with their families.

Networks of Garbage

To understand the kind of social structures and institutional networks with respect to garbage and sanitation workers in Jhansi, our women sanitation workers were asked a few inter-related questions. The jajmani system or patron-client relationship has a long history in rural India. In this, the landed higher caste jajmans were the patrons and the service castes were their kameens (servers). Since urban slums inhabited by sanitation workers have rural characteristics, the women workers were asked if such systems still continued. All of them said it didn’t and a few who had such relationships with particular households said they no longer serve them.

To understand how waste travels and the institutional networks that may exist within, women workers were asked where they collect and clean waste and what they do with it after collection. This was important to understand whether there existed power dynamics in the buying and selling of waste by people from upper castes, as this would impact the collection and the type of waste collected by sanitation workers. Furthermore, this would also give an insight into whether the sanitation workers themselves were using parts of the waste collected by selling them for quick cash, as such practices exist in urban areas.
All women said that all they did was to collect waste, put it in their carts, take it to dustbins or dumping grounds certified by the JMC and dump it there. They did not sort or segregate waste into wet, dry, hazardous, sanitary or e-waste, neither did they sell any portions of it for quick cash.

The severely limited knowledge or information about how waste travels or the structure of a waste pyramid in the city of Jhansi emerged from all interviews. None of the women workers had any idea about where the waste goes beyond the dumping ground or whether any portion of it is sold or treated. There does not seem to be information regarding any waste pyramid in the city or any informal systems regulating waste for commercial purposes.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Unions, Benefits and Life as a Sanitation Worker

There are four unions of sanitation workers in Jhansi, and the tensions and uneasy co-existence between them is well known. Nevertheless, a strong worker’s union acts as an important safety net in terms of labour rights protection. None of the women interviewed, however, belonged to any union. In fact they preferred to stay away from them because many of them believed the unions acted as theatres of power play where the interests were not altruistic but favoured a particular section of workers.

According one of the JMC sanitation inspectors, apart from the EPF, ESI and Society fund extended to permanent and contractual workers, a health centre for free treatment of sanitation workers has also been set up. In addition, permanent and contractual women sanitation workers are entitled to three months paid maternity leave. Permanent workers are also entitled to forty days of paid casual leave and contractual workers to sixteen days. Permanent workers can also avail 365 days in one’s whole service life as paid medical leave. All salaries are mandated to reach their recipients by the first week of every month and when an employee retires, her/his dues are given on the day of retirement along with their pension books. However, there existed many exceptions to these rules.

“Unhone mera ek mahine ka paisa kata taaki maa banne ki chutti le pau (They deducted one month’s salary for me to be able to take maternity leave)”

“Pet-se hoke pura kaam kiya maine (I worked through my pregnancy)” – PI 5, contractual worker

The only sanitation worker who admitted to receiving all benefits, including medical insurance, was one woman working with the Indian Grassland and Fodder Research Institute. Seventy-one percent of the permanent employees admitted to having received or availing paid casual leaves and maternity benefits apart from monetary schemes like EPF and the Society Fund. They also mentioned having holidays on Sundays. They did not receive any medical insurance or benefits. Twenty-nine percent of the permanent employees, however, claimed to receive no such benefits. While permanent are relatively better off, the same cannot be said for contractual workers. The contract system under the sanitation industry is known to be exploitative. Taking advantage of the grey areas of outsourcing, the contract system is abused by municipal corporations around the nation, encouraging mistreatment, apathy towards Valmiki workers and the perpetuation of poor working conditions (Yadavar, 2017).
During our interviews, all contractual workers under the municipality denied receiving any benefits except paid casual leaves. The outsourced workers were the worst off and said that they had got no benefits whatsoever and worked seven days a week. None of the women workers among all three groups of workers had any information about the free health clinic centre mentioned by the JMC sanitation inspector.

“Hum kacche waalo ko pucca se zayada kaam hota hai, unhe kamse kam chutti toh milti hai, humein toh wo bhi nahin milta (We contractual employees do more work than permanent ones, at least they get holidays, we don’t even get that)” – PI 19, contractual worker.

There is clearly a glaring gap between policy and practice. This may be due to ignorant execution of policies or the lack of information among workers about their rights – both of which are the responsibility of the employing institution. Raising awareness about rights and entitlements is a crucial duty on behalf of the municipalities to ensure the physical and emotional protection of their workers, specifically when women workers already bear the double burden of labour between home and work.

“Maine paise bachaye the mere baccho ke liye naye kapde kharidne ke liye; main beemar padh gayi aur sara paisa aspatal mein de diya. Main baccho ke liye naye kapde nahi kharid paai (I saved money to buy new clothes for my children; I fell sick and had to spend it all at the hospital. I could not buy them clothes).” – PI 1

It appears illogical that provisions for such benefits are available only for permanent and contractual workers, since the kind of sanitation work they do is more or less the same as outsourced workers. Those working as outsourced employees work under private agencies approved by the government. It is thus important for the municipality to ensure that the private agencies also provide similar benefits and working conditions to their employees. It is cruel to mandate seven-day working weeks throughout the year without paid leaves of any kind.

To get a better understanding of their situation, we asked all women workers to tell us how they feel as sanitation workers. Eighty-four percent of the women personally interviewed used the word *majboor* (compulsion/desperation) to explain their lives. A common refrain in their answers was the feeling of being stuck in their situation. Compelled by caste and poverty, these women play the role of invisible citizens – obligated to raise children, to earn money, to cook and clean, to silence. Their entire existence is an obligation to accept a society and a State that does not care.

“Jab khaane mein kuch nai hota toh sab seekh jaate hai (When there is nothing to eat, you learn everything)” – PI 12

“Majboori le ayi toh acha lagna padhega (ye kaam), agar padhe likhe hote toh kahi aur hote (Desperation brought it upon us so we have to like this work, if we were educated then we would be somewhere else)” – PI 15

“Pet ka irada hai, chahe padhe likhe ya gawar ho, kaam toh yahi hai” / “thela nahi chalat toh paisa nahi awat (It’s the stomach’s decision, whether literate or illiterate, this is our work/ “if you do not pull the garbage cart, then no money will come in)” – PI 10

When a section of a city’s population describes its existence as desperation and exploitation, it confirms that the policy as well as moral compass of its governance is
questionable. These women ensure the health of others by compromising theirs, the evidence visible daily with garbage carts pulled out outside our homes every morning to collect our waste. They are mothers, wives, daughters and individuals who have mouths to feed, bills to pay, children to educate and drunken husbands to bear. The condition of sanitation workers and manual scavenging has been an oft-debated one. While it is crucial for the government to revaluate its policies and practices, it is indispensable for society as a whole to do the same in terms of its behaviour and attitudes towards these women.

THROUGH THE GENDER LENS

With so many intersectional identities that women sanitation workers live through every day, their gender identity is a dominant one that moulds their lives the most. Each of the twenty-four hours in their day is spent in balancing the strenuous chores at home, being a caregiver to their families as well as working.

“Naukri toh humari do hai didi, lekin bacche paalne ki naukri koi maanta hai nahi (We actually have two jobs, but raising children is not considered a job by anyone)” – FGD 3

It was important to explore certain aspects of their work lives that carry a gendered connotation. It was encouraging to see that 100 percent of the women said that they did not feel their gender de-capacitates them at their work in any way. No instances of women having faced any form of sexual harassment were recorded; in fact, their response to these questions always implied their strength in number and their strength in their brooms. They laughed at the possibility of ever being bothered because they were convinced nobody would dare touch them as long as they held their brooms in their hands.

“Arrey launde darte hai humse! Chooa bhi toh dungi rakh ke jharoo se! (The men are scared of us! If they even touch us then we will give it back!)” – FGD 1

When asked if the women workers felt easily replaceable or that women were easily fired compared to men, all women responded negatively. They confirmed that men and women were treated equally and it did not matter what their gender was; if their work was incompetent, they would have to face the consequences. Supervisors or havaldars watching over their work were mostly men. Unlike the grievance redressal mechanism available to the general public in Jhansi, the women sanitation workers had no official way to file complaints or work-related grievances except informal methods like personally mentioning it to their supervisors.

“Havaldar ko shikayat karna na karna ek hai..uska man hua toh sunega nahi toh baihte raho (There is little point complaining to the supervisor. If he is in the mood to listen there is a chance of redress, otherwise it is futile)” – PI 2

Due to the absence of a formal complaint system, there is no accountability regarding action taken or not taken. This makes it easier to dismiss the problems of women sanitation workers and amplifies the power dynamics of a structure they belong to the lowest rungs of.

Enabling a health-friendly working environment for women, especially because of their biological cycles such as pregnancies and menstruation, have been encouraged by many legislative functions for women labourers. For example, The Second National Commission on Labour, 2002 justified protective discriminatory legislation in favour of women workers, acknowledging the difficulties experienced by them.
(Shodh Ganga, n.d). However, while all women responded negatively when asked if their gender de-capacitates them at work, a different picture emerged when they were asked about situations like coping with menstrual cycles at worka.

“Kapde ka langot pehente the jo gir jaata thaa (We used to wear cloth diapers which would fall off)” – PI 2

“Peheli baar maasik ke waqt thela pakra toh haath kaape, pata nahi tha itna bhari hoga, aadat padh gayi apne se bhaari cheez ghiset na aur pet dard sehna (When I had my period and had to hold the cart the first time, my hands trembled, I did not know it would be so heavy. Now I am used to pulling something heavier than me and bearing my stomach cramps)” – PI 6

All women expressed the difficulties of working with menstrual stomach cramps, thigh rashes caused due to sanitary napkins or cloth, urinary infections, weakness and dizziness. Some women also admitted to having to take their children along for help on days they felt too weak to work. Despite voicing these issues, they emphasised that they learned to bear the pain and manage their work as there is no other option. What was interesting to note was that before admitting to these problems, most women began their responses with saying that menstruation did not bother them and that they were very used to it. During the interviews, it took some time for them to open up and acknowledge their problems, as most were convinced they were supposed to cope quietly.

“Ab duty hai toh karna padhega, yehi jaat hai (Now this our duty so we have to do it, this is our caste)” – PI 17

During the group discussions on the subject of menstruation, women unanimously dismissed the idea that their bodily problems were something that needs care. Their prioritisation of the self was perpetually put secondary to their caste, their work and their families. The labour of love as a true phenomenon surfaces from each recorded interview, but the sheer negligence of their own pain to avoid showing signs of weakness was proof to how societal attitudes towards them had been internalised in their minds.

OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH

Challenges to Own Health

Apart from the diversity in culture, history, religion and language, India is also known for its diversity of living and working conditions (Jaitly and Vijay, n.d). These working conditions range from highly regulated to Dickensian-like appallingy neglected conditions, based on the sector of work. The problem of occupational health and safety is fatal and sanitation workers pay the price by bearing all kinds of diseases. To explore this in our study, women workers were asked about issues of occupational health. When asked about the kind of challenges faced in their own hygiene, 63 percent mentioned problems like infections from cuts caused by rusted nail and glass, eye and throat infections caused by dust, seasonal infections specially during monsoons, skin scrapes and allergies and bruises. The women also mentioned the challenges in managing menstrual cycles during work and it was disconcerting to hear the difficulties of women’s own hygiene influenced by their occupation.
“Baarish mein ghin aati hai, gobar ka smell aata hai, pair mein lipat jata hai, yeh sabse kaharb lagta hai (During monsoons, it is very icky, I can smell cow dung which smears over my feet, that is the worst)” – PI 15

Eighty-four percent of the women received no safety gears or uniforms. According to a JMC sanitation inspector, permanent women sanitation workers under the municipality are supposed to receive proper uniforms (saree and blouse), ID cards, gloves and masks. Men also receive gumboots. Even those working under contracts should receive basic safety gears and outsourced workers should be receiving the same from their respective private agencies. However, only two permanent municipality workers said they had received kits, but that was four years earlier and they had never been used because the sheer weight of the equipment made working very difficult. The sanitation inspector admitted that safety gears are only given out when “demand arises”. This is clearly problematic, as handling garbage inclusive of human and animal waste, broken glass, iron nails, wood spokes and other wet and dry waste without gloves and protective gears can be fatal.

“Koi kit nahi milta, kapda-tukda kat kar khud hi bana lete hai (We do not get any kit, we cut our own clothes and make gears)”

“Apni saaf safai ka humesha dar reheta hai, kaam ke baad jab nahi lete toh seedha dimag nahi kaam karta (My hygiene is constantly at risk, I can't think straight till I take a bath after work)” – PI 19

The women were asked how they handle human waste like baby waste as well as menstrual waste. Seventy-three percent said they used tongs and an aluminium bowl provided by their employers, but that was the extent of safety gear. Both items are made of poor quality materials and do not last beyond a season, which is when these women create their own equipment at home that provides light hand protection. It is a matter of concern that 21 percent of the women said that they did not even have these basic equipment and handled human and animal waste by hand, indicating the persistence of manual scavenging – contrary to the sanitation inspector’s stance that Jhansi is manual scavenging free. Multiple women at several group discussions also revealed that men are still made to enter sewers and septic tank with nothing but their underwear and a single rope tied to their waste, which is manually controlled by another man outside the hole.

“Kabhi haath mein tatti pakda hai? Bhook nahi lagi kaafi time ke liye phir (Have you ever held shit in your own hand? You will not feel hungry for a while)” – PI 15

Facilitation of a Safe Working Environment by Employers

“On the basis of these Directive Principles as well as international instruments, Government is committed to regulate all economic activities for management of safety and health risks at workplaces and to provide measures so as to ensure safe and healthy working conditions for every working man and woman in the nation.” – Ministry of Labour and Employment, Government of India website

Seventy-eight percent of the women sanitation workers said that the government or their private employers were not facilitating a healthy and safe work environment. Basic provisions like first aid kits were not available. Minor accidents on the road are common but no safety provisions or patrols of any kind are organised. They do not raise their voices against it because they feel powerless and replaceable.
It was encouraging to hear many women admit that while the government or their employing agencies did not try to make their work places safe, the communities where they worked did. Despite it not being a dominant practice, many women did share stories of small helpful gestures made by the community on instances of accidents or other mishaps.

**Physical and Mental Health**

Women sanitation workers were asked about their physical and mental health along with their dependency on any drugs or substances. Most women laughed when asked these questions because they could not comprehend the fact that their physical problems mattered or that mental problems were real.

"*Humko koi dikkat nahi hoti, kaam hai, kaam karte hai* (We do not have any problem, this is our work, this is what we will do)" – PI 7

Thirty-three percent women had some kind of physical problem - multiple non-healed bruises, twisted ankles, swollen fingers, skin rash, permanently broken nails, boils on the neck, constant weakness, high blood pressure, diabetes, cough and breathing problems, hair loss - some of which were the result of their jobs. The women workers initially did not consider these real problems and never thought about the effect a rigorous job like theirs could have on them and they accepted them only after it was pointed out to them.

"*Raat ko pair baandh kar soti hu, thela lagane ke vajah se, pair bekaar ho rahe hai* (I tie a cloth tightly around my legs at night. My legs are becoming weak because of my pushing the heavy carts)" – PI 15

It was much more difficult to convince these women to talk about their mental health. When asked if they faced anxiety, severe sadness (depression), mood swings or tensions of any kind, they nodded and said that they faced constant anxiety and depression but did not understand how that was relevant.

"*Itna yeh kaam kar liya hai ki ab naak ke saamne gulaab bhi rakhoge toh tatti sukhungi* (We have done this work for so long that now even if you place a rose in front of my nose, I will still smell shit)" – FGD 4

"*Mera mard yehi kaam karta hai aur khub daaru pita hai, varna naale mein kaise ghusega? Ab ek dum bewda ho gaya hai aur sirt maarta hai mujhe..toh har raat lagta hai ab padhegi* (My husband does sanitation work too and drinks a lot; how else would he enter a drain? Now he’s a complete alcoholic and beats me...every night I anticipate the beating)" – FGD 2

"*Dukh ho ya sukh ho, sab bhogne hai, apne baccho ko padhana hai* (Happiness or sadness, we have to put up with everything, we have to educate our children)" – PI 10

These comments – some said with a laugh, some with sobs – exhibit a sense of acceptance of their condition by women sanitation workers. Their daily lives were filled with economic instability, social alienation and political invisibility – and yet they did not understand their feelings as possible mental health issues because this is life as they know it. Forty-two percent of all women personally interviewed and 85 percent of all women respondents in group discussions admitted to being addicted to gutka (tobacco mix) and tobacco which cause cancer and weaken teeth and gums. They
said it was the only way to beat the smell of garbage when they work and the habit is impossible to give up. They also explained rampant alcoholism amongst their husbands and male sanitation workers, who can only enter sewers and septic tanks filled with shit when they are not sober. All women responded negatively when asked if they felt their employers showed any accountability towards their physical and mental health.

**LAWS, SCHEMES AND POLICIES**

There are many national level policies, schemes and laws to protecting Dalit communities from social and occupational atrocities. One of these is the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Employment (PEMSR) Act 2013 by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment (MoSJE), which decreed a ban on manual scavenging. The PEMS R Act stems from The Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) (EMSCDL P) Act, 1993. The Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1955 was the first law to have initiated the process of conversion of dry latrines to pour-flush latrines to discourage manual handling of human waste. This act was followed by an array of policies and schemes like the Integrated Low Cost Sanitation (1980), Total Sanitation Campaign (1999), National River Conservation Programme (1995), National Urban Sanitation Policy (2008), and Jawaharlal Nehru Urban Renewal Mission (2005). These schemes echoed the ideas of Gandhi, condemned manual scavenging and encouraged the protection, sensitisation and rehabilitation of communities linked to sanitation work.

Not one of the women sanitation workers participating in our study had any awareness about these laws, policies or schemes that were meant to protect them and their rights. While they vaguely knew that manual scavenging was not ‘appreciated’ anymore, they see it happen regularly and do not expect anything to change. When asked if their local MLAs or other JMC officials ever tried to explain to them or educate them about such laws or about their entitlements, they said that MLAs themselves make them clean garbage with their hands before a VIP visits. Some even mentioned that local MLAs who did not receive votes from the Valmiki communities take revenge by completely ignoring all issues of basic services prevalent in areas inhabited by Valmikis. There is a discernible gap between local communities of sanitation workers and their elected representatives.

“Hume toh pata bhi nahi humara parshad kaun hai. Bas election ke waqt aate hai, vote maang ke chale jaate hai phir kabhi nahi dikhte (We do not even know who our MLA is. They just come and ask for votes before elections and then are never seen again)” – FGD 4

While local officers are apathetic to issues of sanitation workers, 78 percent of the women workers responded negatively when asked if they thought local officials perpetuated caste-based vocations through JMC’s hiring process. Most women said that it is schemes like Safai Karmi and the ignorance on behalf of the general public that perpetuate caste-based vocation. They also said that the Valmiki community remains in its caste-based vocation because no other jobs are given to them, no matter how much or little educated.

“Bohot kuch sochte hai dil mein, kaash kisi aur ghar mein paida hote toh hum padhte aur achi naukri milti (I wish for many things, I wish I was born in another house, then I would have studied and gotten a good job)” – PI 5

All the women sanitation workers were extremely unhappy about having been born into this caste and being made to do what they do but they were resigned to their fate.
and did not dare dream for a life beyond it. On multiple occasions, our team faced resistance to cooperation or discussions from their side because in the struggle of daily survival, they have watched government officials, NGOs and myriads of research groups come and go but their conditions have remained the same and so have been their jobs.

“Haal toh humara yehi hai, yehi rahega. Karte aaye hai...ab bas, karte rahenge (This is our condition, and this is how it will remain. We have been doing this and we will keep doing this)” – PI 8
CONCLUSION

“Subeh khana hota tha toh shaaam ko nahi (If there was food in the morning, then there was none in the evening)” – PI 1

“Pareshani aati hai, toh seekh jaate hai (When problems arise, you learn everything)” – PI 14

“Hum subeh saat baje se kaam kar rahe hai, aur ek daana naseeb nahi hua abhi tak, time kahan hai. Abghar aaye hai, mere baccho ko khilaungi ab, varna aur kaun khilayega? (We have been working since 7 am and I’ve not had a bite to eat, where is the time? Now I just got home, I will feed my children, otherwise who will?)” – PI 18

“Jharoo bhi nahi milta (We do not even get brooms)” – FGD3

“Aur koi kaam nahi hai toh yeh karte hai/ Bura nahin laagta, jab lagta hai toh apne parivaar ke baare mein sochti hun (we have no other option, so we stick to this /I don’t feel bad, and when I do, I think about my family)” – PI 10

“Mai kucch mein thi sattara saal se aur woh sirf ghoos mangte the jab bhi pucca hone ka puchti thi, ek acche havalda ne madad ki meri phir/Note hote toh pehele ho jata (I was a contractual worker for 17 years and whenever I asked to be made permanent, I was asked for bribes. A kind supervisor helped me out. If I had the money to give bribe, I would have become permanent much earlier)” – PI 2

“Aadat padh gayi hai, pehele kure ki baas aati thi (Now I’m used to it, earlier I used to smell the garbage)” – PI 3

The predispositions considered at the very beginning of this report confirmed their unhealthy and expected co-dependency in the lives of women sanitation workers, ‘preserving’ an intergenerational tragedy.

As exhibited through our findings, the intersection of gender and caste in the lives of women sanitation workers suggests that those disadvantaged in both - namely, low caste women - bear the worst brunt of discrimination (Deshpande, 2007). The specific problem of caste oppression suffered by the Valmiki community has constantly been interspersed by a generalised patriarchal exploitation. For them, caste, class and gender intersect to relegate them to the margins of India’s political economy (Malik, 1999). While access to school and education is minimal for the Valmiki community in general, the women, bear a disproportionately higher share of this burden due to their predisposed roles revolving around housework and sanitation. Valmiki women face discrimination in access to a dignified life, to legal redress to claim their entitlements as citizens and workers, to fair wages, to decision-making processes and to benefits from - or even the knowledge of - government-initiated programmes targeted at their welfare. Health and childcare related issues are relegated to the background as they cope with daily struggles. Their marginalisation intensifies through the practice of untouchability and unequal social relations are amplified by the inequitable access to resources. The inequity constantly reproduces itself when Valmiki women are forced to perform menial tasks, in exchange for permission, for example, to draw water from a public source (Malik, 1999). Their association with sanitation work, which is seen as the lowest of lowest jobs, enable such situations.
"The everyday act of collecting water invites many abuses and jibes... they were made to beg for water, and after they were given permission to draw it, were made to scrub the hand pump clean." - Malik, 1999, p.324

Despite over two decades of Dalit mobilisation and its contemporary discourse through elected leaders such as Ms. Mayavati, the lower castes of Uttar Pradesh have worst social, political and economic wellbeing indicators (Mehrotra, 2006). Historically, caste-based electoral politics fuelled populism in government policies. Consequently, populist budgets undermined the state’s capacity to finance public investments in infrastructure or education and health services. Further, the existence of a dominantly upper caste population makes the social structures of Uttar Pradesh cities like Jhansi more resistant to change than the rest of the country.

The history of caste-based violence, specifically against Dalit women⁷, in Uttar Pradesh have present day repercussions. The state government’s schemes like Safai Karmi to combat manual scavenging and break caste barriers by opening sanitation work to upper castes became yet another good intentioned policy that ultimately worked to the disadvantage of the Valmiki community. While the middle and upper caste members took up sanitation jobs through this scheme, the non-Dalit safai karmis (sanitation workers) employed ‘substitutes’ from the Valmiki community to do the job on an average pay of Rs. 2,500 per month – an amount much lesser than even the quarter of the total salary for such jobs. Such schemes further led to the exploitation of lower caste by dominant castes while keeping the notion of purity-pollution intact (Tripathi, 2012).

The lack of education is a crucial factor maintaining this imbalanced power dynamics. The access to education based on caste complicates an already prevalent gender gap in the country. The gender gap in education increases as the age of a child increases. An intra-household gender discrimination prevails in the informal urban settlements of Jhansi, with a bias against female children in the intra-household distribution of health care and education (Kingdon, 2002). A tendency of ‘perfect capitalist’ parental behaviour plagues the socio-economically backward communities of India wherein parents invest in the child that promises maximum returns. This practice stems from patriarchal norms that establish girls as the ‘property of another home’ beyond a certain age while boys are seen as the natural heirs of a household (Glick and Sahn, 2000). Women sanitation workers raise their daughters to marry early and, in most cases, take up sanitation work along with handling housework – just the way they themselves were raised.

Valmiki households and communities that earn low levels of income in general are more dominated by capitalistic attitudes than those that earn high levels of income. When the affordability of a family is limited to educating one child instead of two, boys receive preference due to ‘better returns’. The gender bias reduces, if not disappears when families can afford to educate all their children – and the experience of education, specially good quality education, diminishes the hold of socially orthodox beliefs that pit one gender against the other. Most of the women in

⁷ Early 1990s saw violence against Dalit women where multiple incidents followed after the formation of the ruling alliance of Mulayam Singh Kanshi Ram in a bureaucractic set-up in UP. The government was a silent spectator when a Dalit woman was stripped and paraded naked in Dauna, a village 45 kms away from Allahabad. The Dauna incident was preceded by the gang rape of a Dalit woman in Hamirpur (Himachal Pradesh) and a violent clash between the Dalits and OBC Kurmis at Fatehpur (Uttar Pradesh) (refer to paper “Caste Violence”, Source: Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 29, No. 8 (Feb 19,1994), pp. 392-393.)
our study, however, only experienced a compromised education due to generations of poverty, alienation and little exposure.

The politics of geographical disparity with respect to education comes through in every interview recorded during our study. The predominance of gender gap in literacy in the BIMARU states (Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh) is evident from their history of son preference. In the case of our study, the historical negligence of schooling and literacy in Uttar Pradesh for Valmiki communities and specifically the women in them surfaced repeatedly. There is a persistent difference between educational levels by caste when compared to the entire population of Uttar Pradesh, especially those above the age of fifteen (Mehrotra, 2006).

The practice of early marriage coupled with a historic distaste for the Valmiki community ensured that women sanitation workers in Jhansi lived through the worst corners of the alienated square of gender, caste, geography and education. The enforcing of cultural codes of traditions in North India, specifically in Bihar, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh, lead to domestic violence against women (Chowdhry, 1997). According to the National Human Development Report, 2002, not only does Uttar Pradesh have the lowest levels of enrolment rates in the age group of 6-14 in schools but also the highest levels of dropout rates. The expenditure on education stems from two sources: (1) institutional or the contribution of the state and (2) private, which consists of expenditure made by households themselves (Chaudhuri and Roy, 2006). The two sources must complement each other to ensure quality education for all. However, multiple studies (Chaudhuri and Roy, 2006; Ghose, 2011; Mehrotra, 2006) on Uttar Pradesh confirm the exclusion of the Valmiki communities and religious minorities from well-endowed educational institutions. They are either relegated to poorly staffed government schools with very little infrastructure or not enrolled in schools at all.

Further, the role of education of parents came through as a dominant influencer of generational education. The education of parents, specifically mothers, show favourable impact on the educational expenditure in all states (Chaudhuri and Roy, 2006). However, Uttar Pradesh, which already has an anti-female bias in education, discourages Valmiki women from gaining the kind of agency required to break free. The communities of sanitation workers are witnesses to decades and generations of illiterates, and ironically, education is the only exit from such a life. When your way out of misery becomes your entry into it in the first place, where does one go?

"Kaun maa baap chahte hai ki bacche ye kaam kare?/jab insaan bhuka marta hai toh sab kaam karta hai (Which parent would want their child to do this work? When a person goes hungry then he is ready to do any kind of work)" – PI6

The four predispositions of gender, caste, geography and education have the cumulative effect of trapping Valmiki women into an life of sanitation work, keeping their children floating in both the hope of a better life as well as the hope of passing on their jobs to them.

Our study and field experiences reveal that the work of sanitation (in various degrees and forms) still belongs to one particular caste – the Valmiki community. Despite well-intentioned policies, schemes and campaigns, the dominance of the upper and middle castes persists and there is very little accountability from the state to address the problem. Furthermore, governmental, cultural and economic differences are not the only aspects of caste differences. Caste inequality, as rightly argued by
Ambedkar, is graded inequality where discrimination exists at multiple levels of social groupings (Jodhka and Shah, 2010). There are internal divisions and inequalities within the Valmiki communities. The existence of a sense of loyalty to communal suffering makes it difficult for outliers to survive. Such differences make it impossible to organise these communities and result in institutionalising discrimination. Discrimination, itself, becomes a cultural trait in these social groups. Our study, therefore, shows that alterations to the present system, while required immediately, cannot pursue a standardised strategy but have to take multiple contexts into consideration for sustained change.

What can be concluded is that while gender and caste are irreplaceable predispositions of a woman sanitation worker’s life, it is education, or the lack of it, that becomes the primary weapon to maintain the efficient and inhuman caste hierarchy. Consumed in a vicious cycle, the intergenerational lack of access to education, influenced by geopolitics and traditional practices, restrict empowerment and the capacity of these communities to move towards better-paid and dignified occupations.

The ease with which these women workers are relegated to invisibility enables and even encourages the lack of accountability on the part of the government to provide safe workplaces or generate awareness about their rights and entitlements. Such ignorance influences, and is influenced by, the rest of the society which refuses to normalise them as a part of the wider community. Using caste as the basis of our country’s politics, a two-way relationship is manifested between State and society, where ignorance at both ends perpetuates the conditions of women sanitation workers lives.

Just like in villages, the source of discrimination is still embedded in culture; but is enforced by economic pressures in the case of urban areas. The lack of basic employment entitlements like payslips, equal wages for similar sanitation work and other benefits reflect a severe gap between the realities of our women sanitation workers and their local governance. The perpetuation of purity-pollution based discrimination remains an accepted phenomenon with multiple facets. These facets sometimes surface as the lack of vocational options for Valmiki children, residential segregation, cleaning human excreta with bare hands, unpaid leaves, working through pregnancies and menstruation cycles, wife-beating alcoholic husbands, skin diseases and infections, depression unacknowledged as a problem but as a perpetual state of being.

This conclusion does not aim to reproduce the theories and findings already discussed – it aims to conclude the realities that sound so inhuman when written about but not inhuman enough for community self-reflection or change yet. This conclusion aims to remind society and State the inhumanity imposed upon a section of people no different from us, except their surnames. This conclusion is a reminder of all that we as a society have failed to accept, if not realise.
WAY FORWARD

Recommendations for governmental institutions

1. The waste management plan of each urban/semi-urban body must be inclusive of all sanitation workers engaged in the collection, transportation, and conversion of waste into other products. It is important that policies not only suggest but also ensure safe and hygienic handling of waste, and that municipalities regularly dispense good quality safety gear to all workers, whether or not there is demand for them from the workers. It is vital to involve the community at large to ensure that regulators provide such gear to the people involved in all kinds of sanitation work.

2. The dignity associated with 'salary' must be conferred on all workers. A logical and fair wage chart must be drawn up, keeping in mind that the work done by all three kinds of sanitation workers (permanent, contractual and outsourced) is similar and large wage gaps between them is unacceptable. It must also be remembered that the outsourced workers are the most vulnerable, since they receive no benefits whatsoever despite working equal, if not longer, hours.

3. The issue of lack of payslips and wage books must be addressed immediately for all three categories of sanitation workers and a system of surprise checks for the dealing clerks must be set.

4. Medical insurance or partial support must be initiated as a policy, keeping in mind the constant danger from physical injuries/ problems.

5. Sanitation workers and waste pickers integrated in the door-to-door collection schemes of contracted out models must receive government-mandated benefits like paid holidays, schemes such as EPF/Society Fund / maternity leaves/ payslips to improve their earnings and working conditions, their earnings and transform their status from that of waste pickers to service providers.

6. 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.
7. Local councillors (parshads) must organise regular information dissemination and awareness generation sessions about the rights and entitlements of sanitation workers. Such meetings should reflect upon the review of local councillors and their competency, failing which their role should come under scrutiny by the local governments.

8. The persistence of manual scavenging must be acknowledged by local bodies, followed by thorough inspection of its incidence and steps must be taken to end the practice and rehabilitate those earning their livelihoods through it.

9. Women sanitation workers need to be integrated into programmes such as Skill India and National Skill Development Mission to enable them to shift towards better paying and dignified jobs. This must happen simultaneously with mechanising the cleaning of drainage and sewerage systems. However, this must be done gradually so that the sanitation workers are not displaced from their jobs abruptly before they are integrated into alternative vocations.

10. 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.

11. Day care centres/ crèches for babies of working mothers should be established to soften women’s double burden of labour and promote a healthier and relaxed work environment.

12. Women sanitation workers from all three categories of sanitation workers should have reduced hours of work, instead of double shifts, to help them balance home and work life.

13. There should be a policy to provide financial support for quality education till higher secondary as well as skill building programmes and technical training 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.
14. The implementation schemes meant to protect sanitation workers should be evaluated by independent bodies of sanitation workers from the Valmiki community and local bodies should be held accountable for any failures. These bodies of sanitation workers should tie up with civil society organisations for support to form an independent alliance keeping a watch on the implementation of good intentioned policies.

15. Internal Complaints Committees and Local Complaints Committees must be set up to address issues of sexual and other forms of harassment among women sanitation workers. It is also necessary to secure a mechanism that facilitates the independent and unbiased functioning of such committees.

16. Aggressive national level campaigns aimed towards changing attitudes and belief systems against caste should be launched through the media, exhibitions, rath yatra, theatre, poetry and other mediums of communication.

**Recommendations for social institutions**

17. The community at large must first accept its role in the inhuman treatment of sanitation workers and motivate itself to learn about their life experiences. This would help in humanising them and inspire sympathy and the will to change.

18. In order to do this, it is important to organise panel discussions in schools, universities, neighbourhoods, with women sanitation workers as panelist. Hearing their stories in their own voice and the association of a real face with them instead of third party representative narratives such as this report will be much more powerful, relatable and humanised and will resonate better with listeners.

19. Schools, colleges and universities must be engaged to harness the youth to spread of ideas of transformation. Designing educational syllabuses awarding credits to those who create and participate in programmes that open up dialogue about the role of their households in bettering the lives of sanitation workers could act as incentives to start such a movement. Youth should be motivated to work or intern with civil society organisations working with, and on the issues of, sanitation workers. This would imbibe in them a sense of empathy and
understanding at an early age – one of the most significant values required for real change at the social level.

20. The government and ordinary people should encourage alternative businesses started by people from the Valmiki community by buying from them and spreading the word about such shops/businesses.

21. Local neighbourhood bodies such as Residential Welfare Associations (RWAs) should pledge to adopt methods of waste disposal that would make the lives of sanitation workers dignified - the proper covering and disposal of sanitary waste, e-waste and hazardous waste to ensure the least possible scope of physical or emotional hardship while tackling waste by workers. Societies could organise environmentally-friendly systems of disposal in partnership with the sanitation workers in their respective areas.

22. Everyday influencers such as celebrities from the media and film/advertisement world should advocate the normalisation of Valmiki communities. Partnerships with production houses – regional, national and international – for making films and documentaries using the real faces and voices of sanitation workers to highlight their plight would go a long way in spreading the message.
Books and Articles:


Websites:


Census of India, Government of India, 2011, www.censusindia.gov.in

Swachh Bharat, accessed at: www.swachhbharaturban.in/sbm/home/#/SBM
Annexure

SANITATION WORKERS QUESTIONNAIRE
(Personal Interview)

BASIC BACKGROUND
1. Basic Profile :
   → Name
   → Age
   → Caste
   → Gender
   → Educational qualification
   → Religion
   → Address (with landmark)
   → Phone number

2. How long have you lived in Jhansi?

3. What kind of a sanitation worker are you?
   → Street sweeper
   → Rag picker
   → Septic Tank cleaner
   → Sewerage cleaner
   → E-waste collector
   → Scrap collector
   → Other (please specify)

4. How did you get into sanitation work?
   → Through caste
   → Through family vocation
   → Poverty
   → Migration
   → Trafficking
   → Other (please specify)

5. Are you working formally or informally?
   → Under municipality : permanent/contractual.
   → Contracted by private agency

6. Would you prefer being a formal or an informal worker? Why?
7. Do you have children?
   → If yes, how old are they?
   → Do they help you with sanitation work/ are they sanitation workers too?
   → Do you want them to be in the same profession as yours when they grow up? Why?

8. On an average, how much do you earn in a day/month?
   → Do you receive bonuses?

9. How many hours do you work in a day?

SOCIAL STRUCTURES/INSTITUTIONAL NETWORKS

10. How does one usually enter the vocation of a sanitation worker?
    → Does it depend on caste or family ties in the sector or can newcomers from different backgrounds join too?
    → Are newcomers more vulnerable to exploitations if they do not know this business well?
    → Do you think the community of sanitation workers is strictly limited to certain kinds of people or do you think it is easily permeable?

11. How did you learn the work involved in being a sanitation worker?

12. Do you face and social/economic pressures of continuing this work? If yes, how?

13. What are the kind of continued forms of discrimination you face by doing this job?

14. Do you have any patron-client like relationship with any households/institutions? Do they pay you in cash or kind? Elaborate.

15. Where do you collect your garbage (which area)?
    → Are there specific territories you tend to for garbage collection / are there any kind of territories marked out informally or formally among waste pickers who work around you?

16. Where do you sort your garbage?

17. What do you do with the collected garbage?
    → Sell it
→ Deposit it at the garbage dump
→ Other (please specify)

18. How does waste travel in your city, i.e. starting from collection of waste by you, what is the chain of events that the waste goes through while it is with you and even after you have deposited it/sold it?

19. Is there a waste pyramid in your city? If yes, who are the people at the top and low end of the pyramid?
   → Are these pyramids based on caste/class/gender/other criteria?

20. Do these informal/formal pyramids have ties with other institutional networks/political parties/mafias/gangs? If yes, explain.

21. If there’s such a pyramid, what do you think is the total value of waste travelling in it/value created by the city in a single day? (Weight of waste as well as monetary value of waste)

22. How do you feel as a sanitation worker or as a part of this pyramid?
   → Is this your choice of profession or would you like to leave it?
   → If you'd like to leave it, what are the reasons holding you back?

SOCIAL SECURITY

23. Are you a part of any workers’ union?
   → if yes (specify)

24. If you work formally/under the municipality/government institution – do you receive any employment benefits like:
   → regular salary on time/health insurance/social security/holidays/maternity leaves (paid/unpaid)/Monitory compensation of any kind apart from salary (similar to pension for example)

25. If you work informally/under private sector – do you receive any of the worker’s benefits mentioned above?
   → Or are you seen as a volunteer/self help group member and can’t claim such benefits?
**GENDER ASPECTS**

26. Do you think your gender capacitates or limits you in any way in your work?  
   → Have you faced any gender-based discrimination?

27. Have you ever been sexually harassed?  
   → If yes, did you take any action against it? If not, why? If yes, please explain the action.

28. Are the supervisors overseeing work mostly men or women?

29. Are women workers easily fired from work?

30. How do you handle menstrual/baby waste?  
   → Where do you throw it and do you do it with your bare hands?

31. How you manage your job during menstruation?  
   → How does your personal hygiene get affected by your job?  
   → Have you ever had an incident of physical/mental weakness during menstruation and while on the job? What did you do to handle it?

32. What is the mechanism of filing a complaint for you?

**LAWS/ SCHEMES/ POLICIES**

33. Do you know what kinds of laws/schemes and policies are supposed to protect your rights?  
   → If yes, do you think such laws protect you and your family as promised? If not, can you give examples or experiences of it failing to do so?  
   → Do you see things improving in the future? Why/how?

34. What is the biggest grievance you have as a sanitation worker?

35. Do you think local officers at the Municipality perpetuate this caste based vocation for you – via hiring process and wage discrimination?

36. What have your local leaders (MPs/MLAs) done to help you or educate you about your rights?
OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH

37. What are the challenges you face in terms of your own hygiene?
   ➔ Eg: daily or seasonal occupation health problems attached to your work
during rain or peak summer/winter?

38. Do you think your employers or the government are facilitating a healthy and
   safe work environment for you?
   ➔ Are the proper gears, training and working amenities provided to you? If
   not, please elaborate with examples and experiences.

39. While working on the road or inside septic tanks for example, what are the
   kind of safety measures used for the prevention of accidents?
   ➔ Are these safety measures undertaken by your employer or yourself?

40. How do you feel it makes a difference to be an informal or formal worker?
   ➔ How do you think the two kinds of umbrellas of workers differ or interact?

41. Have you suffered/ are you suffering from any physical illnesses/symptoms of
   illnesses caused by the work you do?
   ➔ If yes, please explain what kind
   ➔ If yes, did you consult a doctor? If not, why?
   ➔ If yes, what kind of a doctor/hospital did you go to?
   ➔ If you are working formally/contracted by private organisation – do they
   cover your medical expenses or provide any insurance?
   ➔ If you are self-employed, do you have any kind of social security taking
care of health crisis? If not, how do you manage?

42. Have you suffered/are you suffering from any mental illnesses/symptoms of
   illnesses caused by the work you do?
   ➔ Eg: Depression, anxiety, perpetual lethargy, etc
   ➔ If yes, please explain what kind
   ➔ If yes, have you consulted a doctor/friend/family member or anyone to
   speak about it?
   ➔ How involved has your employer been in the process?
   ➔ If you are self-employed, how have you been coping with it?

43. Are you addicted to any kind of drugs or alcohol?
   ➔ If not, have you indulged in drug or alcohol abuse in the past?
   ➔ What do you think led to such addiction? Did your work/working conditions
have anything to do with it?
→ Have such addictions influenced your family and social life? Elaborate.
→ Did you seek help for your condition?

44. Has your employer’s or any government law/scheme been accountable to your physical and mental health?

SANITATION WORKERS QUESTIONNAIRE
(Focus Group Discussion)

BASIC BACKGROUND
1. Basic Profile:
   → Name of settlement
   → Average age
   → Caste
   → Dominant gender
   → Religion
   → Municipality workers (contractual/permanent)/ Self Employed/ Private Workers

2. What types of sanitation work do you?

3. How did you get into sanitation work?

4. Would you prefer being a formal or an informal worker? Why?

5. Do most you have children?
   → Do they help you with sanitation work/ are they sanitation workers too?
   → Do you want them to be in the same profession as yours when they grow up? Why?

6. On an average, how much do you earn in a day?

7. How many hours do you work in a day/month?

SOCIAL STRUCTURES/INSTITUTIONAL NETWORKS
8. How does one usually enter the vocation of a sanitation worker?
   → Do you think the community of sanitation workers is strictly limited to
certain kinds of people or do you think it is easily permeable?

9. How did you learn the work involved in being a sanitation worker?

10. Do you face economic and social pressures of continuing this work? If yes,
    how?

11. What are the kind of continued forms of discrimination you face by doing this
    job?

12. Where do you collect your garbage (which area)?
    → Are there specific territories you tend to for garbage collection?
    → What do you do with your collected garbage?
    → How does waste travel in your city – starting from your collection?

13. Is there a waste pyramid in your city? If yes, who are the people at the top
    and low end of the pyramid?
    → Do these have ties with other institutional networks/ political parties/
    mafias/ gangs? If yes, explain.

14. What do you think is the total value of waste travelling in it/ value created by
    the city in a single day? (Weight of waste as well as monetary value of waste)

15. How do you feel as a sanitation worker or as a part of this pyramid?

   **WORKER’S SAFETY AND SOCIAL SECURITY**

16. While working on the road or inside a septic tank for example, do you receive:
    → Protective gears/ signs/ any kind of safety measures to prevent accidents?
    → Are safety measures taken by your employer or you?
    → Do you feel save in your work environment?

17. Are you a part of any workers’ union?
    → if yes (specify)

18. Do you receive any employment benefits like:
    → regular salary on time/ health insurance/ social security/ holidays/
    maternity leaves (paid/unpaid)/ Monitory compensation of any kind apart from
    salary (similar to pension for example)
19. If you don't get most of the benefits mentioned above, are you seen as a volunteer/ self help group member and can’t claim such benefits?

**GENDER ASPECTS**

20. Do you think your gender capacitates or limits you in any way in your work?
   → Have you faced any gender-based discrimination?

21. Have there been any incidents of sexual harassments?

22. Are the supervisors overseeing work mostly men or women?

23. Are women workers easily fired from work?

24. What is the biggest grievance you have as a sanitation worker?
   → When you have a grievance, what is the mechanism of filing a complaint for you?

**LAWS/ SCHEMES/ POLICIES**

25. Do you know what kinds of laws/schemes and policies are supposed to protect your rights?
   → If yes, do you think such laws protect you and your family as promised?
   → Do you see things improving in the future? Why/how?

26. Do you think local officers at the MCD perpetuate this caste based vocation for you – via hiring process and wage discrimination?

27. What have your local leaders (Parshads/MPs/MLAs) done to help you or educate you about your rights?

**OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH**

28. What are the challenges you face in terms of your own hygiene? (specially seasonal occupational health issues)

29. Have you suffered/ are you suffering from any physical/mental illnesses/symptoms of illnesses caused by the work you do?
   → did you consult a doctor? /what kind? Who covered the payment?
30. Are you addicted to any kind of drugs or alcohol?
   → why?

   → Have such addictions influenced your family and social life? Elaborate.

31. Has your employer’s or any government law/scheme been accountable to your physical and mental health?