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Occasional Paper on
**Lived Realities of
Women Sanitation Workers in India**



Insights from a Participatory Research Conducted in Three Cities of India



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Your Home and Mine*

Your home reeks of acceptance,
mine reeks of privilege.
The walls holding your roof,
are smothered
with the brightest pink,
the warmest yellow,
the coldest green,
the dullest blue;
telling me everything about you -
what you eat, what you drink,
why you laugh, who makes you howl,
how old your children are,
what they're studying in school,
which is their favourite movie.

Your home reeks of acceptance,
and it tells me everything,
you want me to know.
It can't hide; it *won't* hide,
it stands like a rainbow,
blistered with so many dreams,
dreams your younger daughter
taped on the walls holding your roof.

My home doesn't tell you much about me,
the way yours does about you.
It stands understated, delicate, shy, polished.
My home hides imperfections,
flaunts wood, crystals, handicrafts, medals.
My home doesn't "tape" much to the wall,
it leaves white open spaces,
and lets the walls that hold my roof,
keep quiet, comfortable, unperturbed, diplomatic.

You laughed and said,
people don't touch you,
because you clean *their* dirt.
I wondered sitting in your *only* room,
how my existence felt so murky,
my home so big and yet so little,
your home so little and yet so big.

You are taking,
every corner, cuss, conflict
of the world,
and sculpting them into hands so resilient,
petals break from flowers,
to look up to you.

* This poem was written by Nilanjana Bhattacharjee, who was part of the team that undertook the research on women sanitation workers in three cities (Ajmer, Jhansi and Muzaffarpur) of India. As a participatory researcher, she tries to give voice to the women sanitation workers, who work to keep our cities clean but remain invisible, voiceless and unheard to the rest of us who live lives of comfort in India's cities.

Introduction

The occupation of sanitation work is intrinsically integrated with caste in India. This link earmarks sanitation as the sole concern of just one caste – the Dalits, and among them Valmikis.¹ An even wider gap of injustice appears on disaggregating the Valmiki community by gender. Women sanitation workers (specifically lower caste women) in a country in which patriarchy still thrives, live and work under the double burden of labour.²

A plethora of national level laws, policies, and programmes have been implemented through the years to protect sanitation workers of the Dalit community. Some of the most significant acts are The Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1955, The Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) (EMSCDLP) Act, 1993, and Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Employment (PEMSR) Act, 2013 by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment. Schemes and programmes offered by multiple public commissions and corporations such as the National Commission for Safai Karmacharis (NCSK), National Safai Karamchari Financial Development Corporation (NSKFDC) and Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM) address the socio-economic and working rights of sanitation workers. Despite these numerous developmental and legal interventions, there continues to exist multi-layered systemic gaps, which keep the communities of sanitation workers in socio-economic marginalisation and deprivation.

In PRIA's work to strengthen civil society of the urban poor to ensure their voice in planning and monitoring of city-level sanitation services undertaken in three cities of northern India (Ajmer, Jhansi and Muzaffarpur), sanitation workers, especially women sanitation workers, were an important stakeholder.³ Learning about the daily lives and lived experiences of women sanitation workers was intricately linked to understanding their “world of work”.⁴ A phenomenological study⁵ of 181 women sanitation workers was conducted in 2018 across the three cities.⁶ The objective of the study was to explore the lives of the women sanitation workers and the overlapping identities they perform each day, the associated problematics of dignity, and map the socio-politics of their existence. This occasional paper draws on and synthesises the findings from the three participatory research studies, making the collected stories accessible to a wider society and exposing the lack of physical and emotional occupational health in a thankless job such as sanitation work.

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- 1 The most common Dalit caste performing sanitation work is Valmiki (also Balmiki) caste. They have historically experienced socio-political and economic exclusion, suppression and violence in India. They used to be referred to as the “untouchables” of the caste system.
 - 2 Double 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 labour.
 - 3 This work was undertaken as part of the <https://www.pria.org/project-details-engaged-citizens-responsive-city-30-549> initiative between 2016 and 2019 supported by the European Union.
 - 4 The International Labour Organization (ILO) uses the concept of “the world of work” to include the broader place of economic activities. The concept of the world of work helps capture paid productive work that does not take place within the traditional “public sphere” such as a factory or office.
 - 5 Phenomenology is the study of structures of experience, or consciousness. Literally, phenomenology is the study of ‘phenomena’ or the appearance of things, or things as they appear in our experience, or the way we experience things, and thus the meanings that things hold for us in our experience. Phenomenology studies the conscious experience from a subjective or first person point of view.
 - 6 PRIA Research Reports (2018), https://pria.org/knowledge_resource/1554111089_Research%20Report-%20Bodies%20of%20Accumulation-%20A%20Study%20on%20Women%20Sanitation%20Workers%20in%20Jhansi.pdf
https://pria.org/knowledge_resource/1538542753_WSW_Internal%20Design_Research%20Report-Muzaffarpur-Final.pdf
https://pria.org/knowledge_resource/1554112124_Research%20Report-%20Bodies%20of%20Accumulation-A%20study%20on%20women%20sanitation%20workers%20in%20Ajmer.pdf

Sanitation and Sanitation Workers in India

“I will not give up my education. I will not take up this job of a Bhangi that is thrust upon me.... When I finish my education, I am going to destroy this inhuman practice of untouchability... Where is it written that a Bhangi’s son must become a Bhangi?” Jai shouted

“In our poverty. In our dharma. In our country”, replied his father⁷

Jai’s cry reveals the torment in the life, in the very soul, of the low-caste sanitation worker in India. Forced by the circumstance of their birth and near poverty, Dalits in India continue to work in sanitation – as manual scavengers, cleaners of drains, as garbage collectors and sweepers of roads. Even the educated younger Dalit comes for these jobs. Municipalities and private agencies source entire workforces of sanitation workers from the Dalit communities.⁸ The continued dependence on this community to undertake sanitation and scavenging work in India is appalling.

Sanitation is not an easy concept to understand. The dictionary meaning relates it to “conditions that affect hygiene and health”. The World Health Organisation refers to sanitation as: “the provision of facilities and services for safe disposal of human urine and faeces”. Generally sanitation is understood as a system that promotes disposal of human and animal wastes, proper use of toilets and avoidance of open space defecation. It is often used as an all-encompassing term for a gamut of services/sanitation work. This ranges from work related to personal sanitation to public hygiene. Personal sanitation work consists of jobs such as handling menstrual waste, cleaning household toilets, and managing household garbage (segregation). Public sanitation work involves garbage collection from households across a municipal area, dumping the city’s garbage in zonal dumping sites, sweeping of roads, cleaning drains, school, community and public toilets, sewer lines, sewage treatment plants, septic tanks, and cleaning faecal matter from railway tracks, platforms, train toilets and platform toilets.

Any discussion on sanitation remains partial without discussing who undertakes the sanitation work. The moment an individual’s waste is outsourced to another, it becomes sanitation work. In today’s India, most sanitation work, especially in public spaces, is outsourced to a section of workers commonly known as sanitation workers. In 2017, a study of sanitation workers by Dalberg Advisors estimated there were nearly 5 million sanitation workers in India; of these 2.5 million face high occupational hazards and risks.⁹ About 45 per cent of sanitation workers work in urban areas. Though their number is less than sanitation workers in rural areas, they carry out more risky jobs such as cleaning sewers and septic tanks. Nearly 50 per cent of urban sanitation workers are women, mostly engaged in school toilet cleaning.

It is this veritable army of sanitation workers who keep India’s city’s clean. Without their work, the nation’s dream of clean, green and sustainable cities remains a distant one. Shakuntala Devi, a permanent sanitation worker employed with the Municipal Corporation of Muzaffarpur says, “*Sehar mein do tarah ke log rehte hain. Kachra paida karne wale aur kachra saaf karne waale. Par sehari swacchta sirf nagar nigam ki jimmedari nahin hai. Aam*

7 Extract from the story “Revolt” by Baburoo Bagul (translated by Jerry Pinto), in *When I Hid My Caste: Stories*, 2018, Speaking Tiger, New Delhi.

8 Economic and Political Weekly, 2012, “Sanitising Caste: Total Sanitation Cannot be Achieved Merely By Allocating More Funds”, *Economic and Political Weekly* vol. 47, no 10, 10 March 2012

9 The Sanitation Workers Project (<http://sanitationworkers.org>) was 5-month long study of sanitation workers across India carried out by Dalberg Advisors in 2017, with the support of The Gates Foundation.

logon ko bhi apna kaam thik se karna chahiye. Unko kachra idhar udhar nabin phenkna chahiye (There are two kinds of people in every city. The one's who generate garbage and those who clean it. However, the responsibility of keeping a city clean is not solely that of a municipal corporation's. The general public should also do their part of the work properly. They should not litter public spaces mindlessly)."

Almost all sanitation workers belong to the lowest Dalit sub-castes. The nearly 6 million households of Dalit sub-castes are known by different names across the country – to name a few, Valmiki, Bhangi, Mehtar, Chooda in northern and western India; Bassfor, Dom, Ghaasi in eastern India; Thotti, Arunthathiyar, Madiga in southern India. Between 40 to 60 per cent of these 6 million households are engaged in sanitation work. They occupy jobs across the sanitation value chain, but with little hope or opportunity for occupational or social mobility.¹⁰

PRIA's study found sanitation workers are employed under three types of work contracts – permanent employee of the municipal corporation, contractual employee of the municipal corporation and outsourced workers. Permanent workers earn the highest wages, with the option of availing multiple benefits such as earned leaves, medical benefits, pension contribution and Provident Fund. Municipal contractual workers earn approximately one-half to one-fourth of a permanent worker's salary, for the same job. Outsourced workers earn the lowest wages, often less than one-fourth of a permanent worker's salary, to do the exact same job. Contractual and outsourced workers enjoy no benefits.

An even wider gap of injustice appears when the sanitation workers 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.¹¹ Women sanitation workers live in a country still mired in patriarchy, imposing the double burden of labour 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 worker among all workers. Most of them are employed as contractual and outsourced workers in the three cities of our study. Working as contractual workers reiterates experiences of fear, risk, insufficiency. Those employed on daily wages fear losing their jobs should they take a day off. "*Garib ka zindagi hai, kamaenge toh khaenge, nabin toh bhuke marenge* (This is the life of the poor. If you earn, you eat, or else you die of hunger)," said one woman sanitation worker in Muzaffapur. "*Subah kbana hota tha toh shaam ko nahi* (If there was food in the morning, then there was none in the evening)," said a respondent in Jhansi. Women sanitation workers must earn, or starve.

The perennial association of sanitation work with a particular caste has caused an entire community's lived experiences to entail emotional trauma of social isolation, invisible citizenry and economic depression. The same communities are cleaning our country for the last 4,000 years. It is crucial to dismantle the link between caste and occupation – but cleaning a country's streets is easier than cleaning its morality. While sanitation work is relegated to a city's sanitation workers, each one of us is responsible for changing our behaviour towards our own garbage production, disposal, as well as our perception of those who clean our garbage. Marking this difference between our perceptions of what sanitation is and who we consider responsible for sanitation work becomes critical for understanding the phenomenological aspects of sanitation workers.

¹⁰ <http://sanitationworkers.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Phase-1-Understanding-the-Problem-Part-I.pdf>

¹¹ Santosh Mehrotra, "Well Being and Caste in Uttar Pradesh: Why UP is Not Like Tamil Nadu", in *Economic and Political Weekly* vol 41, no. 40, 7 October 2006, pp. 4261-4271.

Laws, Schemes and Policies for Sanitation Workers in India

There are many national level policies, schemes and laws to protecting Dalit communities from social and occupational atrocities.

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. The 1993 Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act followed. This Act prohibited employment of manual scavengers in cleaning dry latrines and building of new dry latrines. Implementation of this Act remained weak; in fact the PIL filed by Safai Karamchari Andolan (SKA) in 2003 in the Supreme Court prompted the court to monitor legislative progress of states ratifying the 1993 Act. In 2007, the central government introduced the Scheme for Rehabilitation of Manual Scavengers (SRMS) in an attempt to provide manual scavengers with trainings for alternative skills and loans. Learning from the lack of success of SRMS, a National Advisory Council recommended to the central government to enact a new law. The Prohibition of Employment As Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Act, 2013 provides a wider definition of manual scavengers to identify them and fixes accountability to punish offenders. Based on the new Act, the SRMS was modified to focus on self-employment and one-time cash assistance. Under the new SRMS, nearly 13,000 manual scavengers have received cash assistance. However, state agencies have been unable to identify more beneficiaries, leading to poor uptake of loans and skills training. Funding and expenditure through the scheme has reduced drastically over four years (between 2014 and 2017).

The 1993 Act was followed by an array of policies and schemes like the Integrated Low Cost Sanitation programme (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.

There are numerous schemes for the social rehabilitation of Scheduled Castes, which apply to the welfare and rehabilitation of sanitation workers, under the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment. Central and state government schemes provide scholarships and hostels for Dalit students, low-interest loans for self-employment from National Scheduled Caste Corporation, and skills-based training in various occupations (construction, apparel manufacturing, electronics, etc.). The SC and ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 provides legal protection against caste-based discrimination and employment in activities that promote the practice of untouchability.

The Swachh Bharat Mission programme was launched on Mahatma's Gandhi birth anniversary (2 October). Since 2014, this has been the flagship programme of the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs to address the crisis of sanitation in India. It aimed to revamp the streets, road and sanitation infrastructure of India's cities and villages. 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. The Ministry's statistics claim almost 1700 cities across India have been declared open defecation free with 100 per cent door-to-door waste collection in 51,734 wards.

Despite its good intentions, there is enormous scepticism about the success of SBM. There is a link missing in the sanitation chain the SBM programme seeks to improve – the sanitation worker. Bezwada Wilson,

a Dalit rights activist, puts it succinctly when he says, “To the clean the country, you have to address the problems of those who have spent a lifetime cleaning the country.” The people who actually make India clean, the sanitation workers, remain invisible in the participation, process or consequences of this national level movement called SBM. The Dalberg Advisors study found focus on toilet construction is likely to increase the number of unsanitary latrines sanitation workers will now need to clean, with reports suggesting that several sanitation departments have increased the employment of manual scavengers.¹²

The New Municipal Solid Waste Rules of 2016 give some measure of safety standards for sanitation workers. States have been directed to ensure outsourced waste collectors and municipal employees engaged in sanitation work are provided basic safety gear.

The Ministry of Railways announced in its 2017 budget funds for bio toilets in all trains, thus eliminating the need for manual cleaning of railway tracks and train toilets. Bio toilets have been fitted in 30,000 coaches, and the Ministry aims to finish the remaining 40,000 by 2019. With installation of bio toilets in trains, sanitation workers’ exposure to fecal matter is expected to reduce.¹³

The National Safai Karamcharis Finance and Development Corporation (NSKFDC), set up in 1997 as a non-profit company under the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India, gives loan-based schemes (up to Rs 2.5 million) for sanitation workers. Annually the Corporation give loans worth Rs. 1.5 to 1.7 billion to nearly 20,000 sanitation workers. Loans are channelised through banks and other state agencies. NSKFDC has links with training programmes of Sector Skill Councils of the National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC) to train sanitation workers seeking jobs other than sanitation work.

The National Urban Livelihood Mission, started in 2013, focuses on skilling and employment programmes for those with unreliable sources of income. It also provides financial assistance to individuals/groups for self-employment/entrepreneurial ventures.

NSDC has come up with a portfolio of 2000+ job roles categorised under 39 sector skill councils. One such skill council is Green Jobs. It focuses on skills in waste management, renewable energy, green transportation, which are directly related to the environment. A major target of green jobs is to ensure safe sanitation practices in municipalities. It is sanitation workers who the municipalities seek to skill to perform these safe sanitation practices. Majority of sanitation workers in India perform “yellow” and “black” jobs. Manual scavenging is a “yellow” job, and “black” jobs are done by those workers who clean our cities’ drains manually. If there are so many categories of sanitation workers, all keeping our cities clean, many employed to perform “yellow and black” jobs, how will the municipality count the actual number of sanitation workers in a city? The stark reality is that with the current pace of SBM and ideas for decentralised septage management in cities, we will need 5.2 million sanitation workers in our cities in the near future. Are we ready to ensure that every sanitation worker will get a “green job”? And how will the government ensure the inclusion of genders and castes among those who are chosen to be skilled in green jobs?¹⁴

Do sanitation workers have sufficient awareness of all such government schemes, policies and programmes that are expected to benefit them and their children? PRIA’s study in Ajmer, Jhansi and Muzaffarpur found very low to nil awareness levels. Not a single woman sanitation worker in Jhansi who participated in the

12 Understanding the Problem-Part 1, page 25, <http://sanitationworkers.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Phase-1-Understanding-the-Problem-Part-1.pdf>

13 Ibid

14 Anshuman Karol, 2018, The Colours of Skilling India’s Sanitation Workforce, PRIA Democracy For All Blog, accessed at <https://www.pria.org/pria/?p=3257>

study had any awareness of the laws and policies meant to protect them and their rights. They “vaguely knew” that manual scavenging was banned, but did not expect any change in their circumstance because of it. In Muzaffarpur, more than 70 per cent women sanitation workers had little to no awareness of these schemes. While the permanent sanitation workers employed by Ajmer Municipal Corporation have some kind of protection based on types of work, the same could not be said of the contractual women sanitation workers who have no information about the protective laws for them.

SBM sought to “empower” women by giving titles of the new toilets built in the name of the woman of the household. But what about the Dalit woman sanitation worker who cleans these toilets, without proper gear, in fear of her livelihood, working in a physically and emotionally challenging workplace? Understanding the politics of **who** these women are, **why** they do what they do, **how** they do it and **what** can be done to make their lives better will empower them. Till we do so, their bodies will continue to accumulate the garbage, rejection, invisibility, humiliation and sadness of their lives; and they will continue to be alienated from the mainstream, divorced from the idea of letting go and living free.

Methodology of the Participatory Research in Ajmer, Jhansi and Muzaffarpur

This participatory research looks into the new discourse of caste and sanitation labour with reference to women, in an attempt to include the voices of oppressed communities in policy making. PRIA's history with women and work since the 1980s¹⁵ influenced the methodological and analytical approach to the current study.

The primary research question was: *What does it mean to be a woman sanitation worker in Ajmer, Jhansi and Muzaffarpur?* It became essential for us to explore certain predispositions in a lower caste woman sanitation worker's life.

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 India¹⁶ 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,¹⁷ 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 lower caste communities indispensable in our study. It became important to explore 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. In Uttar Pradesh, the 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.¹⁸ Policies meant to ameliorate the condition of depressed castes fail due to Uttar Pradesh's history of violence against lower castes and Valmiki women. Though one can say with some caution that caste-based oppression has loosened its stranglehold on the everyday existence of a number of Scheduled Caste communities in Bihar, the state continues to experience intense caste struggles and violations of the SC/ST Atrocities Act. Rajasthan is known for its conservative socio-political attitudes towards caste and women, with continued practice of female foeticide (reflected in the state's sex ratio of 926 as per Census 2011). In Rajasthan, the overt desire for sons, the very low value attached to the birth of a girl, practice of dowry, early/child marriage and violence against lower castes continues. It was, therefore, important to explore the linkages of caste-based politics for each location.

15 Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA), 1987, "Creating Alternatives: Women and Work", Research Report; PRIA, 1993, "Work and Empowerment", Research Report; Harsh Jaitli and Vijay P., n.d., "Bargaining Diseases for Work: Worker's Health in Thailand, Malaysia, Philippines, Taiwan, Republic of Korea, Japan and India"

16 T.V. Sekher and Neelam Hatti, 2010, "Disappearing Daughters and Intensification of Gender Bias: Evidence from Two Village Studies in South India, 2Sociological Bulletin, vol. 59, no. 1, January-April, pp 111-133

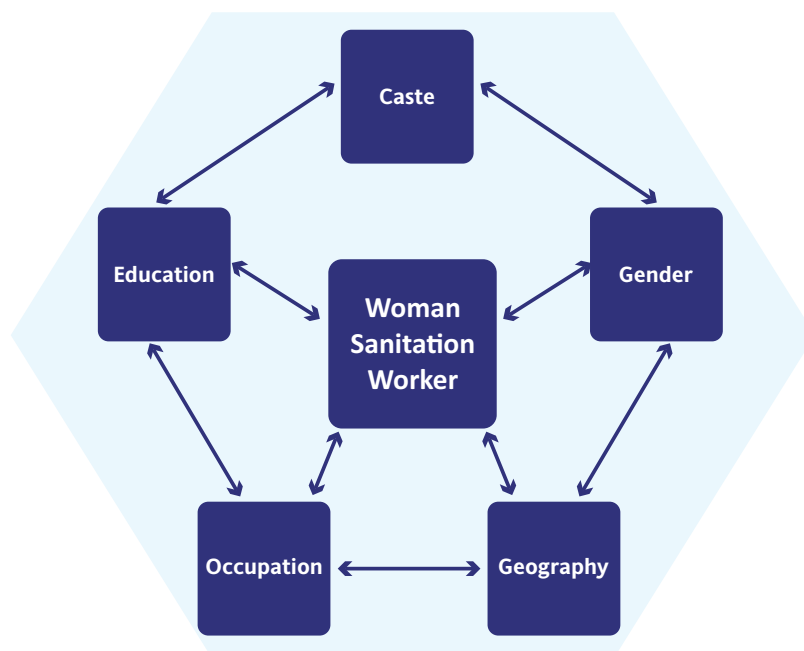
17 PRIA, 1993, "Work and Empowerment", Research Report

18 Santosh Mehrotra, 2006, Well-Being and Caste in Uttar Pradesh: Why UP Is Not Like Tamil Nadu", Economic and Political Weekly, vol. 41, no. 40, 7 October 2006, pp 4261-4271

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 India¹⁹ 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 thus 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.²⁰ Keeping that in mind, the themes that emerged out of these four dispositions constructed our framework of analysis. The analytical framework therefore explores the themes of gender, caste, geography and education. We are born with some identities, while we achieve others. 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 has gathered multiple identities through her external environment.

By looking into the relationships between all factors, a comprehensive analysis of women sanitation workers in the three cities was undertaken. Questions were asked related to:



Basic background: Who these women are and how long they have lived in these cities; 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

19 Kausik Chaudhuri and Susmita Roy, 2006, “Do Parents Spread Educational Expenditure Evenly Across the Two Genders? Evidence from Two North Indian States”, Economic and Political Weekly, vol. 41, no. 51, 23 December 2006, pp 5276-5282.

20 PRIA, 1993, “Work and Empowerment”, Research Report

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, and 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: 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.

Our sampling technique was purposive in nature. The research approach involved a mixture of participatory assessments of situations through a sociological lens and phenomenology involving 181 personal interviews, 14 focus group discussions (5 in Ajmer, 4 in Jhansi, 5 in Muzaffarpur), 10 shadowing exercises²¹ and 15 daily log interviews²² of women sanitation workers across the three cities. There were combinations of all three types of workers as well as self-employed workers in the 110 women (30 each in Ajmer and Jhansi, and 50 in Muzaffarpur) who participated in the focus group discussions. In total, the research reached out to 206 women sanitation workers. Municipal officials, contractual employers, sanitation inspectors, ward inspectors, circle inspectors, ward councillors and trade union leaders were also interviewed. All responses have been anonymised in the reporting, unless specific permission was given by the respondent.

Type of sanitation worker	Ajmer	Jhansi	Muzaffarpur
Contractual municipal sanitation worker	24	5	16
Permanent worker	2	8	5
Self-employed worker/Rani worker/outsourced/ad hoc	3	6	2
Total in each city	59	49	73
Total no. of women sanitation workers personally interviewed	181		

We began with a broad set of questions through semi-structured questionnaires specific to personal interviews, focus group discussions and informal discussions. Throughout our research, we iteratively refined our questions based on emerging data through the narratives. We intended to describe the situation

21 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.

22 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.

of women sanitation workers through their voices; thus their stories and quotes guided our research as well as our analysis.

The methodical measurement applied was a matrix analysis. For the purpose of this research, 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. Second, while we tried to gather data from different types of women sanitation workers, the analysis primarily relates to contractual women sanitation workers. Third, 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 hints 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 have revealed unique insights into the complex and diverse problems in the lives of women sanitation workers in India. The researchers are responsible for any unforeseen and unintentional errors in the research data and analysis.

The Context of the Three Cities

Ajmer

The city of Ajmer is often called the heart of Rajasthan – it is a historic city, a pilgrimage city and an educational and tourist attraction. The Dargah of Khwaja Mouinuddin Chisti in Ajmer is one of the most sacred pilgrimage centres for Muslims, next only to Mecca. The strategic position of the city has been the key to its long and rather turbulent history.

Ajmer city, with a total area of 219.36 square kilometres and population of 542,580 (2011 Census), is the fifth largest city in Rajasthan and district headquarters of Ajmer District. The city's population is expected to rise to 620,155 in 2021. According to Census 2011, the average decadal growth rate of Ajmer between 1991 and 2001 was 20.5 per cent, which dropped to 13.4 per cent between 2001 and 2011. It is important to note that the exceptional growth rate during 1991-2001 was because the municipal boundaries of Ajmer Municipal Corporation (AMC) were extended.

Ajmer is an ancient crowded city with newly developed residential and commercial areas in the outskirts, which have better infrastructure facilities. The average density of the city is 5,750 persons per square kilometre.

Jhansi

The historic city of Jhansi is the cultural and economic hub of the Bundelkhand region of Uttar Pradesh. According to 2011 Census, the average decadal growth rate of Jhansi over 1991-2001 was 36 per cent, which dropped to 19 per cent between 2001 and 2011. The population of Jhansi city was 505,693 in 2011, which is expected to rise to 604,349 by 2020. An area of 150 square kilometres falls under the Jhansi Municipal Corporation (JMC). The average population density of the city is 398 per square kilometre. Increasing population has forced the development of the peripheral areas of the city.

Muzaffarpur

Muzaffarpur is the administrative headquarters of Muzaffarpur District and is located 70 kilometres north of the state capital Patna. This district is famous for its production of 'Shahi Litchi' and is equally reputed for its lac bangles. The city is also the trade hub of North Bihar and is one of the many gateways to Nepal. Muzaffarpur Municipal Corporation (MMC) covers 26.43 square kilometres and has 49 wards. The town's population as per Census 2011 is 354,462. The average density of the city is 13,411 persons per square kilometre.

Key Findings and Narratives of Women Sanitation Workers in Ajmer, Jhansi and Muzaffarpur

The research found a strong correlation between caste, lack of education, and lack of professional agency for women sanitation workers across the three cities. Often hired as contractual and outsourced workers, they suffer further vulnerability due to lower compensation with no benefits whatsoever. Employers showed lack of any accountability towards their physical and mental health. Awareness among the women sanitation workers about laws, policies or schemes that are meant to protect them and their rights is very low.

Basic Profile of Women Sanitation Workers Interviewed

<i>Profile</i>	<i>Ajmer</i>	<i>Jhansi</i>	<i>Muzaffarpur</i>
Age	83% between 31 to 50 years	68% between 30 to 50 years	50% between 30 to 40 years
Caste	100% belong to Valmiki caste	100% belong to Valmiki caste	80% from Mahadalit communities (Mestar, Dom, Malik and Passwaan communities)
Education	77% illiterate	74% illiterate	90% illiterate
Length of time living in city	77% have lived in Ajmer for over 20 years Rani workers ²³ claim to have been living in Ajmer for three to four generations	63% have lived in Jhansi for over 30 years. Many claimed their communities have been living in Jhansi for over 100 years	Data not available

Through the Gender Lens

Her dominant identity as a woman moulds the life of a woman sanitation worker in all three cities. Each of the 24 hours of a day is spent balancing the strenuous chores at home, being a caregiver to her family and doing a job. It leaves very little time for self-care.

Many aspects of their life and job carries a gendered connotation, even though they did confirm that men and women workers were treated equally; if their work was not up to the mark, they would be hauled up just like a male worker was. Women are assigned jobs mostly as sweepers and collectors of garbage

²³ Rani workers, or the Rani System, in Ajmer is an age old traditional patron-client system where self-employed women sanitation workers or their ancestors bought the “rights” to clean certain streets. At the time, formal systems of work did not exist. The houses on those streets pay the Rani workers at the end of each month. Rani workers are not formal employees of the Ajmer Municipal Corporation (AMC). Many women who work as contractual employees with the AMC admitted to squeezing in an hour’s Rani work between the two rounds of working shifts for the municipality. Earning between Rs 400 and Rs 500 per month for this work, they do not do it for the money but, as they explained, “we do this to maintain relationship with the households on the streets we clean”.

from households. This restricts their upward mobility despite long years of employment. Supervisors (or havaldars), sanitation inspectors and circle inspectors were all men. Women interviewed in Ajmer confirmed they had never seen a woman supervisor. Trade unions are also represented by men, which never bring the voice of women sanitation workers to larger forums.

Segregation of job by sex is historically situated in the patriarchal system in which men control the labour of women and children in the family and institutions. Capitalist economies segregate the labour market, keeping women's wages low, making them dependent on men. Women are expected to manage household work – they are “allowed” to work outside the home on the precondition that her household responsibilities remain unaffected. Men dominate institutions such as municipalities, state led policies as well as the dynamics within the family. “*Unke upar jamadar hai, isliye who mehnat se kaam karti hai* (Women work diligently because they don't want the male supervisor to speak harshly to them),” said the ward inspector of Ward 46 in Muzaffarpur. Women are seen to be efficient workers, less demanding and are least paid.

The resulting mutual accommodation between patriarchy and capitalism creates a vicious circle for women. It is no different for the women sanitation workers in our study. This research has found that the consequences of the lower status of a woman sanitation worker – in her family (wife, daughter or daughter-in-law), in her workplace (low paying, low rung job) and in society (her lower caste) – goes deep down, into her consciousness. When a woman sanitation worker says, “*Aurat ki zindagi mein yahi likha hai. Kaam karna hai, kamana hai, khana hai* (This is a woman's life – to work, earn and then eat),” she is echoing generations of internalisation of sex-based and gender based discrimination at home and in jobs. This gender-based barrier breaks in unique circumstances, in unique ways. Till that time, it remains unquestioned, unrecognised, unchallenged.

“*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)” – respondent in Jhansi

The women were unhappy being born into their caste and being made to do this job, and they were resigned to their fate. The daily life of a woman engaged in sanitation work is filled with economic instability, social alienation, political invisibility – and yet they do not question, or challenge the status quo, because this is life as they know it for a woman.

The Reality of Education, Caste and Poverty

Middle aged, illiterate, poor, generationally situated in sanitation work – this dominant image of the woman sanitation worker in Ajmer, Jhansi and Muzaffarpur is constructed through the intersection of education, caste and poverty.

“Nobody used to educate girls in those days, and my family was very poor,” said one respondent in Ajmer.

“My teacher used to beat me a lot, so I left my school,” said another.

“Caste is not the only reason we don't get other jobs. It is also due to our lack of education,” said a respondent in Jhansi.

In Ajmer and Jhansi, the Valmiki community continues to face discrimination and humiliation in education at all levels, leading to a high drop out rate. In Ajmer, the issue of early marriage as well as the need for

the daughters of the house to give up education and help their mothers in sanitation work were dominant realities. In Muzaffarpur, the lack of education among the women sanitation workers is linked with their aspiration for the education of their children. “*Baccha log ko padhne ka bahut koshish kiye par nahi padha* (I tried a lot to educate my children, but they did not study),” said one respondent.

Two additional connections emerge between education of children of sanitation workers and employment status. One is where children who have not been able to study have had to go into sanitation work, either with the municipality or with private employers. The other is where children have been able to acquire decent levels of education (which they themselves value), but despite their education have not been able to find work outside of sanitation. While educating their children till Class 10 may be perceived to be high among women sanitation workers, it is still not enough to compete in the world outside, in today’s India, which keeps redefining educational standards for basic employment.

There remains a continued lack of agency among the women sanitation workers and their children, even among those who have been educated. The community of sanitation workers seems 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 often face resistance. This perpetuates the vicious cycle of caste and education, each becoming the source of discrimination, not only in the wider outside society but also within the community.

“*Hamare jaati ka shoshan sabse zyada hamari jaati hi karti hai* (It is our own community that suppresses us the most)” – respondent in Jhansi

“*Sabse bada dukh yeh hai ki padhi mein achcha hoke bhi, jhadu ke saath phas gaye* (My biggest grievance is that in spite of being good in academics, I am stuck with a broom)” – Neelam

Neelam is a thirty-five year old mother of one. She graduated from school with flying colours and learned basic but adequate technical knowledge in computers to secure a low-rung administrative but better paying job at the Jhansi Municipal Corporation. However, faced with scepticism on the municipality’s behalf as well as resistance from her very own community to be anything but a sanitation worker, she could not secure a higher level job she was eligible for.

Dasai Ram in Muzaffarpur refutes that poverty of sanitation workers is due to inter-generational occupational compulsions. “*Aage badhne ka jazba hona chahiye* (One must be passionate about moving ahead),” he said, citing his own life as an example – from safai karamchari, today he is circle inspector of Zone 2 in Muzaffarpur Municipal Corporation due to his commitment to continue his studies, pass examinations and get a graduate degree. None of his children (at the time of this research) were employed or engaged in sanitation work.

The likes of Neelam and Dasai Ram remain outliers in the world of sanitation workers. Dismantling caste-class barriers to access freedom and choice of education or occupation is still a tough ask, despite state-society reorientation on affirmative action. In the absence of any capital, and therefore inability to acquire the right kind of education, this section of India’s workforce remains economically backward, falling back into the only occupation they know and generationally have access to.

Entering the World of Sanitation Work

“*Koi apne man se nahi lega yeh kaam, lekin yehi apni rozzi roti hai* (Nobody takes this job willingly, from the heart. But this is our bread and butter)” – respondent in Jhansi

“*Mere mata-pita dono nigam mein permanent the. Saas-sasur bhi nigam mein hi the. Mera pati railway mein sweeper ka kaam karta hai. Mera bada beta nigam mein thela chalata hai* (My parents and in-laws were permanent workers in the municipality. My husband works as a railway sweeper. My son also works for the municipality; he pushes the garbage cart)” – respondent in Muzaffarpur

A woman enters the world of sanitation work through three entry points – caste, poverty and marriage. Caste-based occupational work in India ensures sanitation work is carried out by lower castes. Caste-based occupations are carried forward through generations, our study confirms. Multiple women admitted to having learnt sanitation work by watching their parents do the job. Some women got this job as compensation when their husbands, who were employed with the municipality, died in the course of his work. All women expressed the use of their gendered experience as girls in their parental homes where all the cleaning and cooking was expected of them while their brothers were sent to school or did odd jobs. Gendered, caste-based experiences put women sanitation workers in a very vulnerable position, as their chance of entry into different professions is based on better education.

The lack of dignity of labour in sanitation work affects the level of remuneration, keeping sanitation workers shackled in poverty. Lack of education and social and political agency gathers a sense of “destiny” among women sanitation workers – the use of the word “majboori” (forced circumstances) surfaced overwhelmingly in every interview. The women interviewed gave examples of the indirect pressure they face that limits their vocational options. They pointed out that when they aspire to start a small business, like a teashop, upper castes refuse to buy tea from their shops, resulting in losses.

Our analysis shows that while women sanitation workers wish the structures of caste-based occupation is broken for their children, they do not think this will happen. Rather, they fear their children will be left economically weaker, as even the traditional sanitation jobs are now being opened to other castes because of government schemes which seek to break the link between caste and occupation. For example, the Safai Karmi scheme in Uttar Pradesh opened up sanitation work to all castes. The interviewed women in Jhansi said that while upper caste candidates did apply and secure sanitation jobs, the actual work was ultimately outsourced to poor Valmiki sanitation workers. The upper caste employee recruited by the municipality paid the outsourced Valmiki worker a wage as low as Rs 2,000 per month, keeping the rest of the salary while sitting at home. Many women were angry about “their caste’s job” being “stolen away” from them and their children.

Types of Work, Hours of Work and Wages

Much before the rest of the city goes to work, women sanitation workers in Ajmer, Jhansi and Muzaffarpur report for duty, jhaadu (broom) in hand. They sweep the roads, piling the litter and garbage in small mounds to be collected later in the day and transported to the city’s garbage dumps. Sweeping roads is so ordinary a task and taken so much for granted that one hardly notices it. By the time the crowds hit the streets on their way to work, the roads are swept clean and the women sanitation workers have left, making the work and the worker invisible.

The relationship of these women with their jhaadu is intricate. It is a symbol of their identity as a municipal worker (associated with a government job), a weapon to drive away goons, a symbol of untouchability, a symbol of protest and a symbol of the Goddess Lakshmi (for it is the broom that earns them a living).

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

5 a.m.	:	Rise, do ablutions, freshen up
5.30 - 6.15 a.m.	:	Cook breakfast, feed younger child, prepare older children for school, serve breakfast to family
6.30 a.m.	:	Leave for duty (round 1)
7.00 - 10.00 a.m.	:	Work
10.00 - 10.15 a.m.	:	Walk home
10.15 - 10.45 a.m.	:	Cook lunch
11.00 a.m. - 2.00 p.m.	:	Work (round 2)
2.30 - 5.00 p.m.	:	Bathe, serve lunch to family, eat lunch, clean own house, make bidis for extra income
5.00 – 7.00 p.m.	:	Take children to tuition, help with homework, cook dinner, tend to other chores at home
7.00 – 9.00 p.m.	:	Make bidis/quilts, rest or chat with neighbours, sitting outside house
9.00 - 9.30 p.m.	:	Serve dinner to family, eat dinner
9.30 - 10.30 p.m.	:	Wash utensils/clothes, hang them out to dry
11.00 p.m.	:	Sleep

Apart from sweeping roads, women sanitation workers are employed to clean smaller drains, collecting garbage from households and emptying it in a cart, pulling the cart and dumping the collected garbage in municipal dustbins/certified dumping grounds. On probing regarding manual scavenging, it was clarified by almost all the women, that only male sanitation workers cleaned bigger drains and septic tanks – this was a strictly gendered domain.

The women work under three kinds of employment arrangements – first, as permanent workers employed by the municipality; second, as contractual workers also directly employed by the municipality; and third as outsourced workers, under employment with a private contractor who has a contract with the municipality to collect the garbage. In Muzaffarpur, a slightly different employment was noted – that of ad hoc workers.

Across the three cities, permanent workers earn salaries ranging from Rs 25,000 to Rs 30,000 per month. Contractual workers earn between Rs 10,000 to Rs 15,000 per month. Outsourced/ad hoc workers earn as little as Rs 4,000 to Rs 7,000 per month. Only permanent workers enjoy benefits such as deductions

for Employee Provident Fund (EPF) or “Society Fund” (in Jhansi), pension contribution, earned leaves and medical benefits. Not surprisingly, all respondents, if given a choice between formal and informal employment, would prefer formal jobs, specifically permanent jobs under the municipality.

Among the workers interviewed, what is of concern is the lack of information regarding salary structure/mandatory deductions and the lack of availability of payslips. Permanent workers in Ajmer confirmed receiving a payslip every month, but had no knowledge of the break-up of the salary or the deductions based on benefits availed. All permanent women sanitation workers in Jhansi and contractual workers in Jhansi and Ajmer denied having received payslips, and were unable to explain if any money was deducted from their pay for different schemes. 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.

On probing further, not only were most women unsure of what or why a portion of their salaries was being deducted, in some instances when they tried to find out or challenged unfair deductions, officers demanded to see their payslips as proof. Supervisors demanded bribes to give them these payslips. Rather than pay the bribe, the women settled for their salaries being credited into their bank accounts and did not ask for payslips. Workers in Ajmer mentioned payment of salary in cash instead of bank transfers, which aids the practice of bribery. “Every month my supervisor takes a bribe of Rs 200 when he pays our salary,” said a respondent from Ajmer. A stronger enabler of this culture of bribe-taking is the absence of a formal grievance redressal mechanism where women sanitation workers can lodge a formal complaint. This makes it easier to dismiss the problems that women sanitation workers face related to wages and hours of work, amplifying the power dynamics of a contractual work system in which they occupy the lowest rung.

The women working on contract, especially in Muzaffarpur, feel violated by the municipal authorities in many ways. They are not entitled to take leave, they work on minimum wages for the same workload, and do not enjoy any pension. Permanent workers get higher pay, regulated, paid leave and a pension on retirement. Contractual workers are entitled to 4 days of leave per month. These holidays though are not necessarily given on Sundays. The holiday is rotated among the workers in a specific area. Many women specifically mentioned that holiday adjustments depend on the benevolence of the (male) supervisor. Nepotism in appointment of contractual workers affects who gets leave. Supervisors often recruit members of their own family or extended family when vacancies arise. Narratives of women sanitation workers from Muzaffarpur reflect a certain kind of flexibility in the municipality that allows substitution of a woman’s labour on certain days due to illness, motherhood, pregnancy or festivals. The ward inspectors/supervisors extend their support to the women workers when they ask for it.

A number of women in Muzaffarpur complained about delayed payments, which makes them live a life of debt. This experience of cyclical debt contributes to them not being able to progress economically. In Ajmer, apart from the feeling of being “stuck” or “resigned”, an overwhelming number of women expressed the anxiety that comes with feeling replaceable under the contract system. Most women admitted to facing threats of being sacked for the smallest of mistakes. Unlike for permanent staff, the contractual system makes it very easy to fire and recruit people. The presence of nepotism in the contractual system amplifies this further, and keeps women from challenging workplace conditions. While the nature of contractual employment leads to fear and uncertainty among the women, especially with respect to taking a day off, on the other hand the state reasserts the merits of not taking leave by rewarding women who come

to work everyday. “*Mujhko ek din bhi chutti nabin lene ke liye certificate mila hai* (I have received a certificate for not being absent even for a single day),” informs one respondent in Muzaffarpur.

Types of Discrimination

“*Bhagwan jaat bana diya hai, lekin marke sab toh dharti mein hi na jaega. Khoon toh ek hi hai* (God created caste, but when we die, we all go back to earth. All our blood is the same)” – respondent in Muzaffarpur

When asked about direct social discrimination like untouchability, majority of the women in the group discussions in the three cities affirmed facing touch based discrimination in their daily lives. Women shared stories of people living in buildings mindlessly throwing their domestic waste and dirty water on the streets, which sometimes falls on the sweepers cleaning the roads. Water and leftover meals from homes, as well as in restaurants and dhabas is offered to them in plastic cups/disposal 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. Sanitation workers also face discrimination in public spaces like temples, water taps and exclusion during religious festivals. When riding in tempos to commute to and from work, people from upper castes either shun them away or refuse to travel in the same tempo. The influence for such behaviour seems to be their association with “dirt”. Sanitation workers are commonly referred to as “kachrawalla” (garbage people), and not “safaiwalla” (cleaning staff).

It is not that these gestures go unnoticed by the women sanitation workers, but they situate this discrimination as normal. It is heartening though that majority admit discrimination has reduced in their daily experience (reasons being attributed to higher education of the upper castes), though it is important to note the relativity with which they are talking. In Jhansi, 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 middle class residents. Many of these women sanitation workers have seen young adults grow up around them and have built bonds of affection and care with the households from where they collect the garbage. In Ajmer, the age-old Rani tradition, the essence of a patron-client relationship, establishes a relatively closer relationship between the sanitation worker and the neighbourhood in which they work.

Our study confirms spatial discrimination as well. Freedom of movement and residence for Dalit (Valmiki) communities is curtailed through residential segregation.²⁴ Regular derogatory comments and a clear spatial hostility ensure the presence of the women only for sweeping roads and collecting garbage – not for resting or socialisation. Many shopkeepers and residents wash the space in front of their shops and the steps to “purify” the space when the sweepers leave after sitting down to take some rest.

Women sanitation workers in the three cities reside in informal (slum) settlements, often in the periphery of the city. These neighbourhoods are littered with garbage, wide open drains, lack of access to basic services like water and individual household toilets. In contrast, the homes of the workers are neat and clean, aesthetically arranged despite minimal material possessions.

The existence of a dominantly upper caste population makes the social structures of cities like Jhansi more resistant to change than the rest of the country. The history of caste-based violence, specifically against Dalit women, in Uttar Pradesh has 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

²⁴ Human Rights Watch, 2015, “Hidden Apartheid: Caste Discrimination Against India’s Untouchables”, accessed at <https://www.hrw.org/report/2007/02/12/hidden-apartheid/caste-discrimination-against-indias-untouchable>

has become yet another good intentioned policy that ultimately worked to the disadvantage of the Valmiki community. Such schemes led to further exploitation of lower castes by dominant castes while keeping the notion of purity-pollution intact.²⁵

In a challenge to the prevailing caste discrimination, a woman sanitation worker in Muzaffarpur (who also works as domestic help in a private household) said, “*Hum sab kaam kar dete hain (jhaadu lagana, kapda dhona, kachra phenk dena), lekin hamare chone se dar lagta hai unko. Humne kaha, apke dukaan par toh sab jaat aate hain. Unko toh aap jaat poch kar saaman nahin bechte* (I do all the work in my employer’s household – sweeping the rooms, washing clothes, throwing away the garbage. Yet they fear me touching them. I told them one day – do you ask the caste of everyone who comes to your shop and only then sell them the goods?)”

Institutional Networks of Garbage

To understand how waste travels and the institutional networks that may exist within, women sanitation workers were asked where they collect and clean waste and what they do with it after collection. The women just collect the waste, put it in the carts, take it to dustbins or dumping grounds designated by the municipality and dump it there. None of them were aware of what happens to the waste after it is dumped, or whether any portion of it is treated or recycled by the city authority. There does not seem to be much information regarding a waste pyramid in the three cities, nor any informal systems regulating waste for commercial purposes.

Some women did admit to collecting plastic and bottles to get some extra cash by selling them. Understanding the type of waste collected by sanitation workers was also important to know whether there existed power dynamics in the buying and selling of waste by upper caste entrepreneurs.

Social Security and Unions (or Lack Thereof)

Unhappy though they are to be born into this caste which forces them to do this job, the women sanitation workers in our study do feel a sense of pride in the work they do. They find an escape in it from the daily family tussles, and share a nurturing relationship with other women in the same profession. “*Ek doosre se tasalli milta hai. Ghar ke logon se itni kbushi nahin milti hai. Staff ke saath kbush rehte hain* (We seek solace in each other. Our families do not give us much happiness. But our fellow women workers keep us happy),” said a respondent in Muzaffarpur.

A strong workers’ union acts as an important safety net in terms of labour rights protection. However, established unions in the three cities are for permanent workers, not for contractual workers, and the unions are a highly gendered domain. Only male sanitation workers and their jamadars (supervisors) attend union meetings. Women sanitation workers are called for meetings where important announcements are to be made, or when big crowds of workers are required to raise demands/showcase a union’s agenda.

The women in our study did not belong to any union. In fact, they preferred to stay away because many of them believe unions act as theatres of power play, where leaders are not altruistic and often favoured a particular section of workers. Women workers in Ajmer particularly raised the lack of unity among sanitation workers, especially among contractual workers. They felt unions do not raise real causes and issues, the leaders preferring to maintain diplomatic relations with officers and supervisors at the Ajmer

²⁵ Tulika Tripathi, 2012, “Caste Dominance Continues: Safai Karmi Scheme of Uttar Pradesh”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 47, no. 37, 15 September 2012

Municipal Corporation. Interviews with multiple jamadars who belong to unions agreed and confirmed these statements.

The contract system in the sanitation industry is known to be exploitative, taking advantage of the grey area of labour rights in outsourcing. Hostile contracts that do not provide basic rights and entitlements, and in particular do not acknowledge the double burden of women's labour, create a work environment that does not protect women workers' rights.

Occupational Health Hazards

“We are on our own. No one is responsible for our safety. My life is nothing more than a piece of garbage. It starts in it and ends in it” – respondent in Ajmer

All sanitation workers, men and women, permanent, contractual or outsourced, are entitled to safety gear (gloves, masks and protective shoes), proper uniforms, and ID cards. Men also receive gumboots. Eighty-four percent of the women interviewed in Jhansi received no safety gear or uniforms. No woman sanitation worker interviewed in Ajmer and Muzaffarpur recorded receiving safety gear or ID cards. This is clearly problematic, as handling garbage which includes human and animal waste, broken glass, and nails without gloves and other protective gear can be fatal.

Asked about issues of occupational health, the women related numerous physical problems like infections from cuts caused by rusted nails and glass bits, eye and throat infections caused by dust, seasonal infections (especially during the monsoon), skin scrapes, allergies and bruises. “*Dhool ke maare ankh mein chubta rehta hai* (My eyes burn constantly because of the dust),” said one woman in Muzaffarpur. Another in Jhansi said, “*Apni saaf safai ka hamesha dar rehta hai* (My hygiene is constantly at risk).” Incessant pain in the body, sprained shoulders, weakening eyesight, low blood pressure – the medical problems are seemingly endless, compounded by various factors like poverty, poor housing conditions and poor diet. In the absence of any health benefits, these women are bound to suffer in silence.

A woman sanitation worker, working as a sweeper on the road, has no facilities such as toilets, or a resting shed to take a break, especially when working under the hot sun. Basic provisions like first aid kits were not available. Minor accidents on the road are common, but no safety provisions or patrols are organised. These women do not raise their voice against it, because they feel powerless and replaceable.

Going to work at dawn comes with its own set of struggles. Sexual harassment at work among the women sanitation workers interviewed though was mostly unheard of. In fact, response to these questions in Ajmer and Jhansi implies a sense of strength in numbers and the strength of their brooms. The women laughed at the possibility of even being bothered, because they were convinced nobody would dare touch them as long as they had a broom in their hands. “If somebody harasses us, first we will hit him with our broom,” said a respondent in a focus group discussion in Ajmer. In Muzaffarpur, women reported some incidences of eve teasing, commenting and inappropriate physical advances, and felt it was up to them to prevent such mishaps.

The Second National Commission of Labour, 2002 justified protective discriminatory legislation in favour of women workers, acknowledging the physical difficulties experienced by them.²⁶ But there is no enabling health-friendly work environment which acknowledges the biological cycle of pregnancies and menstruation for women sanitation workers in Ajmer, Jhansi and Muzaffarpur. Women spoke of working till the day before they went into labour. “*Pet-se boke pura kaam keiya maine* (I did all my shifts during my pregnancy),” said one contractual worker in Jhansi. Not wanting to lose too much pay, they go back to work almost immediately after giving birth. “*Mera chota bacha chbe din ka tha, tabhi se kaam par jaane lage* (My child was only six days old when I went back to work),” a contractual worker in Muzaffarpur informed us.

These women face difficulties with menstrual stomach cramps, lethargy, thigh rashes caused due to sanitary napkins or cloth, urinary infections, weakness and dizziness. Workers in Ajmer spoke of the challenges in managing menstrual cycles during the monsoon. The confluence of drenched clothes during menstruation while handling wet waste was a regular experience. In spite of these difficulties, they continue working, often in intense pain during their periods, accepting it as something they are supposed to cope with quietly. Most take a medicine to dull the pain; they cannot afford a day’s wages being cut because they did not report for work. “Starvation will kill us more than pain or allergies,” they said. Some women admitted to taking their daughters along to help on days they felt too weak because of the pain. The sheer negligence of their own pain to avoid showing any sign of weakness was proof how societal attitudes towards them had been internalised in their minds. The interview questions in the focus group discussions made them, for the first time, prioritise the self, above caste, work and families.

It was difficult to convince the 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, admitted they constantly felt anxious, angry and exhausted, but did not understand how that was relevant. “*Dukh ho ya sukh, sab bhugatna hai, apne bachchon ko padhana hai* (Sadness or happiness, we have to put up with everything, for we must educate our children),” said a respondent in Jhansi. Many admitted to being addicted to gutka (tobacco mix), which weakens teeth and gums and causes cancer. The habit is impossible to give up; it is after all the only way to beat the smell of garbage. They explained the 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. Every woman responded negatively when asked if they felt their employers showed any accountability towards their physical and mental health.

26 Shodh Ganga, n.d., “Women’s Rights and Labour Statutes”, Chapter 5 in “Women’s Rights Under Indian Labour Laws: A Socio-Legal Study of Aligarh and Agra”, Research thesis by Meenakshi Gupta, accessed at https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/12832/13/14_chapter%205.pdf

Finding a Way Forward for Dignified Work

Tell us how you feel, we asked the women sanitation workers in our study. Uniformly they felt stuck, resigned, destined to do sanitation work because of their poverty and caste. Obligated to raise children, earn money, to cook and clean, to bear their lives in silence – society views their existence as invisible, and the state views them as an obligation. No one really cares.

When a section of India's workforce describes its existence as desperate and exploitative, it confirms that the policy and moral compass of government and society is questionable. Women sanitation workers ensure the health of others, by compromising their own. They are mothers, daughters, wives who have mouths to feed, bills to pay, children to educate and drunken husbands to bear. But they are also individuals, and workers, and it is crucial for government to re-evaluate its policies and schemes, and indispensable for society as a whole to change its attitudes towards these women workers.

This research study offers policymakers as well as the wider society a much deeper and humanised understanding of the socio-economic issues of women sanitation workers. The following set of recommendations (for government institutions and civil society) we hope will result in more effective public and personal strategies towards change and higher accountability in providing safe workplaces and dignified work for women sanitation workers across India.

Recommendations for government institutions

1. A comprehensive policy aimed directly at the protection of sanitation workers must be made and implemented which would cover entitlements, rehabilitation and specific directives of occupational health for permanent as well as contractual/ ad-hoc sanitation workers.
2. 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.
3. 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 types of sanitation workers is similar and large wage gaps between them is unacceptable. It must also be remembered that the contractual workers are the most vulnerable, since they currently receive no benefits whatsoever despite working equal hours.
4. The issue of lack of payslips and wage books to all categories of workers must be addressed immediately and a system of surprise checks for the dealing clerks must be set.
5. Medical insurance or partial support must be initiated as a policy, keeping in mind the constant danger from physical injuries.
6. 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, and transform their status from that of waste pickers to service providers.

7. 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.
8. Local councillors (parshads) and leaders 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.
9. 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.
10. 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.
11. Special facilities (first aid kits, drinking water) and clean toilets with changing areas and low-cost sanitary vending machines must be provided to promote healthy menstrual management and wellbeing of women workers. Established mandates such as maternity leaves, paid leaves and medical leaves must be checked regularly and private employers who fail to provide these should be deemed directly responsible and face strict action.
12. 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.
13. 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.
14. 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.
15. The 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.
16. As mandated under the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013, Internal Committees in all municipalities/urban local bodies and Local Committees (at the district level) 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.

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

Recommendations for civil society

1. Society 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.
2. In order to do this, it is important to organise panel discussions in schools, universities, neighbourhoods, with women sanitation workers as panelists. Hearing their stories in their own voice and the association of a real face with them instead of third party representative narratives will be much more powerful, relatable and humanised and will resonate better with listeners.
3. Schools, colleges and universities must be engaged to harness the youth to spread 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.
4. 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.
5. 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 these workers. Societies could organise environmentally-friendly systems of disposal in partnership with the sanitation workers in their respective areas.
6. Everyday influencers such as celebrities from the media and film/advertisement world should advocate the normalisation of Dalit/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.

Conclusion

“Kaun maa baap chahate 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)” – respondent in Jhansi

The predispositions considered at the very beginning of this paper were confirmed in the 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.²⁷ The specific problem of caste oppression suffered by the Dalit/Valmiki community has constantly been interspersed by a generalised patriarchal exploitation. 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. Women sanitation workers 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.

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. 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. 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. Further, the role of education of parents came through as a dominant influencer of generational education. The communities of sanitation workers are witnesses to decades and generations of illiterates, and ironically, education is the only exit from such a life. But, when your way out of misery becomes your entry into it in the first place, where does one go?

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. The practice of early marriage coupled with a historic distaste for the Dalit community ensures that women sanitation workers across the three cities live in the worst corners of the alienated square of gender, caste, geography and education. 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 a woman worker’s rights and entitlements. Such ignorance influences, and is influenced by, the rest of the society which refuses to normalise these women workers as a part of the wider community.

²⁷ Ashwini Deshpande, 2007, “Overlapping Identities Under Liberalization: Gender and Caste in India”, *Economic and Development and Cultural Change*, vol. 55, no. 4, pp 735-760

Caste inequality, as rightly argued by Ambedkar, is graded inequality where discrimination exists at multiple levels of social groupings.²⁸ 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 results in institutionalising discrimination. Discrimination, itself, becomes a cultural trait in these social groups. Our study 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, which is the primary weapon that maintains the lack of decent work for her. Consumed in a vicious cycle, the intergenerational lack of access to education, influenced by socio-politics, and the traditional practices of pollution-purity restrict the empowerment and the capacity of these women to move towards better-paid and dignified occupations. Why are the realities that sound so inhuman when written about, not yet inhuman enough for a community of workers to self-reflect or change? Their inability to do so is a reminder to us all that we as a society have failed.

²⁸ Surindar S. Jodhka and Ghanshyam Shah, 2010, "Comparative Contexts of Discrimination: Caste and Untouchability in South Asia", *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 45, no. 48, November 27-December 3 2010, pp 99-106

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