

Losing out on Improved Sanitation Work? Challenges and Pathways out of Manual Pit Emptying in Bangladesh

Introduction: This paper forms part of a 2-year research project (July 2019-21) on sanitation workers funded by the Global Challenges Research Fund, in collaboration with WaterAid UK, India and Bangladesh. Drawing on qualitative fieldwork in Bangladesh, the paper examines how minority groups are ‘losing out’ from improvements in FSM, especially in terms of job quality and security. The paper highlights challenges and opportunities for action, to ensure urban sanitation interventions really leave no one behind.

Methods: Fieldwork in Bangladesh took place in February-March 2020. Qualitative methods were deployed to understand the lives and livelihoods of pit emptiers in three cases (two Municipalities and one *Upazila*), where WaterAid Bangladesh has ongoing projects. Data collection included: 9 key-informant interviews in Dhaka with representatives from WASH, labour and Dalit rights organisations; and 26 semi-structured interviews with NGO staff, Mayors, Conservancy Inspectors; 3 in-depth interviews with community leaders and elders, and 10 focus group discussions (FGDs) with pit emptiers and their families – the majority from self-defined Harijan communities. Empirical insights were then triangulated with NGO reports, policy documents and academic literature.

Results:

1. Pit emptiers from minority sub-caste groups (specifically self-defined Harijan Bashphore) have been involved in this occupation since the British colonial era. They live in segregated colonies with limited tenure security and access to basic services. Permanent employment opportunities are decreasing, and there are few viable alternative livelihood options due to entrenched social stigma and discrimination, bribery and subcontracting – “The work is going to other communities. And on top of that they are sub-contracting those jobs to us with a fraction of the money they are receiving for the post” (Mixed FGD 2020).
2. The introduction of FSM trucks and improvement of containment systems is, without doubt, having positive, negative and unintended consequences for Harijan sanitation workers. Loss of earning opportunities due to increased job competition and fewer working areas due to trucks is a concern for many workers – “Saving the environment [via the trucks] has become the cause of our stomachs being dead” (Male FGD 2020).
3. A Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) analysis reveals a number of opportunities to involve marginalised workers more effectively and sustainability in future urban sanitation interventions.

Recommendations:

1. Promoting strategic alliances between WASH, labour, Dalit/minority and (legal) human rights organisations, to record data on deaths and injuries associated with hazardous forms of sanitation work, enforce labour laws (around OHS and compensation), collectively lobby for the Anti-Discrimination Act in Bangladesh to provide legal protection against discrimination.
2. Promoting an inclusive approach to FSM to ensure marginalised workers are not ‘left behind’, including collective lobbying for a rise in FSM and SWM budgets for permanent job creation, incorporation of long-term (rather than ‘one-off’) training to integrate workers into new and existing FSM programmes and/or include transition plans for alternative livelihood options.

3. Supporting grassroots leadership and collectivisation (for example, via unions or cooperatives), to ensure that the demands of sanitation workers are at the forefront of advocacy, policy and planning.