

WaterAid Nepal

Rapid Assessment of Measures on Safety of Sanitation and Waste Workers during COVID-19 in Nepal



INTRODUCTION

Nepal imposed a nationwide lockdown from March 25 until June 14, 2020 to contain the spread of COVID-19. Sanitation and waste workers had to continue providing essential services during the lockdown despite the risk of exposure to coronavirus prevailed. This added risk to occupational and environmental health hazards they regularly face, including illness, injury, and even death. Although these workers have been central to the functioning of towns and cities under lockdown, little is known about how they have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, and how they are coping with this new situation.

WaterAid, together with MITRA Samaj, conducted a rapid assessment in three locations—Lahan municipality, Kathmandu Metropolitan City, and Lalitpur Metropolitan City—to understand the knowledge on COVID-19 that sanitation and waste workers have, health and safety measures in place, and the social, economic and personal impacts on their lives.

Thirty-one sanitation and waste workers

were interviewed who were, engaged in solid waste collection and transportation, sweeping, pit emptying, sewer maintenance and toilet cleaning under public institutions, and private agencies and some were self-employed. Additionally, eight experts in sanitation and waste management were interviewed.

KEY FINDINGS

Awareness about symptoms and transmission of COVID-19

Most sanitation and waste workers knew that coronavirus is transmitted from person-to-person when one coughs or sneezes, and through fomites. Twenty 29 out of 31 workers were aware of specific symptoms of COVID-19 that are highly publicised, such as fever, respiration problem, coughing and sneezing. The most common sources of information in decreasing order were: mass media (television and radio), social networking site (Facebook), and their acquaintances. There were only a very few cases of misinformation among the workers.

Knowledge of preventive safety measures

All sanitation and waste workers knew at least 3-5 highly promoted safety measures such as wearing masks, wearing gloves, washing hands with soap, sanitising hands and maintaining social distancing. However, other less publicised safety measures, such as respiratory hygiene, were not as wellknown or understood. Employers appeared to play a role in raising awareness with 24 out of 31 respondents sharing that employers had oriented them on the disease and preventive measures.

Guidance and training

All sanitation and waste workers shared that while their employers had not provided any formal training due to challenges around social distancing during COVID-19, they had provided guidance and instructions on how to do their jobs during the COVID-19 outbreak. While the Government of Nepal issued an interim guidance titled “Health Care Waste Management in the context of COVID-19 Emergency”, there are no COVID-19-specific operational guidelines for other sanitation and waste workers, except for those working in medical waste collection. One key informant highlighted the lack of minimum safety standards for sanitation and waste workers during the pandemic.

Provision of personal protective equipment and for hand hygiene

All the respondents shared that there are handwashing facilities at their offices, and 19 respondents mentioned that their employers had provided hygiene materials like soap, sanitizer and water at

the workplaces. Twenty-six out of 31 respondents believe that washing their hands with soap and water in their field (outside office set-up) is not problematic because there are more handwashing facilities than before.

Twenty-five respondents knew about personal protective equipment (PPE). The employers of 22 workers had provided them with PPE like gloves and masks, and in some cases, with gumboots, aprons, shirts, trousers, and shoes. However, nine workers shared that they had not been provided with enough PPE, and a self-employed pit emptier had to buy PPE at his own cost.

Those who were provided with PPE mostly re-used it after washing, except for medical masks and gloves, which they disposed regularly. Four respondents also expressed concerns around the quality of PPE distributed to them.

“Not everyone has easy access to a tap, and this is the problem. We have to go quite a far to wash our clothes and fetch water. After I return home from work, I take a bath. But taking a bath every day is not possible though it is very important for me as I work as a waste cleaner.”

— Female worker in Lahan municipality

Practice of preventive measures

All sanitation and waste workers shared that they always wear masks and gloves, wash hands with soap and apply sanitizer, and maintain social distancing at all times. Twelve out of 31 respondents shared that

they always wear PPE—especially at work—as a precaution against probable transmission of coronavirus. All but one respondent reported washing hands with soap and water more frequently than before, and 18 respondents shared that they “wash their hands for 20 seconds.” In addition, they have also been carrying hand hygiene materials with them, which includes soap, water, and sanitizer. Besides, most of them take a bath at home after returning from work.

Concerns around risk of contagion

Though none of the sanitation and waste workers interviewed were experiencing any health problems at the time of interview, all of them were worried about contracting coronavirus, and two key informants shared that they knew of two garbage truck drivers who had tested positive. Challenges around maintaining social distancing at all times was cited as one of the major risks.

Insurance and financial support

Eighteen out of 31 sanitation and waste workers were not covered by any form of insurance. In terms of financial support, the government was providing risk allowance only to sanitation and waste workers deployed at hospitals treating COVID-19 patients. Some respondents wanted this allowance to be extended to other types of workers, and three respondents expressed that they wanted compensation or for their families to be taken care of if something happened to them.

Access to donations and relief packages

Nearly half of the respondents reported

not receiving any funds/donations or extra rations, be it from the government or support groups, either because they are government employees or because relief packages were distributed only to those living in rented accommodation. A few respondents shared that they do not know where they can get relief packages.

Attitudes of public, clients and employers towards sanitation and waste workers

Nineteen out of 31 respondents felt there were some changes in people’s attitudes towards them, with most saying that the behaviour of the public, clients or their employers had improved. They were of the view that people understood that sanitation and waste workers were practicing good hygiene and were working for public good, hence “people had started treating them well”. However, six respondents felt the change was for the worse, and one key informant mentioned that landlords were pressuring workers to leave their houses in some cases, adding to the stress of potentially losing their jobs.

Demands for support from the government or organisations

Respondents primarily demanded more frequent provision of high-quality PPE, health insurance coverage, relief packages, loans from the government, pensions, safety manuals, and prioritisation of sanitation and waste workers in testing of COVID-19. Seven respondents asked for respect and access to soap and water from their clients.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Federal/ Provincial/Local Governments

- Focus on capacity building of local governments in planning, implementing and monitoring sanitation and waste management.
- Prioritise testing of COVID-19 infection among sanitation and waste workers
- Establish emergency funding for the sanitation and waste workers
- Ensure that the insurance of every sanitation and waste worker is insured.



Employers (Public or private or local government)

- Frequently provide quality PPE to all sanitation and waste workers
- Provide risk allowances to all sanitation and waste workers during pandemic
- Ensure all sanitation and waste workers are insured.

Civil Society/research and learning organizations/media

- Advocate for formulation and/or strict implementation of manuals, guidelines, etc. to ensure the occupational health, safety and benefits of all sanitation and waste workers.
- Encourage and support self-employed sanitation and waste workers to have their insurance covered.
- Recognise the work of/and campaign for the respect of the dignity of sanitation and waste workers.
- Raise awareness among the citizens about the importance of the services provided by sanitation and waste workers and recognise their work.
- Support sanitation and waste workers to empower themselves and raise their voice.