

Case Studies for In-Depth Understanding and Representation of Present Plight of Waste Pickers in Chandigarh, India

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Abstract: Waste pickers are the unsung heroes of urban sanitation, playing a pivotal role in keeping our cities clean and safeguarding public health. Their tireless efforts not only ensure cleaner surroundings but also have a direct impact on improving our country's Swachh Bharat ranking. In cities like Chandigarh, rapid population growth, urban expansion, and rising living standards have led to a dramatic increase in solid waste generation. This issue is further compounded by the continuous influx of new products and packaging materials driven by technological innovation. As a result, both the volume and complexity of solid waste have significantly escalated. Recognizing and supporting waste pickers is essential for sustainable waste management and for achieving cleaner, healthier cities.

Key Words: MRF (Material Recovery Facility), Waste Pickers, Rag Pickers.

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I. Introduction:

The situation of rag pickers calls for urgent public policy intervention to address the socio-economic challenges faced by informal waste pickers. Empowering them through skill-based training can expand their livelihood choices, enabling them to pursue careers aligned with their interests and capabilities rather than being driven by mere survival needs.

Meaningful interventions should include efforts to formalize their employment status, offer social security benefits, ensure fair wages, improve working conditions, and provide pathways for upward mobility. Equally important is attending to their healthcare needs—with a focus on timely immunization for their children, access to free hospitalization and essential medication, and regular health checkups.

Yet, beyond material support, what they need most is empathy. It is vital that both the public and authorities recognize their invaluable contributions and treat them with the respect and dignity every human being deserves. Waste pickers are not merely service providers; they are integral to the health and sustainability of our cities. In response to this growing challenge, waste pickers have emerged as key players in managing Chandigarh's solid waste. Every day, they diligently scavenge through garbage bins, landfill sites, dump yards, lakesides, streets, roads, and commercial areas—collecting, sorting, and recovering recyclable materials.

Though often working in the informal sector and without official recognition, their contribution is immense. By diverting large volumes of waste away from landfills and back into the recycling stream, they help reduce environmental pollution and promote sustainability. Their work forms an essential, though frequently unacknowledged, pillar of the city's waste management ecosystem.

CASE STUDY 1: TRANSFORMATION OF LIVES AT THE PINK MRF CENTRE, SECTOR 25

During a recent survey in Sector 25, we encountered a remarkable sight: 20 women dressed in pink uniforms, equipped with masks and gloves, diligently sorting dry waste at the Material Recovery Facility (MRF) Centre. Mr. Sanjay, the proud supervisor, informed us that this MRF is entirely run by women, a truly inspiring initiative that highlights the power of empowerment and change.

These 34 women, who were once rag pickers at the Dadumajra dump yard, have completely transformed their lives. Their previous work involved scavenging through waste to support their families. Today, 20 of these women are employed at the MRF centers, where they focus on segregating dry waste, while the remaining 14 work with wet waste at the newly constructed garbage processing unit in Sector 25.



These women predominantly come from marginalized backgrounds, often struggling to maintain a normal life. They reside in modest, one-room rented houses with tin or thatched roofs, relying on public toilets for sanitation. Despite these challenges, their lives have taken a significant turn for the better since joining the MRF.

Working at the Pink MRF has provided them with secure jobs, a steady income, and a supportive environment. The Pink MRF is a testament to the impact of providing opportunities to those in need, and it is noteworthy that most of the staff at this facility are women.

During our conversation, Santro Devi shared the struggles they faced when the old garbage dump, their only source of livelihood, was closed. However, the establishment of the Pink MRF has brought about a positive change. Rekha, Baby, Mallo, and Reeta, among others, expressed their happiness about their stable jobs and reliable income. Some of these women have been ragpickers since childhood, and working at the Pink MRF has given them a new lease on life.

With their newfound stability, these women can now afford to pay rent, cover school fees, and even enjoy the benefits of government schemes. The Pink MRF is more than just a workplace; it symbolizes the power of opportunity and empowerment to transform lives, proving that meaningful change is possible when those in need are given a chance.

This initiative not only supports these women but also contributes to the broader community by improving waste management and promoting sustainability. The success of the Pink MRF demonstrates how social and economic empowerment can create a ripple effect, benefiting individuals, families, and society as a whole.

CASE STUDY 2: KAMLA'S STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL IN SECTOR 38 WEST

In Sector 38 West, we met Kamla, a 60-year-old woman originally from Uttar Pradesh, who migrated to Chandigarh ten years ago at the insistence of her son. Her son, employed as a sweeper through a contractor at the General Hospital in Sector 16, Chandigarh, faced mental health challenges due to ongoing family conflicts with his wife. These issues escalated, leading his wife, who was a ragpicker, to leave the household. Left with the responsibility of raising her grandson and without any other means of income, Kamla turned to ragpicking as her only option for survival.



Kamla, who is illiterate and unskilled, earns approximately Rs. 200-300 a day from ragpicking, though on some days she makes as little as Rs. 70-100, especially when selling plastic to a local scrap dealer. This income, while insufficient to fully support her family, helps them meet their basic needs. Through Kamla, we connected with several others engaged in ragpicking, expanding our pool of respondents for the survey.

Kamla resides in a small, rented one-room house with a tin roof. She often suffers from muscular pain due to the physical demands of her work and has faced harassment by the police on multiple occasions. She recounted an incident where her bag, filled with waste, was forcibly emptied, forcing her to collect it all over again. To gather more waste, she often starts her work very early in the day, which has led to suspicion from locals.

Despite the challenges, Kamla finds a sense of purpose in her work, as it allows her to care for her bedridden husband, mentally disturbed son, and raise her grandson. However, she is aware of the limitations of her situation and has inquired about government policies or grants that could provide financial assistance to women of her age who lack a source of income, enabling them to retire from their current occupation.

Unfortunately, Kamla's voter card and Aadhaar card are still registered with her hometown address, which hasn't been updated in years, further complicating her access to potential aid. Despite these obstacles, Kamla continues to persevere, finding contentment in her ability to provide for her family, even in the face of adversity. Her story is a testament to the resilience and strength of individuals who, despite overwhelming challenges, continue to strive for a better life.

CASE STUDY 3: RAJESH'S JOURNEY: FROM ASPIRATION TO ADAPTATION

Rajesh, a 26-year-old married man and father of a one-and-a-half-year-old son, arrived in Chandigarh with hopes of finding stable employment. His initial aspiration was to secure a job in a factory, but life took an unexpected turn, leading him down a different path. Today, Rajesh works as a ragpicker, collecting scrap materials in Phase 6 of the city, a job that, while far from his dreams, provides him with the means to support his family.

Rajesh lives in a modest room, paying a monthly rent of 700 rupees. The room lacks personal toilet facilities, forcing him to share a common toilet with three other families of ragpickers. Despite these challenging living conditions, Rajesh remains committed to his responsibilities as a provider for his family.

Each day, Rajesh, his wife, and their child embark on a 7-kilometer journey on a cycle cart to collect waste materials. Their home, situated in isolated fields, offers minimal protection, making it unsafe for his wife and child to stay alone. To ensure their safety and to maintain their companionship, Rajesh includes his family in his daily work routine, transforming a necessity into a shared endeavor.

Rajesh's transition to waste picking was not part of his original plan. Upon his arrival in Chandigarh, he sought work in the industrial area, encouraged by his uncle's promises of employment opportunities. However, without references and specific skills, Rajesh struggled to secure a factory job. In contrast, waste picking offered him a temporary means of survival. Although the work is tough, it provides Rajesh with a modest income of 8,000 to 12,000 rupees monthly, depending on the amount and type of scrap collected.



Despite the challenges and unexpected turns in his journey, Rajesh remains hopeful for a better future. He has applied for a position as a sanitation worker in the army, aspiring to secure stable employment and improve his family's living conditions. Rajesh's story is a testament to the resilience and adaptability of individuals navigating the complexities of urban life. It highlights the determination of those who, despite facing adversity, continue to strive for a brighter tomorrow.

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