Losing Out on Improved Sanitation Work?

Challenges and Pathways Out of Manual Pit Emptying in Bangladesh

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(With: Malisha Farzana, Faisal Naeem and WaterAid Bangladesh)
Manual Pit Emptying in Bangladesh

- Manual scavenging a form of ‘caste-based slavery’ (IDSN 2014) across South Asia (India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka)

- In Bangladesh, self-defined Harijan (low-caste Hindu) minorities ‘traditionally’ involved in this work since British colonial era

- Fear displacement from ‘traditional’ jobs via mechanisation in FSM (Zaqout et al 2020; Cawood et al 2021; Cawood and Bhakta, forthcoming)
Research Gaps

- Are **minorities involved in hazardous manual emptying** able to access improvements brought about by my mechanisation, or enter alternative livelihoods. If not, why not?

- What are the **potential pathways out** of hazardous manual emptying, and how can NGOs, government agencies and workers themselves support this process via policy, planning and practice?
Fieldwork (Feb-March 2020)

- Literature and secondary document review (e.g. IRF-FSM, OHS guidelines, reports)
- Qualitative approach to examine the lives and livelihoods of manual pit emptiers

**Dhaka**

- 24 key informant interviews in Dhaka with 9 labour, WASH and dalit rights organisations

**Case Study Sites** (Satkhira, Rangpur, Saidpur and Thakurgaon)

- 23 semi-structured interviews with Mayors, conservancy inspectors and NGO staff
- 10 focus group discussions (FGD) with 67 manual emptiers and their families (male and female)
- 3 in-depth interviews (IDI) with community leaders

*(Total Participants: 117)*
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High unemployment and competition for jobs means other socio-economic groups are now entering sanitation work in its improved form, or into manual emptying.

Harijan emptiers are often unable to access improved work and alternative livelihoods due to stigma and discrimination (identity, occupation, address), but also bribery and sub-contracting:

“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” (FGD)

Younger generations deploy a range of strategies to avoid association (migration and hiding identity, address, religious conversion) but are often unable to escape stigma:

“The person who got a master’s degree is working as a sweeper. He applied for a computer operator position…but when they saw the address as the sweeper colony he was rejected” (IDI)
Whilst often considered outside of the WASH ‘mandate’, the introduction of FSM trucks and improvement of containment systems is, without doubt, **having positive, negative and unintended consequences** for Harijan emptiers.

- **Loss of earning opportunities** a concern for many workers:
  
  “Saving the environment [via trucks] has become the cause of our stomachs being dead” (FGD)

- **Training is often one-off**, with no guarantee follow up work, meaning some slip back ‘under the radar’ into manual emptying, or travel further afield in search of work.
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Professionalization of the work via improvements in **working practices** (usage of PPE) and shifting terminology (*poricchonno kormi* / cleaning workers)

Some jobs on **trucks and FSTPs** allocated to *Harijan* workers:

“This type of plant can solve the problem of joblessness” (FGD)

**Education, vocational training and start-up grants** potential gateway to alternatives:

“If the government helps us establish businesses then we can [do it], we have many interested people...I'm thinking about asking the government to give autos to some of our youths. If I can manage autos or rickshaws for at least 5 boys then they can have a good earning source. Because we don’t want to be stuck in our current profession for the rest of our lives” (IDI)
Opportunities

- **Strategic alliances** between WASH, labour and dalit rights sectors to lobby for improved health and safety and provide protections against discrimination (e.g. Anti Discrimination Act) and stereotyping.

- **Inclusive FSM planning, policies and programmes** including ‘transition plans’, longer-term training and skill-development, and support in seeking sustainable, alternative livelihood options.

- **Lobby the government** for a rise in FSM and SWM budgets for permanent job creation and higher wages, as well as appropriate equipment, work benefits and linkage to social security schemes.

- **Support grassroots leadership and organising** to ensure that the demands of minorities (especially youth) are at the forefront of decision-making, for example, via unions, associations, cooperatives.
References


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