

Waste Work In The 'Clean City': Perspectives Of Women Waste Pickers | Text Transcript | CIRCLE

This is a text transcript for the recorded webinar "Waste Work In The 'Clean City': Perspectives Of Women Waste Pickers" presented by the Canada India Research Centre for Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) at the University of Guelph. This event was recorded on February 24, 2021 and was moderated by Prof. Sharada Srinivasan. The guest speaker was Dr. Josie Wittmer.

Transcript:

Sharada Srinivasan:

Perhaps this is a good time to get started. Welcome everyone, for the 14th webinar of the hosted by the Canada India Research Center for Learning and Engagement, or CIRCLE for short. CIRCLE is about a year old, maybe, actually, exactly, a year old, established at the University of Guelph.

It aims to be an interdisciplinary nucleus in Canada for cutting-edge research on India and Indian diaspora to showcase, advocate, catalyze, and foster an equitable, respectful, and sustained exchange of knowledge between Canadian and Indian scholars on complex, emerging, and unexplored topics related to sustainability, social, and economic well-being. To learn more about us, you are welcome to visit our website which is canadaindiaresearch.ca.

So, moving on to today's webinar we have Dr. Josie Wittmer, who will speak about women waste pickers in India. I would like to introduce the speaker today, Dr. Josie Wittmer. Josie received her PhD quite recently, I mean she completed her PhD- defended her PhD in December 2020 from the University of Guelph in the collaborative program with the department of Geography, Environment, and Geomatics and International Development at the University of Guelph.

So, during the period of her PhD, she has been a recipient of a number of scholarships which has enabled her to complete her studies, and also undertake her field research, extensive field research, in India. I've had the privilege of being apart of Josie's PhD thesis committee and Josie is also published quite extensively in some of the top journals in the field, including *World Development*.

Josie, while she awaits the results of the postdoctoral fellowships awards, she is now currently working as the Curriculum Assessor, and Program Review Coordinator with the Department of Geography. She is also the Coordinator of the People's Archive of Rural Ontario, PARO, which is being set up at the University of Guelph. PARO is inspired by the People's Archive of Rural India (PARI), which some of you- many of you may be familiar with. I invite you to take a look at the PARI website. PARO is yet to set up its own website, and we will be in touch with you shortly about it.

Josie will also begin teaching in the Department of Geography and Environmental Studies at Carleton University so she has a teaching assignment starting this spring. Currently, Josie is also on several boards and committees in her home community of Smith Falls, including the Economic Development Advisory Board, the Affordable Housing Task Force, and the Local Wellness Festival Organizing Committee. So, I'm very pleased that Josie will- Josie has agreed to do this webinar.

Just a little bit about the logistics. So, Josie will speak for about 30 minutes and then we will open up the webinar for Q&A and discussion. For the duration of the presentation, I would like to request that you stay muted and turn off the video. For the Q&A and discussion, you are welcome to put your comments, your questions, in the chat section, or if you would like to ask the question you could indicate in the chat section and I will invite you to raise your question with Josie. So, Josie over to you.

Josie Wittmer:

All right, good morning everyone, I'm just going to share my screen here. Is that working?

Background Speaker:

Yes.

Josie Wittmer:

Yeah, okay, awesome.

So, yeah, good morning and thank you Sharada for introducing me, and to CIRCLE for the invitation, and thanks to everyone for coming. I know that we're, you know, a year into this pandemic and we're all sort of experiencing that fatigue of virtual meetings and these kinds of events, so I appreciate you being here today. I'm just gonna jump right on in here.

So early in the morning, tens of thousands of women in the city of Ahmedabad, in India, wake up before sunrise to get out onto the roads to collect disposed of recyclable materials from roadsides, dumping sites, and wastings to generate daily subsistence incomes.

Women waste pickers walk an estimated eight to ten kilometers, and this 'collecting work' requires walking quickly and frequently bending over to pick up materials. After they complete their rounds of waste picking work in their usual working areas, their daily collection, amalgamated into one big plastic sack, like this picture here, weighs an average of around 15 to 20 kilograms - it's quite heavy.

The women then sort these recyclables quickly and quite expertly into different plastics, cardboard, paper, metals, etc., and then they sell these segregated materials to local scrap shop dealers with average daily incomes from about 80 to 150 rupees, which is about one to two US

dollars. And then the women return, after this morning and early afternoon of work, to their homes to start or continue their daily household and caring work.

Waste pickers are located at the bottom of urban waste economies. They are poorly remunerated for the various risks, health threats, and forms of harassment and exploitation they experience in their work with waste in the city. In India, this work is also infused with cultural and social meanings, norms, and stigmas, around material, and ritual purity, and pollution, particularly at this intersection of gender and caste identities.

In Ahmedabad, which is a city with about 60 million - or sorry, six million people - they are an estimated 40 to 50 thousand waste pickers, most of whom are women, who are working every day to collectively recover around 400 to 600 metric tons of recyclables from the city's waste stream, and that's on a daily basis. So, waste picking is hard work.

It's also stigmatized and feminized in this context and women waste pickers take on multiple burdens and experience vulnerability not only at the bottom of the occupational hierarchy of urban waste management and recycling, but also based in these intersecting oppressions of patriarchy caste and class.

So, waste picking is explained in the literature as being an important strategy that's often employed by women as it does not require any capital to begin or a specific education, and it allows for flexible working hours that women can combine with their health and caring work. So, despite the hazards and stigmas of this work it has long been an important livelihood strategy for women and their households for ensuring their economic survival.

And, so, despite the value of this work and the need of informal recycling work that the women are doing, so, this need and value is not only for the women themselves, but also, they are providing important recycling services for the cities, for the municipalities, but these livelihoods are currently under threat due to ongoing shifts in the waste landscape of Indian cities as municipal waste collection and recycling is moving from largely being the purview of informal actors and municipal employees towards more technical and corporate interventions.

So, Gerwani and Korin refer to this new waste governance regime in India to describe a suite of recent discourses and governance mechanisms that are aiming to clean up urban spaces and modernize solid waste management, but this technocratic approach to managing solid waste is said to be creating market opportunities for corporate actors and entrepreneurs whose participation seems to be valued and sanctioned over the skills and knowledges of informal workers and more traditional systems of cleaning the city.

Uh, my slideshow's not working - there. So, these discourses and interventions are ongoing and multi-scalar, and they have political, economic, managerial, cultural, and symbolic or discursive elements to them.

For example, the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, or the Clean India Mission, which started in 2014 and 2015, is a national scale campaign that manifests, in state and local scale, kind of goals,

projects, and missions with this aim of eradicating open defecation, cleaning up urban spaces by targeting citizens behaviours around things like littering and household waste disposal and in implementing modern waste management planning. And, so, there's some photos here.

The first one is a clip from the Swachh sort of policy, visioning document, where we have like a mechanized and technical sort of approaches to waste management. And then the very famous photo of prime minister, Narendra Modi, sweeping the city, and then a quote from Modi where he's kind of leveraging Gandhi's image, talking about social responsibility and citizenship associated with cleanliness.

So, from a similar time frame to this Swachh Abhiyan, and also emerging - actually at the same time that I was in India doing some of my field work - the national solid waste management rules were revised in 2016. And so, while this Swachh mission is sort of the ideological project and envisioning around cleanliness, these solid waste management rules are the managerial and governance mechanisms through which these ideas are sort of put into action and into rules.

So, the rules particularly lay out the requirements for states and municipalities, and managing waste, and widely promote solutions to urban waste, like the municipal privatization and mechanization of waste collection, as well as plans for waste-to-energy and incineration technologies. So, this is sort of the shifting context in which I started my exploration of the impacts and implications of the contemporary urban waste landscape, and so, I'm looking at these changes and shifts from the perspectives of women waste workers who have long worked with waste in the urban margins.

So, today I'm presenting a small section of findings from my doctoral dissertation, which more broadly, focused on women's perceptions of well-being, their access to livelihoods in urban space, and then experiences of organizing and collectivizing in this changing landscape. So, this particular paper or this piece aims to investigate and complicate several of the assumptions that inform approaches to solid waste governance in Ahmedabad, highlighting the ways that gender and other structural inequities tend to be obscured or rendered visible by these developmental discourses and practices that aim to modernize solid waste management and urban cleanliness.

So, in this piece I use an urban political ecology (UPE) lens towards waste management and urban cleanliness in urban India. So, UPE is a geographical field of study that investigates the city as a hybrid of society and nature where interconnected material, political, economic, social, and cultural relations produce highly uneven urban socio-physical landscapes. So, this approach enables scholars to explore dynamics and the culinary processes of city making, as well as their contestations by centering its analysis of urban phenomena and processes in these various materials, spatial and social inequalities, that are often obscured in the visioning and production of urban spaces.

In this research, I apply the UPE approach to explore the ways that sociocultural meanings of waste and cleanliness intersect with and inform the broader political economic factors that

shape how it is managed, and doing this from the women's perspectives. I operationalize this UPE lens for empirical study through this feminist strategy of situating the research in the everyday.

The situating of UPE intentionally contextualizes broad theoretical and structural critiques of city making and exclusion within these embodied everyday experiences and I'm aiming here to privilege marginalized women workers as knowledge holders with important insights to offer on the ways that urban development vision practices are touching down in the urban margins of every day.

This is a mixed method study based on two, five month data collection trips to Ahmedabad between 2016 and 2018. The study included a survey of 401 women waste pickers working in 10 randomly selected sites across Ahmedabad, as well as semi-structured interviews with a sub-sample of 46 respondents and then I revisited- I was able to revisit 36 of those women one year later for more interviews and sort of unstructured discussions and narratives. Then I did a bunch of group workshop discussions.

There were sort of 12 ones that were more formally organized and a lot of informal discussions again, but the photo on the left is one of the photos of the groups that we had a little workshop with in the sort of row in front of the women's homes in one of the communities. These workshops were used for sharing and discussing preliminary findings of the study and also sharing some information and talking about local resources and services and just having some snacks and chai together.

I also used participant observation methods throughout both of these research trips and ongoing discourse analysis of media and policy documents, and then a series of iterative interviews with local advocacy workers, organizers, activists, NGO employees, and cooperative and union representatives in Ahmedabad, as well.

Throughout this research, and actually, this research wouldn't have been possible without the assistance of Mobina Qureshi who was my Gujarati interpreter. She worked with me through both phases of the research and there's a photo of her and I together at Ahmedabad's first queer pride march, ever, on the far right.

I also worked with six local research assistants in conducting the survey, like step one of the research, and there's a photo in the middle of Viral, sitting with a woman while she's sorting her materials and conducting this survey. And that's kind of a lot of our entry point into these surveys and interviews is that we found that we were able to sit with women while they were sorting their materials and that was a nice way they could continue working and not be interrupted while we were trying to talk to them. So, that was one strategy.

So, what did respondents say when we asked about their work? Initially, I was actually thinking that I was going to talk to women about well-being and health, and that was going to be the main emphasis of my PhD project, but it kind of shifted a little bit and I still did one piece about well-being but whenever I asked women how their work was going at the beginning of

interview conversations and surveys, they immediately wanted to start talking about all these changes that were happening around them, and so, the project shifted a little bit.

The women's narratives about their work highlighted the gendered nature of this shifting waste landscape in Ahmedabad, and the barriers pertaining to women's access to their livelihoods. So, their access to waste, in the context of increasing privatization, mechanization, and therefore, the masculinization of the waste landscape. In conversing with respondents, discussions often turned quickly to these recent challenges that they were experiencing and trying to get waste in this new waste regime, that I was discussing earlier.

Respondents explicitly and often used, the language, and sometimes English terms, that are used in the Swachh discourses around the cleanliness campaign, attributing their losses, incomes, and materials - and, yeah - their losses and incomes, and their losses to access to materials due to these recent changes in the management and behaviours of people in society around waste disposal, and these sort of modern urban development visions and practices in the city.

I'm going to talk a little bit more about the context and explanation of these photos, but there's a photo here of an apartment building, and for the most part the bins are now kept inside, but this is an example of where the garbage and recycling bins are kept outside but they're all locked up. There's a guard that's stationed at the gate of this apartment building and he'll unlock the gate for people from the apartment building putting their waste in and for the waste truck to come and take the garbage away, but anybody else who would normally have access to waste through garbage bins or through waste on the street aren't able to access it because it's locked.

The second photo is just a broad, a more zoomed out version, of development in the city, where the year before, where this woman is standing in front of a big wall with a big stadium kind of thing going up behind her, the year before that was the area where all the women in this community would sit and sort the materials together, and they used it as an occupational space, and now they aren't able to use that space anymore.

Then these are just other photos of waste management, new waste management things, that have happened in the city throughout the phases of my research. Like, this GPS sticker, I think. It marks a waste pickup spot for a complex, and that was right outside of my apartment. It wasn't there the first year that I was there but it's there now. Yeah, okay, moving on. So, what are the women saying?

A 45-year-old woman, working as a waste picker for 25 years- oops, sorry, having a little bit of a technical issue, one second, there [laughing]. A 45-year-old woman, working as a waste picker for 25 years, said that "because of the Swachh Abhiyan people have become very clean. They do not throw any garbage outside and people do not let us inside the residential societies to pick up waste- big bins are put inside and they now throw the waste there. It's a 500 rupees fine for people if they throw their waste outside of their place, so people are very afraid and

conscious of this now. So now, I just pick up whatever I can get on the roads- I used to get three bags daily, now I just get a single bag."

This movement of waste to these inside spaces, inside of the gates of these compounds and things, therefore, has material impacts on women's incomes. Waste pickers are not allowed inside of these areas, of these gated residential areas, where waste bins are now being stored, due to these long-standing cultural and moral understandings of their access pertaining to space in the city, and pertaining to caste, gendered, and occupational activities. Respondents also attributed their frustrations with their decreasing access to waste materials and outside space, and to increasing competition with emerging and sanctioned actors in the newly privatized system.

A 55-year-old woman, working as a waste picker since childhood, said "it's not only here that the waste trucks are more and more, but everywhere... The government is giving work to people and they come and get the waste early in the morning and we cannot say anything to them because they are hired by AMC"- which is the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation- "we have no right to stop them as they have proper jobs. It's difficult for me to get anything here now."

So, there is a lot to unpack in this in this particular quotation, but quickly I'll just say that in this paper that I wrote I also show that emerging governance mechanisms particularly in (indiscernible) gendered barriers for women in participating or responding to the conditions of the new forms of work in the waste landscape.

For example, Ahmedabad, now has mandated these early morning or overnight waste collection shifts since 2018, and those rules kind of preclude women's participation in this formalized form of work because women, first of all, aren't really or women from this particular community, it's not socially acceptable for them to be operating equipment and machinery, and also, to be accessing public space at night, and so, these things aren't quite possible in the current socio-cultural context.

I mean this woman is speaking to that and also that the power of the sanctioning of the work and the new workers that are coming in on privatized- they're getting hired by private companies and a privatized waste management system- and that they feel like they don't have any power, even though they've been doing the same route every day for many years, they don't feel that they have the power to say anything to them and speak up.

Women waste pickers are actively contending with the challenges to their work, and although there are rights-based unions, organizations, and cooperatives working with waste pickers in Ahmedabad, the majority of the interview respondents and surveyed people that I was speaking to, were not involved in those organizations, and even some of them were still employing these individual-based strategies focused on maintaining everyday access to waste and incomes in these outside spaces along the roadsides, in response to these challenges to their work.

So, this woman is saying, a 45-year-old woman, working as a waste picker since childhood said, “I just pick up what I can find on the roadside- paper, cardboard, plastics, but these truck drivers take all of the better, higher value things these days.” So, what can be done?

“I am getting much less material in the morning now, so I have started going out for an extra round in the evening.” Scholars and activists have highlighted the tensions inherent in these kinds of individualized and functional improvisations for people living and working in context of prolonged precarity and poverty. For women waste pickers, in particular, these burdens associated with these strategies compound with other forms of household and caring work, adding to daily workloads, stress and physical ailments that might already be threatening well-being.

So, whether they're walking more and working more doing extra rounds, taking loans, or taking on other forms of feminized or precarious home-based work, these experiences convey the harsh nature of the trade-offs, and sometimes near impossible decisions, associated with poverty for women trying to earn an income and a livelihood here.

In the paper, I argue that while the political-economic management of waste and cleanliness behaviours are shifting, the deeply ingrained social and cultural norms pertaining to women waste pickers identities, access to space and work opportunities have not. And so, women's waste pickers bodies and labor are therefore continually being positioned in tension with aspirations for Ahmedabad's modern waste management, or waste landscape, are invisibilized within it.

But, I do challenge the notion that appears in some of the literature that sort of attributes these imaginaries of clean and modern urban spaces as being held exclusively by these elite actors and institutions. Just as an example, one of the respondents, a 22-year-old woman working as a waste picker for eight years said, “because of this Swachh campaign, people are keeping their houses and societies very clean. It feels good that the roads are clean and the city is looking good, but it affects our work- we cannot get any material.”

That I mean, a few of you know, many women said things like this, but this quote was so succinct that in this paper I argue that the marginalized urban citizens also aspire for a clean city environment and that this isn't just an elite vision or elite goal, and these workers are actually doing the work of cleaning public spaces, and so, it's an injustice not to include their voices and expertise envisioning and governing a clean city. I think that it's about making sure that everybody has opportunities and livelihoods, as this woman has said here.

Just as a sort of a discussion, this piece points to the ways that this political-economic pursuit of mechanized and privatized forms of waste management in Ahmedabad are having these material impacts on women's livelihoods as these forms of management and governance intersect with the social and cultural dimensions, and the meanings around waste, waste work, and the identities of marginalized workers.

As the work of informal recycling shifts from being a feminized and stigmatized form of manual labor to this mechanized, masculinized, and privatized domain, women's experiences highlight this uneven rollout of waste management, planning, and practice, as well as, the ways that these modern technical forms of management tend to obscure these social and cultural forms that mediate women waste pickers access to incomes and urban space. And, they're, for the most part, excluded without this consideration.

The materiality of waste, in particular, I think the respondent's struggles really highlight this materiality of waste, and highlight the ways that waste is kind of a material reminder of a lack of recognition and exclusion for participants in both the imagining and the production of the city. And that's something that Farhana Sultana writes about, regarding water governance. And yeah, the materiality of waste being a material reminder of exclusion.

And so, this study also highlights the ways that women's dispossession from waste picking work leads to increasing physical and mental burdens as they continue to balance household and caring work while working longer hours, walking longer distances, earning less income, feeling more stress, and providing for their households.

As women seek these additional forms of income or strategies, in trying to get more waste materials from roadsides, scholars working on women's work in public space, like Naila Kabeer and colleagues, note that these opportunities tend to shift women's labor from public space back into the home space with potential impacts on women's independence, power, mental, and physical well-being, in this context.

However, women's contestations to this currently unfolding challenge to their livelihoods highlights the ways that they are continually resisting, contesting, and improvising in order to ensure these livelihoods despite these structural systems that exclude them and deny their sort of substantive rights or substantive experiences of urban citizenship.

But I'm also hesitant to praise resiliency in this context, because I emphasize this need for women waste pickers and other marginalized workers, if they're improvising and having all this burden put on them, like I don't want to just praise that as being resilience and good for them because really, this is a fundamental problem with rights and citizenship in this city. So, yes, there is resiliency and improvising but there shouldn't have to be. And so, that's something that's still kind of thinking about and working within terms of citizenship.

In addition to making contributions to feminist literatures, the feminist urban sort of literatures, and the everyday analysis of the city, I also am aiming to promote these alternative knowledges and imaginaries of urban spaces from the margins, and these processes of city making. But, this work also carries some implications and recommendations for labor organizing, for policy, and research on women's informal work in cities.

First, in thinking about the possibilities and attempts to include workers in formal work opportunities, I advocate in my dissertation for reconsidering top-down approaches to solid waste management policy and planning which really predominate in this context. So, it's not

really about folding women into an existing system of waste management and privatization, but taking a bottom-up approach based in these women's knowledge and expertise, as well as grassroots organizers who are working with women, so leveraging that knowledge and experience and trying to make something that's inclusive from the bottom up.

Second, I think that there needs to be a reconsideration of this prioritization of technological solutions in waste service provision and the implications that these approaches have for women waste pickers from marginalized urban communities who experience identity-based barriers and participating in this sort of technical modern visioning of the city. So, I suggest that a social-cultural analysis with a critical view towards these structures of patriarchy caste and capitalism, in particular, may help to evaluate municipal solid waste management processes and generate ideas towards more socially appropriate and feasible alternatives for marginalized women workers.

In addition, in working towards including waste pickers and solid waste management systems, this is actually, there in the new solid waste management rules from 2016 that I mentioned earlier, there are a few mentions of waste pickers and including informal sector workers throughout this new document. This is also something that has been seen in Ahmedabad, but other cities too where there are organizations working to and with the municipality to include workers. But, in Ahmedabad it's kind of been failing, and so, that's what the third paper in my dissertation is about.

So first, I think there's a problem where waste pickers are not being- they're kind of being seen in these discussions as stakeholders or a group in need of inclusion as sort of like a charitable form of inclusion, and what ends up happening, is it ends up being kind of symbolic and a very small number of women are included. I think that it would be more productive to think of waste pickers as being a legitimate and capable group of service providers in the urban waste landscape rather than these stakeholders in need of charitable inclusion instead.

This kind of understanding of waste workers as service providers is often core to the philosophy of these waste picking organizations and cooperatives in the local context, in Ahmedabad, and other cities in India. But yeah, I think it's just a matter of being recognized as service providers by governing actors and disrupting this material and ideological privilege that private firms and mechanized interventions are holding in this context.

Finally, even if inclusion and organizing is touted or pursued as a solution in this context, my broader research project reveals that inclusion of some workers will always necessarily exclude some of the most marginalized and vulnerable workers who can't, for various reasons, join in with these kind of formalization schemes. So, it is important that the autonomous forms of waste work remain a legal and viable form of work for those who need it, so even if we can include most waste pickers into a formalized system, we still need to make sure that it's not a criminalized form of work moving forward.

I think that a rethinking or a shift in the understandings and values around efficiency, legitimacy, and service provision could be productive towards thinking through possibilities

towards a more inclusive waste management landscape, not just in privileging corporate and technological solutions, but in taking a look at the cultural and social norms that inform waste management, planning, and workers experiences, and then also in valuing the efficiencies and hard work that are already existing for service providers, women waste pickers, are already providing in cleaning the city.

Just some quick acknowledgements, I'm still sort of in dissertation mode with my acknowledgements but definitely hats off to Dr. Kate Parizeau, Dr. Roberta Hawkins, and Dr. Sharada Srinivasan, my committee. My community partners for this project were the Gujarat Institute of Development Research, Paryavaran Mitra, Manav Sadhna, and the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), and my research team who I mentioned, Mubina Qureshi and all of the RA's that helped out on this project.

I was funded by SSHRC, sorry, the Canada Research Chair and Gender Justice and Development, and the Society of Women Geographers, and obviously I'm very grateful to all the women who gave their time, energy, and expertise to this research. Thank you. I guess, I need to stop sharing my screen.

Sharada Srinivasan:

Although the pictures are so wonderful, you know we can have them, rather than our faces, but thank you very much, Josie, for laying out, you know, a broad terrain of interrelated issues that affect the lives of women waste pickers, and you know our conceptualization of citizenship and waste governance and what a smart city is, so thank you for that.

Opening up the floor for questions, comments for Josie, you're welcome to put your comments and questions in the chat or if you would like to unmute yourself and ask the question directly, please indicate and I'm very happy to invite you to ask your question. Okay, so, I think I saw Andy's hand go up first. So, Andy over to you. You have to unmute yourself.

Andrea Paras:

You have to give me permission to unmute...

Josie Wittmer:

We can hear you now [laughs].

Andrea Paras:

Oh! You can, oh great. Okay, great, here we go. All right, it was telling me that I didn't have permission to unmute me Okay, okay. Thank you and it's great to hear about this project because I heard about this project before you started your field work so it's great to hear about it at its completion.

I have two questions; one is, there's this kind of tension that I'd like you to unpack, because I was also glancing at your recent piece in *World Development* where you talk about well-being, and in that piece you highlight the kind of physical hardships of that work and that you know there's a lot of precarity to it and there are significant kinds of vulnerabilities and dangers to that kind of work, and yet you're kind of arguing that there should be space in governance for women to be able to continue doing this.

So, I wonder if you could kind of address the tension of the fact that if the women were to continue doing this, it's still a very kind of dangerous and vulnerable form of work.

And, then the second question is that I know that you were published on kind of wastes in an informal recycling, in the context of Vancouver, which is a very different kind of context, but I'm wondering, do you see kinds of similarities in the kinds of issues that come up? Like, how can we- what can we learn from Ahmedabad that we can help us tangle through similar issues in other contexts?

Josie Wittmer:

Yeah, thanks for the questions, Andrea. I think that, yeah, there's a little bit of literature, I think again by Naila Kabeer and her colleagues, about sort of that tension between the benefits of this kind of precarious and dangerous work and then the economic benefit of it as well, and the not only the economic benefit though but the benefits also of more intangibles, like women are often working together in groups, in their work areas, there's a bunch of women that are sort of like, they're like friends and they're working together.

They'll all have their bags stored at the same central spot and they all go out into different directions and it's quite organized, like they have their roots that they go on at specific times every single day and they all come back and we'll sit together and sort materials and have chai and whatever, and that's an opportunity outside of the household to be with other people and like in a lot of women's, I think, in the *World Development* piece I talk about like, yes, there are a lot of physical challenges with this work and there are some dangers and hazards but the women often didn't really, I think, because many of them have been doing this work since childhood or since their marriages.

It's not really seen, it's like, yeah, we all have pain, we all have, you know, it's not even brought up as an issue so much as it is, like, the things that we, when we talked about well-being, women always were going on about stresses and tension of poverty, of not having money, of feeding themselves, of household dynamics with mother-in-laws or husbands, and sometimes cases of abusive situations, and so having this opportunity to spend most of your day out working on the streets, whether you know there are hazards of like cutting yourself, and the hard work, and injuries of the waste work but it was sort of balanced out by these other sort of benefits of the work and that's something that Naila Kabeer and some of her colleagues have talked about in a few different pieces, where work in public space has these benefits of getting outside of the household.

So, when I'm talking about that this work needs to still be viable, there are ways to make the work safer and make the work- there is a lot of talk in India about formalization and giving people masks and gloves and things, and whether or not those sort of material things of masks and gloves are actually going to be used or accessible.

Yeah, I think that even if a bunch of women get included in these schemes and have, you know, regular salaries and more things that are more stable in terms of the work, the work will still be necessary for some of those women who for many reasons might not be able to travel to a specific place to do a work route or to work according to somebody else's schedule, like they have to work whenever they can because of their household schedules.

So, that's why I think like although the work is still bad, there are benefits to it, and some women will have to just- like that's just the reality, unless there's a huge cultural sort of social shift where the understandings of waste, and work, and gender are going to change. Yeah, so, that's I think how I would address that first question.

And, the second about the similarities between Vancouver and Ahmadabad, yeah, totally, like quite different contexts and I mean even the population of waste pickers in Vancouver, whereas on this study I'm thinking, more about like gender dynamics, in Vancouver it was mostly men that I was speaking to, like the waste picking there that I was speaking mostly to men, and men with addiction issues, in particular, and so, that certainly wasn't so much the case here in Ahmadabad, it was all women.

But, in terms of similarities, I think that one of the biggest things is sort of like that structural failure of sort of the neoliberal-capitalist approach to governing the city, envisioning the city, where marginalized folks are often left out, and I would add that sometimes there's symbolic inclusions of, you know, like in my other paper, there's a photo of Narendra Modi, it's just a screen capture of a video that he posted on Twitter, where he's sitting with a bunch of waste pickers and praising them for their hard work and contribution to the cleanliness campaign and it just such an eyeroll moment because he's like leveraging the vision or the image of these people and then at the same time, sort of attributing their work to this voluntary campaign which has, you know, there's so many problems with it.

So, yeah, I think that when I looked at well-being and waste workers in Vancouver, there's a lot of issues with food insecurity and access to housing, and these kinds of things that were all sort of structural failures of the neoliberal-capitalist sort of place that we're in and that was also seen but in a different way in Ahmedabad.

Sharada Srinivasan:

Okay, so, I'm going to draw your attention, Josie, to two questions in the comment section. The first is from Steffi Hamann. What happens to the waste that gets picked up by the trucks? Is waste management largely automatized in these modern waste facilities?

And, the other question is from Bill, about, you know, you mentioned co-ops, you know women-based workers co-ops, so can you talk a little bit about that, because he's a huge fan of (inaudible), I think that's where the question comes from.

Josie Wittmer:

Okay, yeah, so Steffi, to answer your question, what happens to the waste when the waste gets picked up by the trucks?

It goes to the landfill and that's the only thing that happens, it goes to the landfill. There are informal processes that happen though, like in the, I don't have a picture in this slideshow, but in the back of the trucks there's often women that are sitting in the back, and they're sorting and they might be like the wives or female family members of the men that are hired to drive the trucks, and so they sit in the back of the waste collection truck and have these big plastic sacks hanging off the back and you see these trucks driving around with these plastic sacks and ladies sitting on top and they're sorting out the recyclables.

But yeah, the thing is that the trucks go into the dump and they're weighed, and so they get paid according to the weight of the truck, and so they want those recyclables in the truck to add to the weight but then once it's all dumped, they keep that material, and they sell it themselves, and so the privatized system, whereas before they had some municipal vehicles that would come and collect waste from the big community waste bins all over the place, but they were just hired as municipal employees, like their salaries weren't contingent on weight of garbage that they picked up, and so those workers often kind of had partnerships and kinship networks with waste pickers and would let them pick out whatever they wanted from the waste.

Or it would like stop the truck and a bunch of women would jump into the back of the truck and sort out and grab what they wanted while the guys had chai or whatever, but now because of the tipping system of weighing the trucks these private, like the new private companies, they're incentivized to keep their own weight and then they sell the material for extra money. And so, they're not incentivized to allow anybody else access to recyclables, and it's become sort of like this territorial thing, but yeah, the answer is it just goes straight to the landfill.

Sharada Srinivasan:

Are you going on to the next question, Josie? But, let me ask, Steffi, do you want to ask her something by unmuting yourself, Steffi? I'm not sure, I see this "insert facepalm emoji" so I don't know if you are-

Steffi Hamann:

No, no, that was my spontaneous reaction to it going straight to the landfill [Sharada laughing] because really, there's a lot going wrong here and I'm not an expert at all in waste

management, and maybe this would have been a question to ask to James to chime in too, because I see him in the audience, but I really appreciate the clarification because I'm just a novice to the subject and so this is really, really interesting to learn. Thank you, Josie.

Josie Wittmer:

Yeah, thanks, no problem.

Sharada Srinivasan:

Josie, on to your next question.

Josie Wittmer:

I'll just also add that there's now been, in the last couple of years, there's been a lot of talk about incineration and wanting to build incinerators but then there's also a lot of literature that talks about sort of how recycling and incineration in this particular context in India aren't really compatible systems so at once they're doubling down on recycling and then also saying that we're building incinerators, so it's kind of like how many high-tech solutions can we get going at once but I don't know there's a lot of work that sort of talks about these divergences and problems with that approach.

In the interest of time, Bill is interested about co-ops. Okay, so in this context, in Ahmedabad, there's one big organization called the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) and they have a lot, a lot, a lot, of members they organize, tens of thousands of women, not only for waste picking but in street vending, home-based work, any kind of self-employed work that women are involved in big numbers.

But, their approach is quite meta, it's a really big approach to organizing, they do a lot of legal stuff and big picture organizing and they do have cooperatives of women that they work with and are trying to partner with organizations- or sorry, that they try to partner with the municipality.

In the third paper that I wrote for my dissertation, that I didn't discuss here, but there are there's a lot of issues that SEWA and the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation worked together for a few years and had a really successful pilot program but then the municipality kind of canceled that contract in favour of hiring municipal, or sorry private corporations that had trucks.

And so now, in order to bid on any waste collection contracts in Ahmedabad, you need to have a certain amount of capital put down as a deposit, you need to own a certain percentage of your own fleets of vehicles, and so the municipalities kind of created this context where they're citing the waste management rules and saying like according to these rules this is what we're doing but then making all these- their own sort of framework where it's kind of tailor-made to

be sort of this corporate technical approach with trucks that looks very modern and mechanized coming through.

There are smaller organizations, also, working with women waste pickers. There's one called Paryavaran Mitra and they're located, they run their own scrap shop in the middle of one of the biggest slum areas in Ahmedabad, and I worked quite closely with them, but I think their membership is about 300 women, and so they're doing really good work with a relatively small number of women and they're trying to expand out into some other communities but it's kind of- I mean it's slow going because it's hard work to do, and to organize, and to gain people's trust in the community.

So yeah, there are benefits to formalizing the informal in this context for sure, but they're also, I think, this is something I actually say in the other piece, and Bill I definitely can send you this if you're interested, we can touch base after, but some of the drawbacks of formalizing in this context, when formalizing is happening in this privatized system and making women sort of like adopt these, you know, wearing a uniform and showing up to this place at this time, it's not really feasible for some women, and so formalization can necessarily exclude others in this cultural context. So yeah, I can send you that paper if you're interested, Bill.

Sharada Srinivasan:

Okay, so I'm now going to invite, James Roselle, for a question, but before that I do want to invite the audience, we have about 15 minutes, if you have any questions, please indicate, show of hands, or on the chat section, so Josie can budget her time better. So, if you have questions, pop them down now. Over to you, James.

James Roszel:

Thank you, Sharada. Josie, first of all, fantastic presentation today, thank you very much. I have a couple of questions here that are really related and I had a third one that Steffi asked, so thanks Steffi.

First of all, what access to healthcare and other government resources do the women in your study have? Are they restricted as marginalized population or informal workers who often don't have access to proper documentation or even the knowledge to access some of these resources?

And then secondly, with regards to this Swachh program how was the waste picker activity or knowledge incorporated into things like the pickup scheduler locations that the AMC actually rolled out when they introduced this program, I'm thinking, like, are they using the time of day with the early morning pickups to restrict access to the waste pickers?

Josie Wittmer:

Well, thanks James, it's a beautiful scenery you got there at the Great Wall of China [laughs].

Yeah, so in terms of access to health care and services, in particular, that was a major, major gap that we found, or I found in the study, and then the survey, and especially when we started talking to women one-on-one and then in the group conversations that was a major thing, I would say, most, I don't know, I can't give you exact percentages off the top of my head, but most women were missing some sort of major documentation, that didn't enable them to access services.

And so they were able to access healthcare, often they would actually prefer to go to private care providers because there was this widespread perception that the public care provided wasn't good, so they would go to private little clinics and that kind of thing, and there were private hospitals, where they are- sorry, public hospitals that they can go and a lot of women did use those services when in dire need but the perception of what is an injury and what is an illness was quite different from what my understanding of it would be.

It was pretty dire circumstances that would make women go to use those services, but even still there were so many missing documentation pieces and things that were so prohibitive for women to actually use to get free services that they would have been- there are government programs that have- so that, you know, people experiencing poverty in mind and they should be able to access them and have ration cards and all these things but so many of them don't have identity documents and a lot of them had been trying to get them at some point in their lives and just kind of gave up after multiple visits and just being stigmatized in the office and treated poorly.

So that was something that we actually did with the RA's a little bit where we would help some women fill out forms and try to help them access these things and use our positions and our privilege to try to advocate a little bit for some of the women who are really in dire circumstances but yeah, so that was a major gap that we talked a lot about in sort of the workshop discussions about access in terms of Swachh there wasn't inclusion, like Swachh is the sort of the ideological, like this is what we want India's cleanliness landscape to look like and the planning of the AMC privatization of waste collection.

I don't think there was any consultation with waste pickers involved in that process, it was definitely like they went, they just made their plan, and yeah waste pickup happens in the morning and that's when they would go and do that to get all the garbage off the streets and I think that's just a thing that waste is always picked up first thing in the morning and so they just kind of kept doing that.

But then in 2018, actually just after I finished my field work, the city announced all these new rules about having waste being picked up overnight because they want people to wake up in the morning to a clean city instead of the city being cleaned in the morning and so, that was especially at areas that were night life kind of areas where there was eateries or along the street by the universities and stuff, there's a lot of street vendors that are open until like midnight.

And so, they want those cleaned up right away but that was a big access point for women to access waste first thing in the morning. The women get up at like three in the morning or four in the morning and go, and now they're finding that the garbage is already gone, so I don't think it was like an intentional thing like we need to cut off these waste pickers it was just sort of this is when garbage gets picked up and it just happens to also be when women are able to go and do that work. Sharada, you're on mute! There you are.

Sharada Srinivasan:

Okay, I was muted by the host. Anyway, can you hear me now? Yeah, I was trying to get back from the comment screen for some reason I can see only one screen at a time so I'll have to go back to the setting. Marvin had a question and he had to leave so that's a bit of an unfortunate situation because I know Marvin works on a lot of urban issues not specifically on waste but he had questions related to the material context and because his question is not detailed, you know, I would be very curious to see what Marvin has to ask, and I'm happy to follow it up with an email with him. Since I don't see other questions, maybe I can ask you a question.

Josie, so one of the things that has happened you know a life-changing thing for all of us between the time you finished your work and now is of course COVID, so you know, I mean I do most of my research is qualitative and happens a far, so research has come to a standstill. So, I have two questions for you and your free to answer both or one of them or neither up to you.

So, one is of course, you know, how has the Covid pandemic and the sort of strict norms around managing Covid affected the women themselves, you know, women and waste pickers?

And the other question is, and I've been doing a lot of thinking around this and I'm sure a lot of qualitative researchers are doing the same, is, you know, your research is so based on in-depth and continuous interaction with face-to-face interaction with women waste pickers so there's something to be said about that method in studying the everyday, so if you have any thoughts on how do you study the everyday when you cannot be there to interact with people who's every day you are studying?

Josie Wittmer:

Right, those aren't hard questions at all to answer [laughs].

I think the second question is keeping me up at night currently. Yeah, so how did the pandemic affect the women?

Well last May or I think it was in March of last year, India implemented a strict lockdown of people and we actually reached out to try to speak to, so 'we' being Sharda and Mubina, my interpreter, and I reached out to try to follow up with some of the some of the women that we spoke to before to see how they were doing in lockdown and it was really, I mean to answer both questions at once, it was a really interesting exercise by having to try to call women and speak to people over the phone and study the everyday over the phone but there were

challenges there because people were locked down, you know, other people might be in the room, women are living in quite small quarters, close quarters, with their families, so yeah, it really, the pandemic context, really affects these kinds of research, I think.

Now, if we were to do it again without, because it's not a lockdown and women are now able to go and work on the streets again, there's more freedom of movement and to have those phone calls but the phone calls are, access to phones are sometimes hard, women will share the cell phone with a bunch of other family members and trying to track down somebody while they're home is hard.

So yeah, I think that in terms of the question of how do you do qualitative sort of engaged everyday research through the pandemic when you can't travel and be there?

I think it's really hard and I think it would be even harder if I didn't already have those face-to-face connections with women that we could call them and explain, like 'oh this is the Canadian lady', like 'oh yes, how is she', because there was definitely recognition, because they're asking about my family, and my partner and all this stuff but yeah, I think that "how to study the every day" is a really hard question, especially if you don't already have connections with community organizations with participants themselves.

Then also having that asterisks of- it's hard to know exactly what situation people are in, then it might not be a one-on-one call or it could be one-on-one but then there's somebody sitting nearby listening in and we don't know, so it's definitely something to continue to think through, and I definitely don't have a very great answer to that question.

I think with the pandemic there was definitely a shift for women especially during the lockdown when they weren't able to go out and work and have that freedom of movement that I spoke about earlier, but also the income wasn't coming in and because women, like I was saying to James, women aren't, you know, necessarily linked up with the different programs that they could be in terms of ration cards and access to services and care, they're kind of just going at it alone and a lot of them were taking out, just day after day, taking out loans to pay for groceries and that kind of thing or just depleting, like some of them had a tiny bit of savings, and it would just be fully depleted in a week or two.

But that being said, with the lockdown, in particular, there was one person allowed to go out and do daily groceries or daily errands in a certain window of time in India, and for the most part, it was the women that we were speaking to that were the people from their household, not their husbands or anybody else, but the women would go out because they were the ones that were comfortable and sort of like navigating the public space, sort of like, you know, navigating police harassment and that kind of stuff.

So, you can see those empowering benefits of waste picking work and that confidence in navigating public space as a woman but yeah, there was definitely a lot of that burden just compounding in terms of finances and debt and the inability to work.

Sharada Srinivasan:

Thanks, Josie. Yes, the methodological question is something that we will all have too, and we are grappling with, and we will continue to grapple for some time to come now. Are there any last-minute questions? This is the last round. Any burning questions either in the chat or if you would like to ask Josie directly. Okay, three-two-one.

Okay, thank you very much, Josie, for an interesting presentation, and I think the discussion was excellent, stimulating. It's a pity that, you know, Marvin, had to leave before his question.

Thank you, everybody for attending this session and engaging with Josie, and thanks Shirley for being the tech backbone for, you know, helping us do this one more session so seamlessly.

Well, I want to draw your attention to our next webinar which will be on Wednesday the 10th of March, same time, 11 am. This will be by Ashna Jassi, who is a PhD candidate with Applied Social Psychology at the University of Guelph and the topic of her presentation will be Canadian Punjabi Sons and Daughters and Elderly Care. So, I invite you to, you know, learn more about this event and the other events at our website: canadaindiaresearch.ca.

I think I have said everything, so thank you very much everybody and enjoy the rest of the day. And thanks, Josie. Take care, bye.

Josie Wittmer:

Bye everyone, thank you.

[End of Transcript]