

## The role of households and livelihood systems in South Asia

### Jo Beall

Attempts to combine informal recycling into formal systems of solid waste management (SWM) often assume more private solutions and a greater role for citizens — yet the acquiescence of households and communities is taken for granted, and the impact on municipal sanitary workers, or sweepers, is simply ignored. Sweepers are central to both public and private systems of SWM,<sup>1</sup> while the household is also a key stakeholder — as generators of waste products, users of official waste collection systems, and private employers of sweepers. Here it is argued that the potential for integration of formal and informal systems of residential level municipal waste management can be better assessed if the social aspects of SWM are investigated.

#### Recycling

Waste separation at source, for example, is common practice within most South Asian households, but it is an activity that men rarely engage in, regarding it as 'petty selling and not a man's business'. Women and children are more likely to be involved, with domestic workers playing a role in better-off households. Thus within households themselves, it is women who are primarily responsible for recycling. Education campaigns targeting men or 'the household' would be clearly misdirected.

#### Dirty work

Nor do male householders normally have anything to do with the physical management of unwanted waste. Rather, it is the junior women of the house, usually daughters-in-law, who are responsible. Anthropologists have linked women's responsibility for dirty work to symbolic associations, embracing behavioural taboos and restrictions; in South Asia these are associated with the concept of ritual pollution, and for women with menstruation and childbirth.<sup>2</sup> In Muslim societies this is overlaid with the practice of purdah — here older women or young boys will remove waste to prevent the younger women from having to leave the seclusion of the house.

When households can afford it, it is invariably the dirty work which is shed first, and someone else is employed to remove garbage. The most common pattern is for sweepers to remove household waste on a private informal basis.

#### Policy consequences

Those responsible for doing waste work are those with the least influence or authority within households; directives aimed at household heads as to where and how waste should be disposed of, will have little effect when it is mainly the younger women or domestic workers who are responsible for doing the actual work. In addition, both women and men are reluctant to engage with waste work outside the home, which goes some way towards explaining why project interventions have found it inordinately difficult to get community-based organizations to engage in self-help initiatives for improving SWM.

#### The role of the sweepers

An important reason for this is the fact that almost everywhere people involved in waste collection are stigmatized by virtue of the dirty work they do. At the same time, however, this is employment which is highly prized within the group and sweepers struggle hard to obtain and retain secure public sector jobs or, through these, access to private work. Thus the caste or hereditary group status identity of sweepers acts and is used as a 'closed shop' to exclude other work seekers.

Although ostensibly unskilled work, the delivery of waste collection services in South Asia requires social skill. It means conforming to socially acceptable patterns of behaviour, be it using only the back door, not handling food utensils, performing tasks not strictly related to waste collection duties, or by male sweepers avoiding contact with purdah-observing women. If householders fail to pay up for this service, sweepers have ways and means of holding them to account, such as 'forgetting' to remove their rubbish. Moreover, when sweepers already provide informal door-to-door waste collection to households, they are not above sabotaging community-based collection schemes which are designed to bypass them, or which put their livelihoods under threat.

#### Influencing decision-making

We now have quite a good understanding of the impact of changes in waste and waste management on the livelihood strategies of low-income groups working with waste; what is less well addressed is how initiatives by less powerful groups in society can and do influence decisions at a broader level. For example, the activities of pickers have prevented the introduction of 'bagging' domestic waste to improve the efficiency of primary waste collection in much of South Asia. Moreover, the role of sweeping as a hereditary and stigmatized occupation has made the contracting-out of waste collection services to private operators a difficult option. In both these examples, a social perspective highlights that cavalier changes to existing systems of SWM, which are already integrated, are

likely to have a significant impact on the livelihood systems of these low status groups.

Just as deeply entrenched age and gender relations mediate the allocation of tasks, responsibilities and decision-making power around waste management within households, so wider social relations govern responsibility for waste collection in the public sphere of cities: policymakers ignore them at their peril. Community-based initiatives, which do not take gender, age or hereditary status group relations into

account risk failure or sabotage. Private solutions that fail to engage with the informal waste economy lose the opportunity of promoting effective SWM, while at the same time promoting public-private partnerships that can support the efforts of low-income groups to help themselves.



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1. See Ali, M.S. (1997) 'Integration of the Official and Private Informal Practices in Solid Waste Management.' PhD thesis, Loughborough University of Technology; Beall, J.D. (1997a) 'Households, Livelihoods and the Urban Environment: Social Development Perspectives on Solid Waste Management in Faisalabad, Pakistan.' PhD thesis, London School of Economics and Political Science; Blore, I. (1997) 'Understanding Solid Waste Management Systems', Report to Department for International Development.

2. See for example Douglas, M. (1966) *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, Routledge, London; Moore, H. (1988) *Feminism and Anthropology*, Polity Press, Cambridge; Ortner, S. (1974) 'Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?' in M. Rosaldo and L. Lamphere (ed) *Women, Culture and Society*, Stanford University Press, Stanford.

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