



Woman Rag Pickers in Meerut: A study on Living Conditions, Work Environment and Health Issues

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Abstract

Both population and economy classify India as a developing nation. We have the second-highest population, behind China. A large number of people migrate to towns in the hope of a better life; as a result, villages are being replaced by slums, which become extensions of cities. This has led to environmental issues, including solid waste generation. Even with the policies that the government has developed, waste management remains a persistent issue. In this aspect, rag pickers play a major role in clearing the solid waste generated by an ever-increasing population. Many urban poor are turning to this occupation as a source of income, as it requires no special expertise. They pick up the waste articles, which include papers, plastic bags, pet jars, containers, metal pieces, and even leftover discarded food. During the process of collecting waste, they encounter many problems, such as animal bites, harassment by local residents, police, and district authorities, besides contracting various diseases due to the filthy work environment. Rag pickers have low earnings considering the amount of time they spend on this activity. Women are also involved in rag picking, and they too face multiple problems at their settlements and at the workplace. Through this paper, an attempt is being made to carry out a study of living conditions, work environment, and health. The challenges faced by women who work as rag pickers in the slums of Meerut City are significant.

Key words: rag pickers, slums, recycling, socio-economic condition, solid waste.

Introduction

Across the country, rag pickers survive by collecting waste from various parts of the city, selecting items such as plastics, bottles, aluminum foil papers, plastic wrappers, electronic waste, and any recyclable metal for sale to scrap dealers. Most of the rag pickers migrate from rural areas and even from other cities and live in urban slums, which have become an integrated part of any city. Most of the rag pickers live in socially and economically deprived communities and are illiterate. Adult males are not the only ones engaging in rag-picking, large number of children, both males and females, can be seen picking recyclable material from the

streets, municipal waste bins, and garbage dumps. Adult women, too, are equal partners in the process of picking, sorting, and selling the waste material. In the large municipal garbage dumps, women of all ages, married and unmarried, rummage through the buried material, are searching for any recyclable material to sell. They live in deplorable conditions in the slums, without any sanitation, drainage, water supply, electricity, or other basic amenities required for decent human life. Picking up the waste exposes them to hazardous materials such as metal scraps, needles, bandages, empty bottles, and glasses, resulting in cuts, bruises, and exposure to harmful gases. They contract multiple diseases like cough, lung infection, eye infection, joint pain, and fever. Because of poor economic conditions, they are unable to get the necessary medical aid. They are unable to receive medical benefits from government hospitals because identity documents are not available to them. Additionally, the authorities' indifferent attitude denies them access to most facilities available to other citizens. Addiction to chewing tobacco and alcohol is prevalent among women. Both at home and at the workplace, they face sexual harassment. A typical day in the life of a rag-picker woman consists of her heading out to work between 3 and 4 AM, walking for nearly 8 and 10 km in harmoniously mutually agreed-upon territories, and scavenging in municipal bins and dumpsites. In the process, one has to bend forward and below to the ground a minimum of 1,000 times to collect nearly 20 kg of recyclable waste with their bare hands. She then carries it in large bags on her head and shoulders, sorts it at her place, and sells this sorted waste to the local KabadiWala, or waste dealer, earning nearly Rs 100–150, in order to survive herself or augment the family income. They have to work for a minimum 5 to 10 hours every day, as the income of the rag picker depends on the working hours and quantity of waste collected by the individual rag picker. The rag pickers who work the maximum hours of the day and collect a high quantity and quality of waste will only get a higher income; otherwise, the rag pickers who work a lesser number of hours and get only a lower quality of scrap will result in a lower income. Working hours differ from person to person, depending on the rag picker's age and health profile.

Objective of the study

The main objective of the study is to carry out an analysis of Living Conditions, Work Environment, and Health Issues of the women rag pickers living in slums in Meerut City.

Methodology

Meerut has a large number of slums with hundreds of rag pickers, both males and females. The study identified four slum areas with the assistance of an NGO, and deemed a sample of 80 female rag pickers suitable for descriptive research. The researcher conducted a similar study in the Meerut slums to investigate the human rights violations of rag pickers. (Kumar, N. 2024), the current study draws some of its observations and outcomes from the previous study as references. We have used a descriptive research design to focus on the objective's outcome.

Results and Analysis

Living Conditions of Women Rag Pickers

- Housing Status-** It was found that, 39 % of the women rag pickers live in Hutments, 36 % live in Kuccha houses, 22 % lives in Pukka house, and 3 % of them have no house to live.(Figure 1)
- Size of Family-**It was found that, 56 % of the women rag pickers have 2-4 family members and 44% have 5-8 family members. (Figure 2)

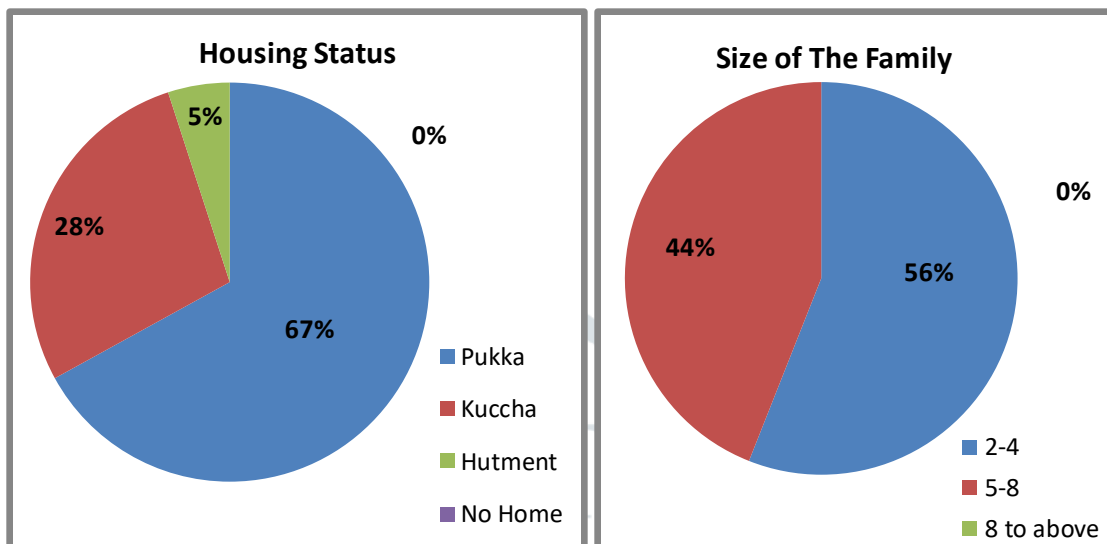


Figure 1: Housing Status

Figure 2: Size of Family

- Age group-** In this study, it was found that 39% women are in 26-35 years of age group, 28% are of 36-45 years of age, 22% are of 16-22 age group and 11% are between the age of 46 to 60 years.(Figure 3)
- Religion-** It was found that majority of women rag pickers were Hindu consisting of 72% and 28% were Muslims (Figure 4).

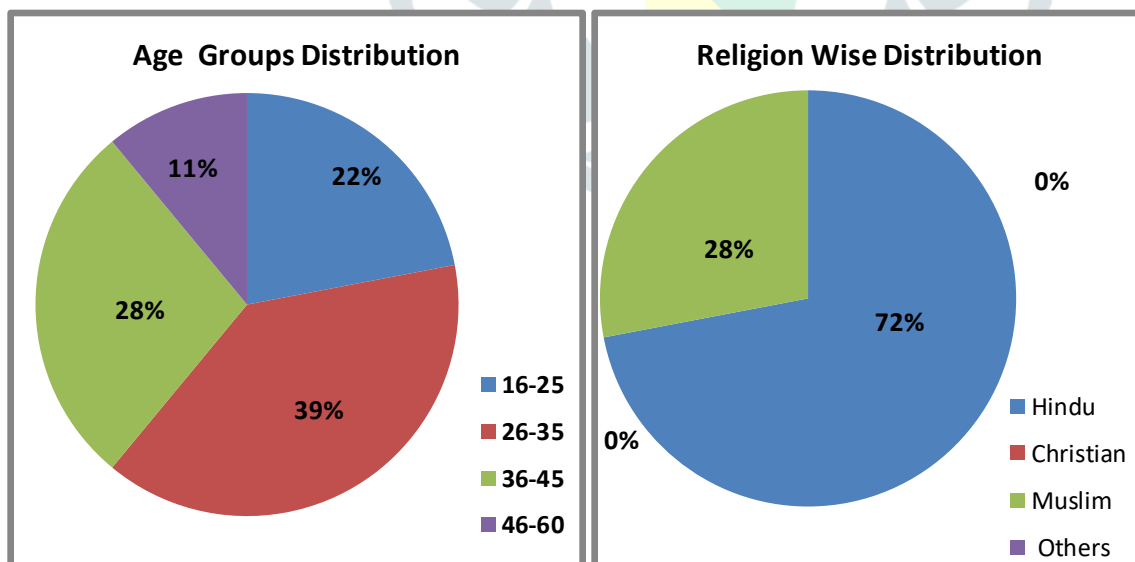


Figure 3: Age Groups

Figure 4: Religion

- Community-** It was found that, 89% of women rag pickers were SC/ST and 11% were of other backward class. (Figure 5)

6. **Educational Status-** It was found that, 67 % of the women rag pickers had studied between classes 1-5, 28 % had educational qualification from Class 6-8, 5% had educational qualification from Class 9-10 and none was found to have studied beyond class 10. (Figure 6)

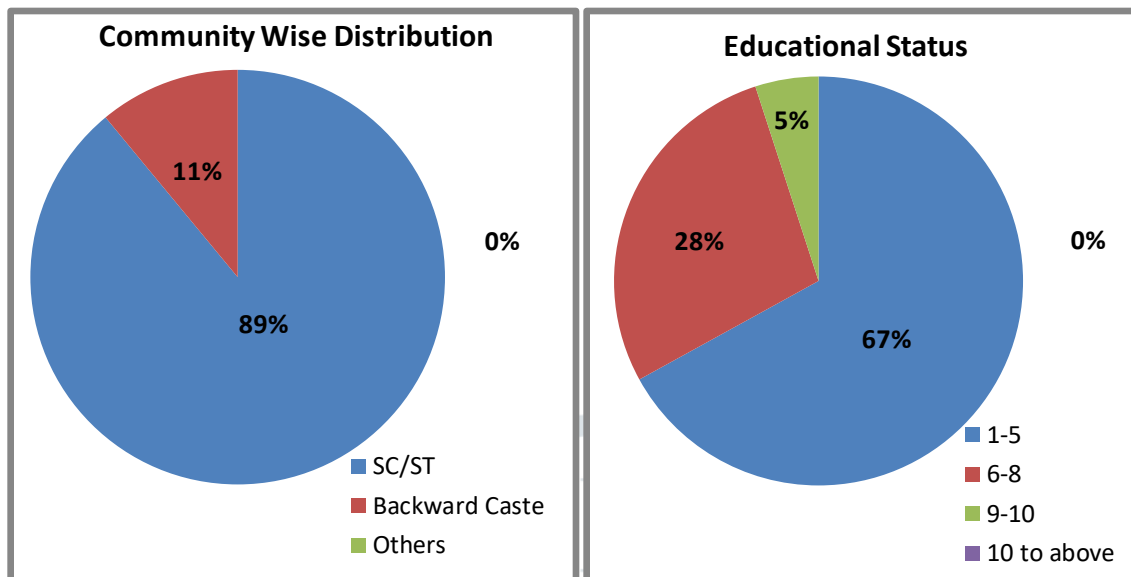


Figure 5: Community

Figure 6: Educational Status

7. **Availability of Basic Facilities-** It was found that 22% women rag pickers have toilet facility in their house, 56% women rag pickers have water facility, 11% have Electricity connection, 44% have ration card, 11% have gas connection, 33% have bank account, 17% have Aadhar Card, and 33% have voter card with them. (Figure 7)

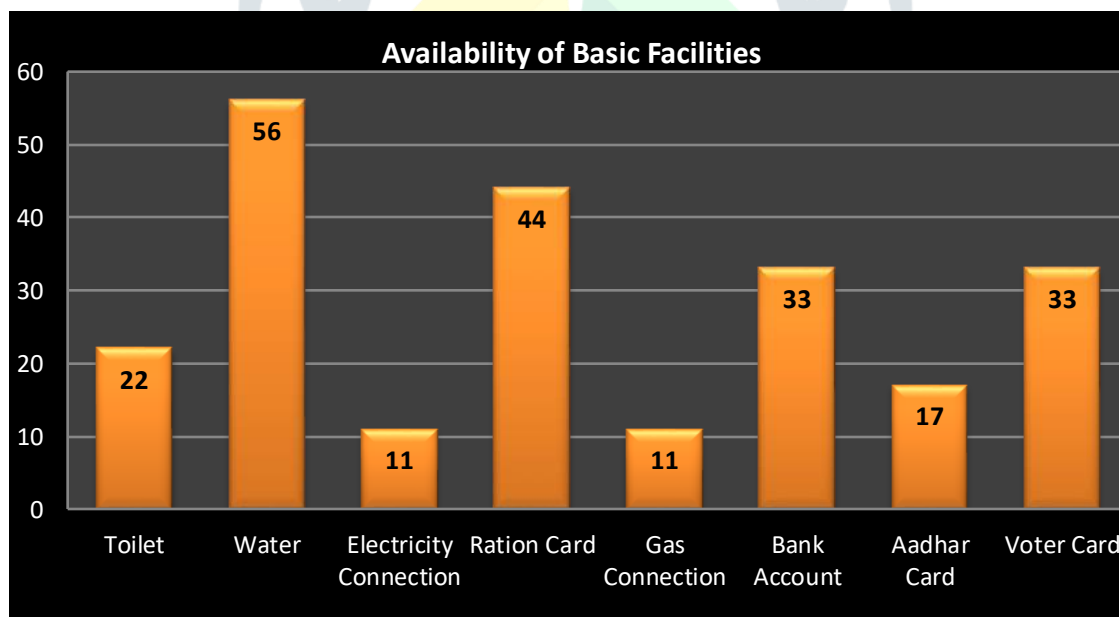


Figure 7: Availability of Basic Facilities

8. **Monthly Income Status-** The rag pickers earn money by collecting and selling of the recyclable waste. In survey, it was found that 45% of the women rag pickers earned Rs. 5000-8000 per month, 20% earn Rs. 8000-10000 per month, 17% earn Rs.3000-5000, 12% earn above Rs.10000 and 6% earns Rs. 1000-3000 per month.(Figure 8)



Figure 8: Monthly Income

Health Issues of Women Rag Pickers

9. **Health Issues of Women Rag Pickers-** In the survey it was found that 79% of women rag pickers had cut injuries, 69% had skin allergy, 52% had diarrhea, 36% had breathlessness and 23% were suffering with Asthma or Cough.(Figure 9)

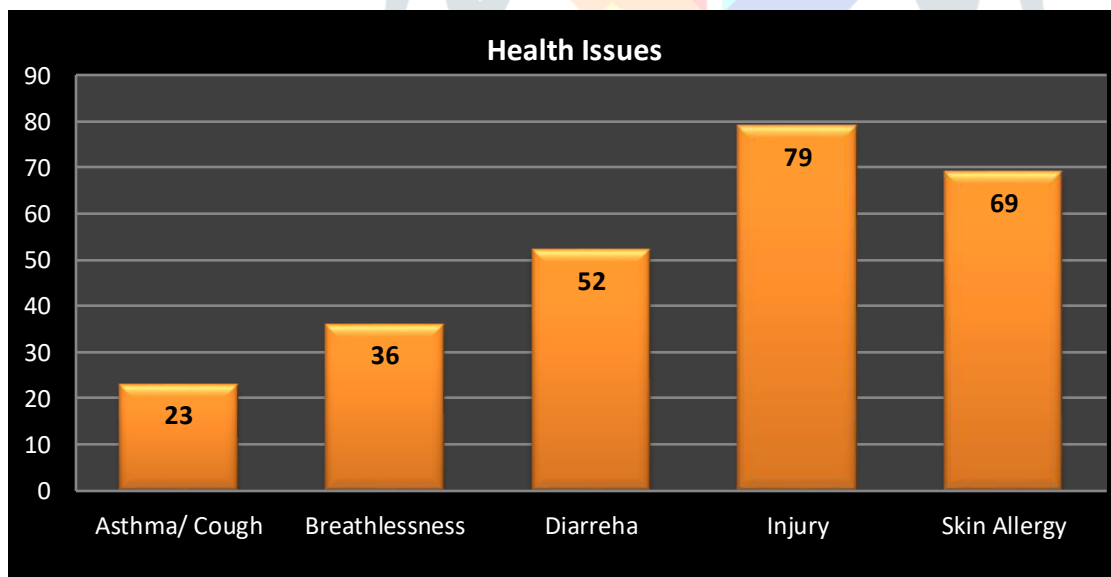


Figure 9: Health Issues

10. **Availing of Medical Facility-**It was found that 48 % availed medical facilities from Govt. Hospitals, 20% received the medical facilities from Mohalla Clinics, 13% received the medical facilities from Private Hospitals and 19% got treatment from private doctors. (Figure 10)

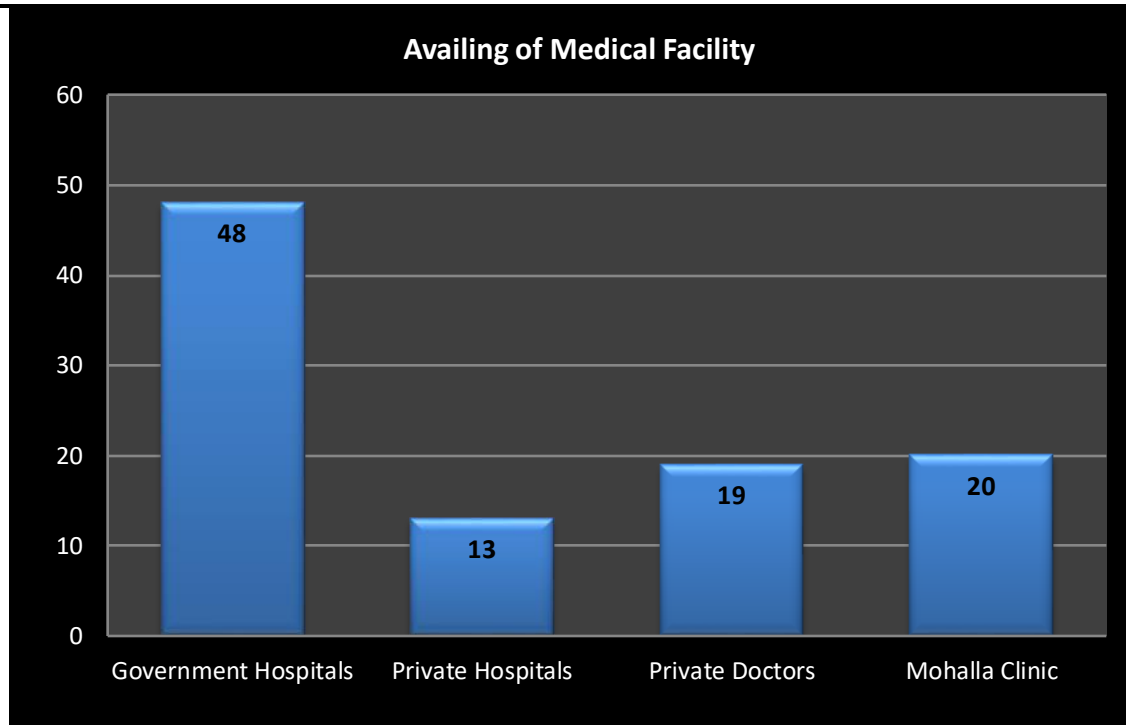


Figure 10: Availing of Medical Facility

11. Accessibility to Health Services- It was found in the survey that 56% children had received polio drops, 44% felt that their living area are being sanitized, 37% reported of the health teams visiting their localities and 13% had access to ambulance services in emergencies. (Figure 11)

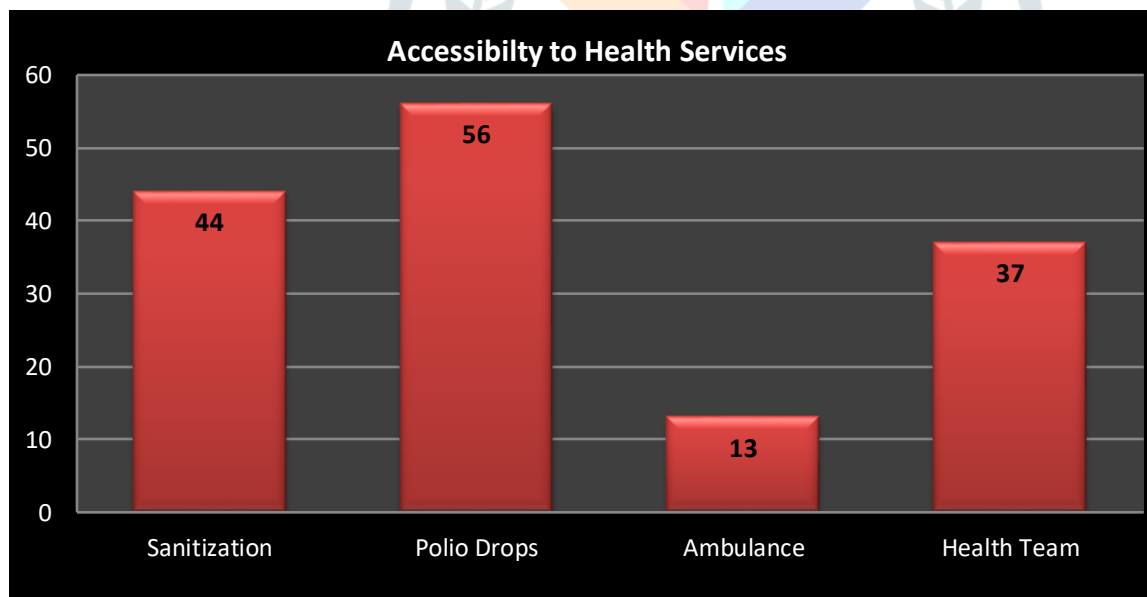


Figure 11: Accessibility to Health services

Working Environment of Women Rag Pickers

12. Working Environment- During the survey it was revealed that women rag pickers were unhappy with their working environment. 100% were from the poor category, 89% of them felt mentally exploited, 11% felt physically exploited, 12% complained of poor behavior by society members and 5% reported non-cooperation and support from the general environment.

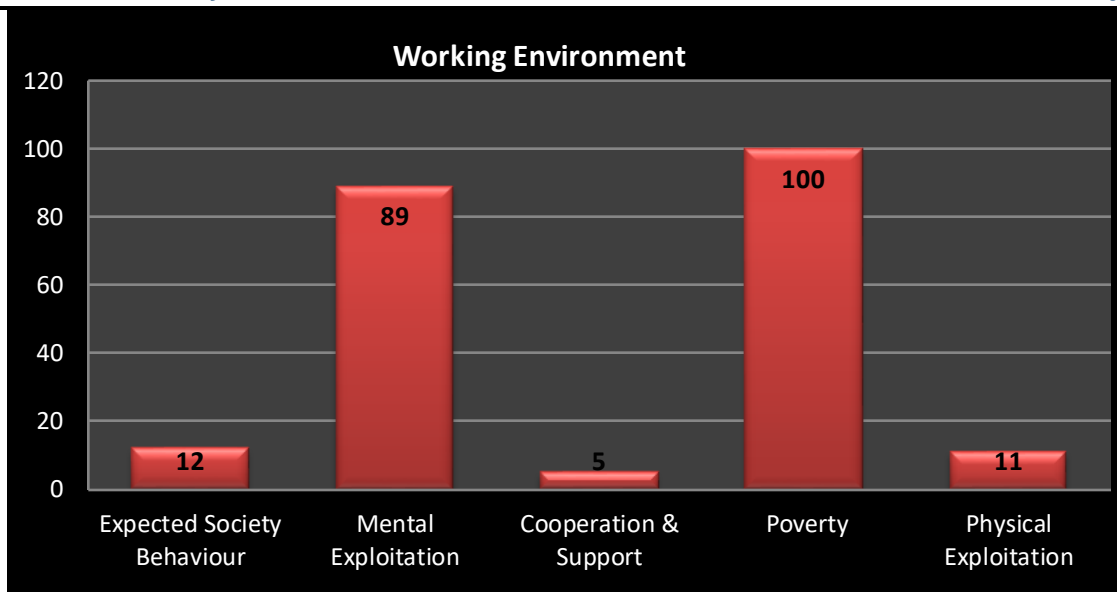


Figure 12: Working Environment

Discussion and Conclusion

During this extensive survey it was felt that majority of the women besides the above mentioned issues, also had some additional issues impacting their lives as human beings, which can be summarized as under:-

- 1. Low self-image-** Majority of rag picker women suffered from low self-image due to their caste background and nature of work performed by them.
- 2. Illiteracy & lack of skills -** Most of them are illiterate and without any basic skills which makes them vulnerable to exploitation.
- 3. Exploitation by the middleman-** Women rag pickers do not get fair amount of money for their collection and exploited by the middle men. In comparison, men get more money from the contractors or dealers because they are in a stronger position to bargain. Due to unfair practices many of these women get stuck in a credit-commodity trap where they have to take credit from the middlemen to meet their exigencies and are consequentially bound to sell recyclables to them, even if they are offered a lower price.
- 4. Health problems-** The monetary injustice cited above often takes a toll on their health and wellbeing also. They hardly ever get to relax and unwind from their strenuous and mundane routine. It was found that most of the rag-pickers are extremely poor, illiterate, and belong to rural immigrant families. Many commence their profession at the young age of five to eight years. Most of them never attend any school or have any formal education. Most of their families are in need of extra incomes from these young children. While they are collecting rags they are constantly exposed to the hazardous substances and poisonous gases resulting in to multiple ailments, anemia and retarded growth. Almost 90% women were found to be chewing tobacco and were regular consumers of alcohol. They were married at early age of 15 to 18 years to the men of their own community also in the same profession. At that young age they suffered because of lack of awareness of reproductive hygiene and sanitation.

5. Family Problems - It was found that many women rag pickers were head of the families because of desertion by their spouses or got widowed. In some cases the men were found to be drug addicts and did not work compelling women to work to run the household.

6. Seasonal nature of work- Most of the rag pickers depend solely on this work. They become jobless in the monsoons, when the picking up dry garbage from the bins or dumping ground is nearly impossible. Despite of all these problems these women carry on with their work of picking up recyclable garbage, sorting and cleaning to make it ready for sale.

Generally speaking, India has no municipal waste management policy and no program of recycling, which means that the work that the rag pickers do is indispensable. Without them, garbage would not be collected, sorted and recycled. The industry where it exists is unregulated and the authorities tend to treat the rag pickers as if they have no legal rights. Children are officially banned from working in waste collection, though, aside from routine harassment by the police, the authorities tend to turn a blind eye to them.

There are a number of organizations that are doing great work with and for the rag picker women and also trying to create awareness towards waste segregation at source. Of these, SEWA in Ahmedabad, SWaCH in Pune, and WOW (Well-being Out of Waste) in Bengaluru are some prominent names. Another inspiring initiative taken by a group of alumni from the Institute of Rural Management, Anand is ParyavaranMitra, an NGO based in Gandhi Ashram, Ahmedabad.

Conclusion

The study on problems faced by women rag pickers reveals that the social and economic condition is very poor. Since they live in unhygienic area most of them are malnourished suffer from many diseases. There is a dire need for targeted interventions for holistic development of rag pickers. Better life style mechanisms towards enhancing livelihood have to be framed by state through urban development departments concerning women rag pickers. The civil society organizations can devise a strategic plan for rehabilitation and promotion life of rag picker as they are as much a part of our society as we are. At the age where the young girls should be playing in the open and going to schools, they are made to work in the most inhumane and suffocating environment. It is high time that we as civic society take action to provide a dignified human life to this strata of neglected society

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