

Unheard, Unseen, Unrecognised: The Plight of Dhaka's Waste Collectors

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Waste segregation could not be implemented in any step of the solid waste management process in Bangladesh.

PHOTOS: MD RAHAT KABIR

Every day at 7am, Limon (not his real name), a boy of around 15, gathers a group of eight teenagers at a tea stall in Rayerbazar slum. In the tea stall, where they have a quick breakfast of a banana and a bun each, they are not particularly welcome.

Limon and his friends have been told not to sit on the benches and take away their food immediately, only because of what they are forced to do for a living. Many of these kids are from single-parent families, some of them are orphans, others have to support their ultra-poor families and have been deprived of any kind of formal education. Most are too unskilled to do any other job.

These boys collect waste from households and scavenge in garbage dumps in the Dhanmondi-Kalabagan area. Around 60 children in Rayerbazar slum alone have been working as waste pickers. According to the Bangladesh Labour Foundation (BLF), an estimated 100,000 waste pickers work in Dhaka alone—most of whom are women and children.

While hundreds of children and teenagers from the surrounding neighbourhoods go to school, teenagers like Limon leave their shanties with their bins and rickshaw vans to go collect garbage. Every two workers are given a rickshaw van and two buckets by their employers. With this rudimentary equipment, each pair has to 'cover a street' of the densely populated city. 'Covering a street' means the team of two have to collect waste from all residential buildings, shops, restaurants, and other sorts of establishments on the street. "At 8am we start collecting the waste and have to finish it by 4pm. Sometimes, we can eat lunch

but most of the times, not. If we cannot finish collecting the waste by 4pm, we aren't able to pick out recyclable materials from the garbage," says Limon.

Limon, with the help of his 'assistant', 12-year-old Alamgir, (not his real name) collect two tonnes of garbage from a street in Kalabagan every day. After collecting the garbage, they dump it all in an open container on Dhanmondi's Satmasjid road. There, they then scavenge with their bare hands for all sorts of recyclable material such as paper, plastic, metal, glass and collect them to sell in recycling factories.

"While rummaging through garbage, my hands have been wounded many times by sharp objects such as glass or steel blades. The sores you see on my body are quite common among us. It is a kind of skin disease we have contracted from the garbage we work with," says Limon. "But,

Corporation (DNCC), says, "We have set up garbage containers in specified places as it is not possible for us to collect domestic garbage from every household. Local residents of many areas of Dhaka have arranged these services that collect garbage from households and dump it in the containers. These are entirely private initiatives."

DNCC has only 199 garbage containers of different sizes in the 82.4 square kilometres of its jurisdiction and Dhaka South City Corporation has 321 containers. However, the utility of these garbage containers depends solely on these untrained young workers who transport the garbage to these daily.

These waste collectors are recruited by *mohajons* (employers), most of whom are activists of local political leaders. According to waste management offices of the city corporations, around 6,000-7,000 of these employers are operating in Dhaka



Waste collection service providers mostly employ unskilled women and children as they can be employed with low wages.

selling recyclable waste is a source of extra income for us. Every day, we earn around 200 to 250 taka by selling these goods and divide the amount equally between us," adds Alamgir.

By working for more than 12 hours at a stretch and working every single day of the week, these child workers earn only BDT 1,000-4,000 per month. After being recruited, a novice usually gets Tk 1,000 per month. After spending a year or so, he is paid Tk 2,000 per month. And, when he learns to pull the garbage van, he gets Tk 4,000 per month.

According to city corporation officials, these waste collectors or 'primary collection service providers' are not employed or managed by the city corporations. Rafique Hasan, a waste management officer of Dhaka North City

city. Some of these employers have established registered organisations, however, many are recruiting waste collectors and operating in different parts of the city without establishing any formal body.

To obtain the job of waste collection in a particular area, an employer has to first receive recommendations from the local ward councillor and ward commissioner. After receiving recommendations, these employers have to apply to get this job at the waste management office of the city corporation. Although one of the prerequisites to get authorisation from the city corporation is that these service providers will not recruit any children, the practice of child labour among these employers is widespread.

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