

Campaign for Waste Recyclers

According to an estimate by World Bank, 1% of the total population of any city, are the waste recyclers. They earn their living by collecting waste from dumpsite, roads, streets, commercial as well as residential areas dustbins and so on. They collect all types of dry waste like paper, cardboard, plastic, pet bottles, metals, glass and even hair. These workers walk for more than 10 km per day to collect this waste that they later segregate it into different categories and then the sell it to the scrap shop trader. In Urban India 0.2 percent of women workers are waste recyclers belonging to the lower strata of society.

Waste recyclers reportedly work for more than 12 hours in any given day in extremely hazardous and gruelling conditions, as they sort garbage with their bare hands in designated dump sites. At these sites, they are subjected to harassment from security guards, infection, animal bites, and poisonous fumes. The relationship between the waste recyclers and the local scrap shops is long-standing yet exploitative. The price of scrap is variable, set by the shop owner, and has been decreasing over time. Given Ahmedabad's ever-rising population, the amount of trash has also risen in tow. The trash surplus has resulted in a steady decline of prices. Accordingly, nearly three-quarters of these waste recyclers subsist well below the poverty line.

SEWA began its work with waste recyclers in 1975 after being approached by former textile workers who had lost their jobs as factories closed and turned to collecting and selling waste to earn a living. SEWA took a developmental right based approach for empowering them. It consisted of struggling for their rights, social security, similar rates at the scrap shop and building up their cooperatives to link them towards decent livelihoods.

It was estimated that approximately 76 percent of the city's waste recyclers were SEWA members and they cleaned 37.5 percent of the nearly 3500 tons of waste that the city produces every day. SEWA supported these waste recyclers by approaching textile mills and arranging for waste pickers to collect and sell rags and other waste generated by the mills. It also secured the right for waste recyclers to go door-to-door to collect household waste, and it lobbied the local municipal government for waste pickers to collect dry categories of waste at no cost, and other categories at reduced costs.

Yet unfortunately these traditional waste recyclers have to struggle very hard for their inclusion in the Solid waste management system of any City. In past through long struggle by SEWA the traditional waste recyclers had got work contract of Door-to-Door waste collection in one of the wards from 40,000 households and commercial buildings. They earned decent income from this work but ultimately this work was given to private larger companies as the small cooperative of the waste recyclers could not meet the impossible financial compliances set by the Municipalities.

SEWA after many negotiations with the Municipal Corporation and cases in the Courts of Law was successful in ensuring the inclusion of waste recyclers in the waste collection system of the city by getting Material Recovery Facilitation Centre. The dry waste of 8 to 10 wards is dumped in the Material Recovery facilitation centre and then women waste recyclers segregate it.

System Gaps :

1. The Govt does not recognise the role of the traditional waste recyclers in keeping the environment clean.
2. The waste recyclers have no protection in law or social security

3. The Solid Waste Management Rules 2016 recognizes the primary role played by “waste picker” and “informal waste collector” in municipal solid waste management, importance of their integration in mainstream solid waste management practices, and provides for conscious measures to formalize their contribution to develop a participatory and inclusive system of solid waste management. The said rules also set out the duties of waste generators and provides that every waste generator shall segregate and store waste generated by them in suitable bins and handover segregated waste to authorized waste pickers or waste collectors. But the methodology of the integration is not very clear, thus they remain unincluded and waste recyclers cannot access the clean waste at source.
4. After lots of negotiations, struggle and collective bargaining initiated by SEWA with the Labour Department, on 6th February 2007, Gujarat Informal Economy Workers Welfare Board was initiated. Initially the Board was for three trades namely Incense stick workers, Street Vendors and Waste Recyclers. This Board was started with the aim of bringing the informal sector workers in the mainstream and extending Welfare benefits to them also. This Board was result of policy intervention by SEWA to bring visibility to these informal sector workers. The first step of this board was to provide ID cards to the workers along with medical assistance and relevant trainings. All these efforts have a very definite purpose to bring the women waste recyclers in the main stream of waste management of any city. They should become the owners as well as managers of the “Green Livelihood” systems of the city. They should be the main decision makers at the workplace as well as at their households and in their communities. But unfortunately, this initiation has also come to a halt presently.
5. Materials recovery facility Centre (MRF) is a place where non compostable solid wastes are temporarily stored to facilitate segregation, sorting and recovery of recyclables from various component of waste by authorized informal sector of waste pickers for the purpose of introducing a green livelihood system before the waste is delivered or taken up for its processing or disposal. MRF helps in reduction substantial waste to reach the landfills as a result the hazardous emission reduces. It also reduces the cost of transportation also for any municipalities. Here too the traditional waste recyclers cooperatives are discouraged by the authorities and red tapeism in the system makes it very difficult for poor, vulnerable waste recyclers to survive and sustain.
6. The women waste recyclers are generally exploited by their scrap traders in weight of the collected waste as well as the rates of the waste. The deduction of wages by the trader is unfair and unjustified.
7. In the supply chain of the waste , these workers remain at the bottom of the value chains. As a result, their bargaining power is least. They have no access to the direct market as a result they always remain low paid & low status
8. The waste recyclers have a very tedious day and are exposed to heat, cold, pollution and filth through out the day. They continuously work in most unhygienic conditions. They also suffer from occupational health hazards like dog bites, septic, physical pain and even sexual harassment at times. Yet they are not protected under any health or such social security benefits.
9. Waste recyclers are also involved in the collection as well as dismantling of the E-waste. Their work involves exposure to hazardous materials and handling. Moreover, due to the lack of knowledge of these women workers they remain continuously in contact with explosives and polluting materials. This increases their vulnerability.

Short Term Campaigns:

1. The invisible and scattered waste recyclers need to be identified and organised
2. Linking them to decent livelihood through negotiations with different stakeholders for clean waste collection at source.
3. The skills of the traditional waste recyclers should be updated and capacities should be built for them to withstand any harsh situations in the future.
4. The traditional waste recyclers and their cooperatives should be encouraged. They should be technically equipped to bid for the solid waste management contracts.
5. The Material Recovery Facilitation centres, run by the Municipalities of the city should be managed and run by the cooperatives of the waste recyclers.
6. Identifying the Supply chains in the Waste Recycling Industry so as to eliminate or reduce the links of middlemen.
7. Education to the E-waste handlers and increasing their skills to handle this waste efficiently so that their livelihoods are also enhanced.
8. Linking the waste recyclers on E- Shram portal and with other welfare schemes of government, welfare board and welfare departments

Long Term Campaign:

1. **Ensuring Waste recyclers decent livelihood, protection and regulating livelihood through including them in Solid waste Management ruler 2016, subsequent state rules and other waste legislatives**
2. Promoting the inclusion of traditional waste recyclers at all levels of Solid Waste Management of a City
3. Constitution and implementation of the Informal Economy Workers Welfare Board that includes the waste recyclers to extent the medical benefits, maternity benefit, tool kits and Capacity building support. This will ensure decent livelihood for these workers in the main stream.
4. Formation of the Committee at the Central level to see that the cities/states follow the solid waste management rules regarding collection of waste at source by waste recyclers.