



“TRAPPED IN CYCLES OF POVERTY”: A CASE STUDY OF THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC STRUGGLES OF WOMEN MANUAL SCAVENGERS IN NORTH CHENNAI

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ABSTRACT

Manual scavenging involves the hazardous and degrading task of manually cleaning, handling, and disposing of human waste, sewage, and other filth. Women manual scavengers face both gender discrimination and the stigma associated with their work. Women manual scavengers are particularly vulnerable to infections, diseases, and exposure to toxic fumes and chemicals from human waste and sewage. Lack of proper protective gear and sanitation facilities further exacerbate these risks. Women manual scavengers often receive meager wages for their work. The lack of formal contracts or employment agreements makes them susceptible to exploitation by contractors and middlemen, who take advantage of their marginalized status and offer low wages for a hazardous job. Socio-economic struggles refer to the challenges and difficulties that individuals face as a result of their social and economic circumstances. The cycle of poverty and lack of education further restricts their employment options, leaving them trapped in this dangerous and degrading occupation. Manual scavengers usually lack access to social security benefits, health care, and insurance. This leaves them vulnerable in times of illness, injury, or emergencies, further perpetuating their cycle of poverty.

The researcher has chosen to analyse a sample of 10 case studies focusing on women within manual scavenging communities in North Chennai. This selection aims to investigate and gain a deeper understanding of the distinct experiences, obstacles, and socio-economic challenges that these women confront in their lives.

KEYWORDS: Women manual scavengers, sanitation, poverty, socio-economic struggles.



INTRODUCTION

Manual scavenging, a practice entailing the manual cleaning of human waste and other hazardous materials, disproportionately affects marginalized communities, particularly women. In the prevailing social hierarchy, manual scavengers are positioned at the very bottom and are even regarded as the most marginalized among those who are already marginalized. Women make up around 95% of manual scavengers, facing not only the denial of fundamental rights but also encountering numerous difficulties across all aspects of life. This is due to a socio-economic structure that is built on caste-based discrimination, patriarchal norms, and exclusion, effectively pushing them to the fringes of society.

What is manual scavenging?

Manual scavenging, a practice rooted in caste-based compulsion, has persisted across various regions of India. This occupation involves the manual cleaning of human and animal waste using basic tools like brooms and small tin plates. The waste is then collected in baskets and transported to designated disposal sites situated at a considerable distance from inhabited areas.

Why are women involved in manual scavenging more vulnerable than men?

Women are more prone to vulnerability when it comes to manual scavenging due to the combination of social, economic, and cultural factors such as caste-based discrimination, social stigma, limited opportunities, and limited access to education and awareness. Women who work as manual scavengers often feel compelled to continue because their families and communities have very limited ways to earn money. These families are usually very poor and come from marginalized groups in India. In these communities, even having enough food to eat is a big problem. While men from these communities might find occasional work as laborers, their income is not steady or dependable. Women are more vulnerable to manual scavenging due to a combination of social, economic, cultural, and health factors exacerbating their precarious position in this occupation.

Purpose of the study

This study seeks to uncover the underlying causes that lead to the entrapment of women within manual scavenging communities in a relentless cycle of poverty. The researcher aims to delve into the intricate socio-economic and other challenges confronted by these individuals, shedding light on their struggles.



Reasons for the continuation of the vicious cycle of Poverty

The perpetuation of the vicious cycle of poverty can be attributed to a combination of interconnected factors that reinforce each other over time. These factors create a self-reinforcing loop, making it challenging for individuals or communities to break free from poverty. Some reasons for the continuation of this cycle include:

- **Limited Access to Quality Education:** Lack of access to quality education can restrict individuals' skill development and hinder their ability to secure better-paying jobs. This limitation keeps them in low-wage, low-skilled positions, unable to escape poverty. Many women engaged in manual scavenging come from communities with historically limited access to education and skill development opportunities. The cycle of poverty and lack of education further restricts their employment options, leaving them trapped in this dangerous and degrading occupation. Some are forced to do this under social pressure. In particular the Dalit community
- **Unemployment and Underemployment:** Economic opportunities may be scarce in impoverished areas, leading to high rates of unemployment and underemployment. Insufficient job opportunities perpetuate a lack of income and reinforce the cycle of poverty.
- **Lack of Access to Financial Services:** Limited access to banking and credit facilities prevents individuals from making investments, starting businesses, or dealing with emergencies, trapping them in a cycle of financial instability.
- **Discrimination and Social Exclusion:** Marginalized groups face discrimination and social exclusion, limiting their access to education, jobs, and essential services. These barriers can keep them trapped in impoverished conditions.
- **Lack of Infrastructure and Basic Services:** Insufficient access to clean water, sanitation, healthcare, and electricity hampers the ability of individuals to improve their quality of life and engage in income-generating activities.
- **Cyclical Nature of Poverty:** Poverty tends to be passed down from one generation to another. Limited access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities for parents can affect their children's prospects as well.

Gender Discrimination and Social Stigma

Women manual scavengers face both gender discrimination and the stigma associated with their work. The work is traditionally considered "polluting" and is associated with lower caste communities. Women



in this occupation are subjected to social exclusion, and disrespect, and often lack access to basic services and amenities.

Health & Occupation Hazards

Manual scavenging is a hazardous and unsanitary occupation that exposes workers to various health risks. Women manual scavengers are particularly vulnerable to infections, diseases, and exposure to toxic fumes and chemicals from human waste and sewage. Lack of proper protective gear and sanitation facilities further exacerbate these risks. The workers were exposed to extreme hazards due to inadequate protective equipment and technological support. The cleaning was performed manually, without proper safety measures. The acquisition of machinery for the cleaning of sewer and septic tanks in major urban centers is very rare. They have no masks, no gloves, no shoes. Without these protections, they get skin diseases, asthma, and respiratory illnesses. Men participating in manual scavenging often develop a vulnerability to alcohol addiction as a coping mechanism to endure the workload.

Low wages & Exploitation

Manual scavengers, including women, often receive meager wages for their work. The lack of formal contracts or employment agreements makes them susceptible to exploitation by contractors and middlemen, who take advantage of their marginalized status and offer low wages for hazardous jobs. They also lack access to social security benefits, health care, and insurance. This leaves them vulnerable in times of illness, injury, or emergencies, further perpetuating their cycle of poverty.

Case studies

The researcher has conducted 10 case studies covering the area of north Chennai. The respondents were women involved in manual scavenging and sanitary works or belonging to the families of the manual scavenging community.

Case Study - 1

Name: Vijaya (Original name changed)

Age:38

When I left, my mother-in-law initially didn't give me any food. While my husband and my daughter received food, I was denied. She made it clear that if I didn't work, I wouldn't be allowed to eat.

Case Study- 2

Name: Jothi (Original name changed)

Age: 35



I studied until 8th grade, but I've found that there are no other job opportunities available to us, no matter where we search. I've tried looking for jobs elsewhere. If I approach a hotel for work, they inquire about my caste. Once they learn my caste, they only offer me jobs cleaning toilets. I wish to do something different, and I recognize that this is discrimination, but I feel helpless.

Case Study- 3

Name: Rajalakshmi (Original name changed)

Age: 30

I'm the only working member of my family, my husband passed away after two years of marriage. I have two children and I cannot see them starving. I made a choice to take up this job after my husband's departure. But I was not able to tolerate the nature of this work, so I decided to leave the job. A couple of days later when I left my work, my family eventually ran out of food to eat. That's when I faced the most pressure from the family.

Case Study - 4

Name: Rani (Original name changed)

Age: 50

I took the difficult step of separating from my husband due to ongoing domestic violence and abuse. In the past, I worked as a manual scavenger, involved in tasks like garbage disposal and sweeping. Despite the challenges, I'm proud to have raised a daughter and a son who are now also contributing to the family's support through their own work. I understand the importance of securing a better future for them, so I'm persevering in my job despite its hardships, all with the goal of saving for my children's future.

Case Study - 5

Name: Chinna Ponnu (Original name changed)

Age: 60

I've faced the loss of everyone dear to me, leaving me on my own. With determination, I managed to arrange marriages for my two daughters, who are now happily settled in Andhra. For three decades, I toiled as a manual scavenger under government employment, earning around Rs.1000 on a monthly basis. I extended my hours of work, striving to save for my family's needs. Following the successful settlement



of my daughters, I made the decision to retire from my job. Now, it's heartwarming to share that my daughters support me by sending me money, as they ensure my well-being.

Case Study - 6

Name: Nayomi (Original name changed)

Age: 30

I'm originally from Chennai, I spent a part of my life in Andhra after getting married. However, my husband and I eventually moved back to Chennai in search of employment opportunities. Following in the footsteps of my mother, I also took up a job as a manual scavenger. Together, my husband and I work diligently to provide for our family's needs. We're blessed with three children who are currently pursuing their education in high school. My aspiration is to provide them with better opportunities, steering them away from the same job path i've taken. Education is our priority, ensuring they have a brighter future ahead.

Case Study - 7

Name: Divya (Original name changed)

Age: 25

Both of my parents have been engaged in the challenging occupation of manual scavenging. My father was tasked with cleaning septic tanks and sewage systems, but a few years ago, he was diagnosed with kidney disease. Presently, he relies on dialysis treatments to manage his condition. The difficulties my family has faced due to these circumstances have had a significant impact on our lives.

Case Study - 8

Name: Josephine (Original name changed)

Age: 59

I started my journey as a manual scavenger and through hard work and dedication, I rose to the position of a supervisor. Over a span of 36 years, I committed myself to this field, overcoming numerous challenges along the way. Despite my long service, I have not received any government assistance or support. As I approach retirement next year, I also face the burden of a severe lung problem caused by



cleaning septic tanks. I am grateful that my two children are now working and actively providing for the family.

Case Study - 9

Name: Janaki (Original name changed)

Age: 32

My husband was employed as a manual scavenger, responsible for cleaning septic tanks and dealing with blockages. Tragically, he lost his life while performing this hazardous job. It's important to note that he had a habit of consuming alcohol while working, which likely contributed to the unfortunate incident. Following his untimely passing, the responsibility of supporting the family fell upon me. Despite having limited options, I found myself compelled to step into the same line of work as my late husband. My primary motivation was to ensure the well-being and future of my son, as I navigated this challenging path.

Case Study – 10

Name: Rajeshwari

Age: 30

I got married at the age of 16, and now I have four children. Unfortunately, my husband lost his leg in an accident, which has left him unable to work for the past five years. As a result, I have taken on the sole responsibility of providing for our family. I continue to do this work for my children's well-being, it drives me to work tirelessly in order to support us all. It's a challenging journey, but I'm dedicated to ensuring a better future for my family.

Findings of the study

Case studies on women in manual scavenging communities often reveal the harsh realities and challenges these women face. Here are some common findings from such studies:

- ✓ **Gender Disparities:** Manual scavenging is typically a gendered occupation, with a disproportionate number of women engaged in it. Women are often assigned the task of cleaning dry latrines, which is even more degrading and dangerous than other forms of manual scavenging.
- ✓ **Dignity and Discrimination:** Women manual scavengers often endure social stigma and discrimination due to their occupation. They are marginalized and treated as untouchables, facing exclusion from



mainstream society. Their residents are used to call as sweeper colonies before, which is also situated far away from the city.

- ✓ **Health Hazards:** Manual scavenging exposes women to serious health hazards such as respiratory diseases, skin infections, and even fatal accidents. The use of chemical agents and lack of protective gear exacerbate their vulnerability.
- ✓ **Limited Education and Skills:** Many women in manual scavenging communities have limited access to education and skill development. This perpetuates the cycle of poverty and forces them to continue in the same occupation.
- ✓ **Economic Exploitation:** Women manual scavengers often work long hours for meager wages. They are susceptible to economic exploitation by contractors or employers who take advantage of their vulnerable position.
- ✓ **Lack of Government Support:** Despite legal prohibitions and initiatives to eliminate manual scavenging, many women lack access to government programs aimed at their rehabilitation and alternative livelihoods.
- ✓ **Impact on Families:** Women manual scavengers often contribute significantly to their families income, yet their contributions are often not acknowledged. Their earnings may go towards education and other essentials for their children.
- ✓ **Hope for Change:** Despite the grim realities, case studies may also shed light on stories of resilience and hope. Some women manage to break free from manual scavenging through educating their children, skills training, and community support.

Social work Intervention

Role of a social worker as an Educator

A social worker plays a vital role as an educator in manual scavenging communities by empowering individuals and communities to overcome the challenges they face. Here's how a social worker can contribute as an educator:

Awareness and Education Campaigns: Social workers can organize awareness programs to educate community members about their rights, government initiatives, and the dangers of manual scavenging. They can use workshops, seminars, and community meetings to spread information and raise awareness.



Health and Hygiene Education: Manual scavenging communities often lack proper sanitation and hygiene practices. Social workers can educate them about proper waste disposal, personal hygiene, and methods to prevent diseases spread through unsanitary conditions.

Role as a Change Agent

Advocacy for Education: Encouraging parents to send their children, especially girls, to school is crucial. Social workers can advocate for access to quality education, help parents understand its importance, and address barriers that prevent children from attending school.

Dismantling Gender Stereotypes: Social workers can challenge traditional gender roles by promoting the education of girls and women. They can work to change community attitudes that perpetuate the cycle of women's engagement in manual scavenging.

Linking to Government Programs: Social workers can help manual scavenging communities access government schemes and programs designed for their upliftment. They can guide them through the application processes and ensure they receive the benefits they are entitled to.

Role of sustainable development goals in eradicating poverty.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are centered around six essential elements: Dignity, People, Prosperity, Planet, Justice, and Partnership. These goals collectively aim for the overarching principle of “leaving no one behind,” ensuring that all individuals and communities benefit from the global development agenda.

Poverty in various aspects of people’s daily lives, such as education, health, housing, and access to basic amenities. It varies from region to region and community to community. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) play a crucial role in eradicating poverty by providing a comprehensive framework and roadmap for addressing the various dimensions of poverty and promoting sustainable development. Here's how the SDGs contribute to the goal of ending poverty:

1. **Comprehensive Approach:** The SDGs go beyond just economic indicators and address the multidimensional nature of poverty. They encompass a wide range of issues, including social, economic, and environmental factors that contribute to poverty.
2. **Integrated Solutions:** The SDGs recognize that poverty is interconnected with other global challenges, such as inequality, lack of access to education and healthcare, environmental degradation, and climate change. By addressing these interconnected challenges, the SDGs promote holistic solutions that can have a lasting impact on poverty reduction.



3. **Empowerment and Participation:** The SDGs emphasize empowering individuals and communities to participate in decision-making processes that affect their lives. Empowered communities are better equipped to identify their own needs, priorities, and solutions for poverty reduction.

Overall, the SDGs provide a comprehensive and inclusive framework for tackling poverty in all its dimensions while promoting sustainable development. Achieving SDG 1 (No Poverty) requires a collective effort and a commitment to addressing the various challenges that contribute to poverty on a global scale.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the study on women in manual scavenging communities underscores the deeply entrenched cycle of poverty that these women find themselves trapped within. The findings reveal a distressing reality where socio-economic, cultural, and systemic factors converge to perpetuate their marginalization and vulnerability. The vicious cycle begins with limited access to education and skills training, which restricts opportunities for upward mobility. Breaking the cycle of poverty requires comprehensive efforts that address multiple aspects simultaneously. Strategies may involve improving education access, promoting healthcare, creating jobs, providing social safety nets, tackling discrimination, and addressing systemic inequalities to create a more inclusive and equitable society.

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