

Empowering Women Ragpickers of Mumbai - Stree Mukti Sanghatana's Parisar Vikas Programme

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Introduction

Stree Mukti Sangathana (SMS) is a non-governmental organization (NGO) working towards women's liberation by creating awareness in the society about women's issues and creating employment opportunities for poor women. Established in 1975, its programmes and activities are targeted towards enabling women to become literate, self-reliant and confident. To achieve its objectives, SMS started a programme called Parisar Vikas in 1998.

This case study showcases the work being done by Parisar Vikas with poor, migrant women in Mumbai who work as rag pickers, to empower them, build up the economy and concurrently improve the environment.

Contextualizing Urban Poverty and Rag picking

The Bane of Urban Poverty

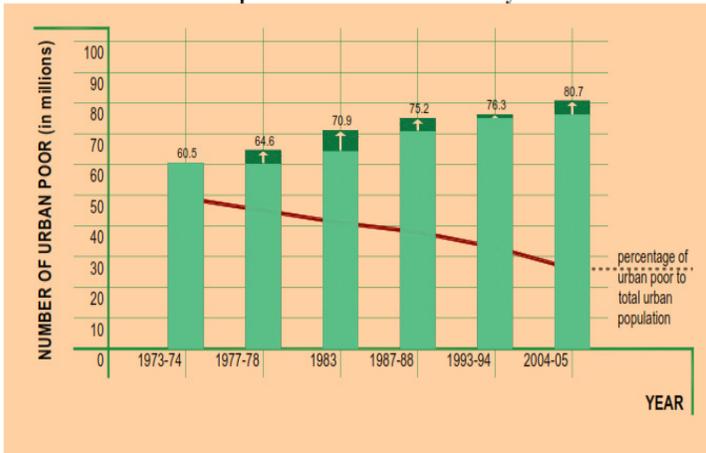
Developing countries are characteristically plagued by a high rate of population growth and crippling poverty. Among these countries, India has the highest concentration of poverty in the world, with around 320 million people living below the country's official poverty line – a staggering 35% of the total population. 75% of the global population growth is taking place in the urban areas of the developing countries causing a 'hyper growth' in cities, which are not equipped to cope with such a situation.¹ There are over 300 million urban poor who live in severe poverty in these cities of the developing countries. They have few options of livelihood, live in unsafe environments and face manifold threats to their health and security.² The dichotomy is that even as these cities are major contributors to the global economy and generate more opportunities, urban poverty persists and is indeed growing (Figure 1). This rising prevalence of urban poverty is indicative of the fact that the country's policies and programmes have not been able to alleviate poverty.³

¹ United Nations Centre for Human Settlement (2001). Cities in a Globalizing world. Global Report on Human Settlements

² World Development Report (1991). The Challenge of Development. World Bank

³ Human Development Report (2005)

Figure 1: Percentage of Urban Poor (1973- 2005)



Source: Planning Commission, 03 October 2011

With urban India's growing population has come increasing consumption and consequently, increasing quantities of waste. Due to the dearth of good waste-management policies in India, and given the zero awareness on recycling, all the waste ends up in landfills. Mumbai, the most populous city of India and the commercial capital of the nation generates approximately 7025 tonnes of waste per day.⁴ The Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai (MCGM) manages waste in the city by collecting waste from communities and simply disposing it at the three main dumping sites currently servicing the city. The MCGM dumps and saturates their landfills and later turns them into real estate land. Mumbai initially comprised seven different islands and a lot of marshland. By filling the gaps, most of the land has now been reclaimed. Dharavi was formed out of a reclaimed landfill site. Deonar is currently the largest dumping ground in Mumbai and is home to thousands of migrants.

Enter the Rag picker

More than 90% of Indian cities and towns do not have a proper waste disposal system. The whole responsibility of garbage collection falls on the shoulders of rag pickers. Rag pickers collect garbage from dumping grounds, residential areas and street bins. They are among the 1.5 million⁵ little-seen workers who perform a vital role as they delve into the litter of modern life, recycling anything of worth and carefully disposing the rest. A major chunk of these people fall below the urban poverty level; they find livelihood opportunities through picking waste. Research indicates that as many as one in a hundred persons in a large city in India could be employed in waste recycling, starting from waste picking to operating small junk shops and even operating reprocessing factories. Of these, most

⁴ <http://urb.im/mm/120826ar>. Accessed on 11.09.2013

⁵ Chaturvedi, Bharati (2010). "Mainstreaming Waste Pickers and the Informal Recycling Sector in the Municipal Solid Waste."

are marginalised rag pickers and small waste dealers.⁶ There are more than three lakh rag pickers in Mumbai alone.⁷

Plight of the Woman Rag picker

Rag pickers are mostly women. There are also itinerant buyers who are mostly males. They purchase scrap directly from households, offices and shops but they need capital to be able to do the same. The rag pickers also do the unhealthy work of segregation. They get paid a pittance. They are dependent on middlemen who purchase segregated rag from them at pre-decided rates. These women are a part of the marginalised population. They live in very harsh conditions in slums, lacking even the most basic amenities.

The women rag pickers are mostly dalit or minority migrants who fled their villages because of poverty or drought or because the rural economy could not sustain them. Some migrate to Mumbai after marriage. They are part of the most vulnerable and downtrodden workers in the informal sector. Their work is seen as shameful and is not accepted by society. When they start working, it is perhaps only to supplement the family income. Later, this becomes the only source of income for most, as a large percentage of men stop working due to addiction to alcohol or leave their wives for younger women.⁸ As the sole breadwinner of the family, these women have to endure long working hours, starting at 5 a.m. in the morning. Girl children and older women earn lesser as compared to the younger women as they cannot meet the efficiency levels of the latter. They earn on a daily wage basis and the money is dependent on the quantity of waste collected. Thus, if one falls ill or cannot collect an adequate quantity of waste, it means a day without food. They are exploited by their bosses who pay them nominally and make a profit while selling the waste to factories.

Apathy towards the Rag picker

It is a distressing fact that the people who handle our waste are invisible – we neither recognize them nor acknowledge their role in society. While they keep our cities clean, the government does not fulfil its responsibilities towards them. Their work is hardly ever recognised by the official waste management system despite their large contribution to the system. Rag pickers are unrecognized and have almost no rights to work, despite the fact that they save almost 14% of the municipal budget annually.⁹ Staying blind to these 1.5 million rag pickers who contribute to the country's growth is one among the many reasons which lead to increasing urban poverty. Migrants who have no other support system invariably end up doing this work. When they come to the city they do not have access to identity cards or birth certificates, thereby barring them from accessing the basic governmental facilities which are intended to alleviate poverty.

⁶ Chinthan (2009) Carving Opportunities. A Manual to Facilitate Children Waste pickers Access Education

⁷ <http://www.mid-day.com/lifestyle/2013/may/290513-no-place-to-call-home.htm>. Accessed on 11.09.2013

⁸ Stree Mukti Sanghatana (2006), Evaluation of Stree Mukti Sanghatana Rag Picker Project

⁹ Chinthan (2003). Space for Waste. Planning for Informal Recycling Sector

These invisible environmentalists are discriminated against, harassed and hold very few economic and social rights even while they provide a valuable service.

Rag pickers as Carbon Assets

We need to look at rag pickers as carbon assets as they are negating the society's carbon footprint. The rights of rag pickers as part of the larger rights discourse framework are gaining significance in contemporary times. The requirement is to look at the government policies that are meant for poverty alleviation but end up marginalizing a large mass of the population. Unlike the early 90's, the dependence on long term and deep state subsidy is fading out. Instead, poverty alleviation strategies feasible in the market are favoured. These market ventures must be warranted on the basis of their self-sustaining capacity. Self help, profitability and longer-term sustainability are the mantras of current poverty alleviation strategies.¹⁰ If these are along the lines of social welfare and equity, these ventures must be embraced.

Stree Mukti Sanghatana (SMS)

It is in this context that it is vital to bring into the limelight the grass roots level work being done in the sphere of women rag pickers of Mumbai by SMS. The case study with the theme 'Sustainable livelihoods for the poor' can rightly be contextualised to SMS's contribution to the livelihoods of the urban poor and helping to change their poverty status. The main objective of SMS is to work towards creating conditions conducive to equality, by creating social awareness of marginalised, poor women's issues and generating employment opportunities for them.¹¹ The Parisar Vikas programme started by SMS in 1998 aims at empowering the women rag pickers of Mumbai by helping them to become literate and self-reliant and addressing the problems of these women engaged in the menial task of cleaning waste. It is to the credit of this programme that it also addresses the problem of waste management engulfing current urban existence.¹²

Parisar Vikas

Inception

SMS first got introduced to the women rag pickers during their conscience-raising programme in Govandi, near Deonar. As part of this programme, SMS was performing their popular and radical play called *Mulgi Zali ho* (Its a girl child). During their interactions, they realized that most of the women were rag pickers who had migrated from the Marathwada region of Maharashtra as a result of the frequent draught conditions that prevailed there. As rag picking is a job which requires low skills

¹⁰ Dandekar; Mahajan (2007) Alleviating Poverty and Greening the city: Women rag pickers of Mumbai.

¹¹ <http://streemuktisanghatana.org/>. Accessed on 11.09.2013

¹² <http://streemuktisanghatana.org/>. Accessed on 11.09.2013

and Deonar has a huge dumping ground, most of the women took to rag picking. This chance encounter was the genesis of the Parisar Vikas Programme.¹³

Objectives¹⁴

The objectives of the Parisar Vikas Programme are:

- To organize and train women rag pickers
- To try and improve the standard of living of women rag pickers by understanding their problems
- To create a 'zero waste' situation in our cities
- To keep our surroundings clean and green
- To help recycle waste appropriately
- To develop and use new techniques for the treatment of waste.

Women Rag pickers, called *parisar bhaginis*, are brought together and imparted training to acquire skills. They are also facilitated in terms of their children's education, their own literacy, savings groups formation and access to microcredit, health care and hygiene.

Scope of activities

Under this programme, the scope of activities undertaken by the *parisar bhaginis* are as follows:¹⁵

- Organizing the sorting of solid waste at municipal dump sites;
- taking on solid waste disposal and recycling contracts in privately-owned housing colonies and large corporations, and taking care of their solid waste on-site, off-grid, in more hygienic and less polluting ways;
- adopting innovations which include installation and use of bio-gas digesters for processing organic waste and generating usable methane gas;
- adopting construction and use of bio-gas digester prototypes which are efficient and scale appropriate to the site;
- utilizing enriched soil from biodigesters to develop nursery beds to grow and sell plants for landscaping; and,
- established contractual relationships with Tetra Pak, a multinational corporation, to recycle Tetra Pak's juice boxes which are constructed of layers of paper board, aluminium and



¹³ Dandekar; Mahajan (2007) Alleviating Poverty and Greening the city: Women rag pickers of Mumbai.

¹⁴ <http://streemuktisanghatana.org/>. Accessed on 11.09.2013

¹⁵ <http://streemuktisanghatana.org/>. Accessed on 11.09.2013

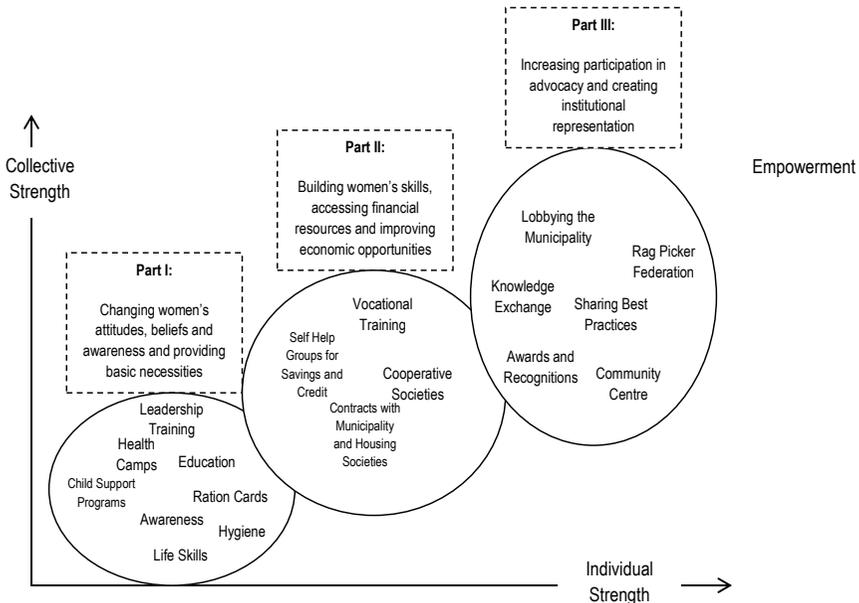
polyethylene. Their efforts contribute to reducing the volume of solid waste that must be disposed of by the municipal waste-management system.

Business Model

The Parisar Vikas programme differs from the more traditional social welfare approach. It involves economic development, job training and poverty alleviation, as well as efforts towards improving the environment by cleaning up and greening the city.¹⁶

Parisar Vikas works on a three-step model (Figure 2). Firstly, it aims at changing the deeply ingrained attitudes, beliefs and practices through suitable training modules. It ensures that the women themselves develop a sense of dignity towards the work they do. Secondly, it aims at empowering the women rag pickers, both at individual and collective level. Thirdly, it tries to strengthen the movement as a whole by creating institutional representation that can participate in advocacy and social change. This includes provision of identity cards which has changed the status of the workers from being scattered labourers to an organised worker force. It has taken the revolution a step further by staking a claim to the state resources.¹⁷

Figure 2: Parisar Vikas Business Model



Source: Stree Mukti Sanghatana (2006) *Evaluation of Stree Mukti Sanghatana Rag Picker Project*

¹⁶ Dandekar; Mahajan (2007) *Alleviating Poverty and Greening the city: Women rag pickers of Mumbai.*

¹⁷ Stree Mukti Sanghatana (2006), *Evaluation of Stree Mukti Sanghatana Rag Picker Project*

Problems Faced by Women Rag pickers

SMS conducted a survey of 2,000 women Rag pickers in 1998 to identify the problems of women rag pickers.

The survey highlighted the following facts:

- Rag picking is a caste and gender based activity.
- All rag pickers belong to the scheduled castes (dalits).
- The age group of rag pickers ranges from 7 years to 70 years.
- Women rag pickers comprise 85%, men rag pickers 10% and children rag pickers 5% of the workforce.
- 50% of rag pickers are single parents, with a large number of children.
- 90% of all rag pickers are the primary breadwinners for their families.
- 98% of rag pickers are illiterate.
- 98% of rag pickers have no alternative skills.
- All rag pickers are from drought-prone areas of Maharashtra and other southern states.
- Middlemen exploit rag pickers, leading to further deterioration of their position.
- Rag pickers suffer serious health hazards resulting from unhygienic work conditions. As they deal with toxic waste, respiratory diseases are common. Instances of tuberculosis (TB) are many. They suffer from dog and rat bites at their work places. Citizens indiscriminately discard biomedical waste and sharp objects such as needles, broken glasses, etc. Injuries from these are very common.
- Rag pickers are required to carry heavy loads and have no form of transportation. Because of the heavy load that they carry, most of them suffer from severe back pain.
- More than 50% of the children of rag pickers (especially girls) are out of school because they have to take care of their younger siblings. Most of them are married off at the age of 15–18 years.
- Due to poverty and malnutrition, most of them are anaemic. Due to early marriage, they face serious health problems during pregnancy and childbirth. Women have neither the time nor the money to look after their children and themselves. The community as a whole suffers from a high rate of infant mortality. Small ailments turn into serious problems due to lack of attention.
- The health facilities provided by the municipalities are inadequate. Most of them leave for work early in the morning and therefore cannot avail of the facilities at the health posts (which close at around 4 p.m.). Rag pickers therefore become victims of quacks who visit the community and also become victims of superstitions as they are illiterate.
- Rag pickers are the poorest of the poor in Mumbai and are unaware of their rights as citizens.

Getting Off the Ground

This survey gave a baseline for SMS to start the Parisar Vikas Programme with the support of the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai (MCGM). MCGM has provided municipal-controlled land at strategic locations on lease for the rag pickers to work. SMS also approached MCGM for a grant of land to establish a training centre for rag pickers and a day-care centre for their children near the dumping ground in Deonar. The day-care centre was started so that mothers could leave their children here while they worked. It also enabled the girl children to pursue education as there was no need to stay back and take care of their siblings. Once the day-care centre started functioning, 75% of the girl children started going to school. A follow-up was also done to ensure that there were no dropouts.¹⁸ SMS has friends in the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), who pitched in Rs 500 per girl child to aid education for the girls in the community. For this purpose, a piece of land near the existing municipal primary school was allotted by MCGM and a shed was constructed with a grant from War on Want, an anti-poverty charity based in London, England. The centre was inaugurated on the 11th of March 1999 by Ela Bhatt of the Self-Employed Women's Association of India (SEWA), Ahmedabad. The first effort at leadership training was started with classes for 50 women in July 2001. After the leadership training was concluded, the rag pickers entered into agreement with Tata Power and with the Naval Dockyard. Fifteen and twenty women worked under this contract at Tata Power and the Naval Dockyard, respectively. They would take the dry waste and let wet waste compost within the sites.¹⁹

MCGM also offered a piece of land of 2500 sq metres for composting of bio-waste at the dumping ground. At that time, the rag pickers did not have any knowledge about this technology. SMS grabbed this opportunity. Formal training was imparted to the women in gardening and composting with the help of Mahim Nature Park officials for a year, and by trainers from Bhabha Atomic Research Centre (BARC) for four years. In November 2000, the Additional Municipal Commissioner of Mumbai inaugurated the vocational training centre for the rag pickers on the Deonar site.

Towards Enhanced Economy, Empowerment and an Improved Environment

In 2002, SMS received a maintenance contract for the Nisargaruna (biomethanation) plant²⁰ developed by BARC scientists with a capacity for treating 5 tons of biodegradable waste every day. SMS started by constructing four such plants and today they operate eight plants (Table 1). One of the plants has successfully generated electricity from the biogas generated. With the help of BARC, a 100 kg plant has been constructed to treat the waste from the canteens, thus contributing in a big way to the search for alternative fuel.

¹⁸ Interview with Mrs. Sunita Patil, dated 22.08.2013

¹⁹ Interview with Sunita Patil, dated 22.08.013

²⁰ See notes on Nisargaruna (Appendix A)

In the meantime, in 2002 a new government resolution (GR) was released which required that women co-operatives be formed for waste collection. Accordingly, 10 cooperatives with up to 50 members each were formed to procure waste management contracts with housing societies and industrial, educational and commercial complexes (**Table 2**). During 2003–2005, all contracts were transferred from SMS to the co-operatives except for the MCGM contract as there were lot of petty issues with them, and the TISS contract.

Table 1: Details of the 8 biogas plants

S. No.	Contractor	Contract with
1	3 biogas plants at BARC	Contract transferred to co-operatives from MCGM
2	1 biogas plant at Tata Power	
3	1 biogas plant at TIFR	
4	1 biogas plant at MCGM	Contract with SMS
5	2 biogas plant at TISS	Contract with Federation

Table 2: Details of the Cooperative Societies

Ward Name	Cooperative Society	No. of Members
M Ward	Amla	48
	Yashodhra	42
	Muktai	23
	Savitri Bai Phule	23
N Ward	Vasundhara	48
	Ramai	48
S Ward	Bimai	44
F Ward	Chaitanya	49
	Balasaheb	48
L Ward	Priyadarshini	48

Source: Dandekar; Mahajan (2007) *Alleviating Poverty and Greening the city, Women rag pickers of Mumbai*

As mentioned earlier, Tata Power and Naval Dockyard had signed contracts with SMS in 2000. They agreed to give the biogas contract to the cooperatives but not the cleaning contract, as they wanted the cleaning contract to remain with SMS. Even with RBI, SMS has the contract for cleaning, and they then sub-contract it to the cooperatives. Other societies also demand contracts with SMS rather than cooperatives as they find SMS more reliable than cooperatives. A summary of work undertaken by SMS is at **Table 3**.

In November 2004, *parisar bhaginis* along with SMS experts participated in training of the staff, workers and residents of the Indian Petro Chemicals Limited (IPCL) township in Nagothane in Raigad district. Today, Nagothane township is the first petro-chemical township in India to achieve near 'zero waste'²¹ status.²²

Table 3: Summary of Work Undertaken by SMS

Municipal Ward	Area	No. of Parisar Bhagini Working	No. of Households	Quantity of Dry Garbage in Kg per Day	Quantity of Wet Garbage in Kg per Day
A	Colaba	15	1501	1495	325
F North	Sion-wadhala	21	1101	1235	441
F South	Parul	4	78	35	250
G North	Dharavi-Mahim	46	245	1368	77
G south	Wazali-Mahalaxmi	10	600	280	325
K east	Andheri	6	840	475	40
L	Kurla	37	700	1360	30
M east	Deonar-Chembur	47	1868	3452	8720
M west	Chembur	34	2455	227	1053
N	Ghatkopar-vikroli	2	160	0	75
S	Powai-Bhandup	6	210	46	0
T		26	1134	420	310
Total		254	10892	10393	11646

Source: Dandekar; Mahajan (2007) *Alleviating Poverty and Greening the city: Women rag pickers of Mumbai.*

Parisar Vikas Bhagini Sangh (PVBS)

Parisar Vikas Bhagini Sangh (PVBS), a federation of saving groups of women rag pickers, was formed in 2005. It is also registered as a community development society with the MCGM. Two hundred *bachat gats* (savings groups) were formed. Each *gat* had 10 members before the formation of the Federation. Today, all savings groups are part of the Federation. The Federation charges each group an interest rate of 1.5% of the total loan given and the group further charges its members 2%; thus the Federation has a spread of 0.5%. The loan-disbursing process is more

²¹ Waste generated in your house is manageable waste. Do not send it to the dumping grounds. Segregate it at source into dry and wet waste. The wet waste goes to a manure pit near your locality. You can reuse it. The dry waste goes back to the manufacturer for recycling. What remains for the dumping ground is zilch!

Dry waste comprises of plastic, metal, thermocol, foam, glass, rexine, battery cells, paper, cloth, bulb tubes, rubber, etc. Wet waste comprises of vegetable waste, food waste, garden waste, coconut shells, wood pieces, nails, hair, eggshells, bones, flesh, used cotton, paper, etc.

²² Stree Mukti Sanghatan booklet

or less the same as it is with the savings groups, whereby the Federation internally discusses every detail regarding the group before disbursing the loan. The Federation has a fixed one-time membership fee of Rs 500, and Rs 100 per month is to be paid by a group.²³ If the performance of the *gat* is good for a period of six months, a grant of Rs 1000 is given to each member under the Swarna Jayanti Shahari Rozgaar Yojna (SJSRY) Scheme as seed capital to set up a micro-enterprise. In this way, one group received Rs 10,000 (10 members multiplied by Rs 1000 each). A total of 196 groups have got subsidies under the SJSRY to date. To avail the Scheme,

it is mandatory to possess a Below Poverty Line (BPL) card. This work of helping women get the BPL cards is done by SMS. The Rs 10,000 received under the SJSRY Scheme has been split into two components – Rs 5000 with the Federation and Rs 5000 with the *bachat gat*. Thus, in case the *bachat gat* needs a loan, they can approach the Federation. This has generated a system of internal loans.

The PVBS got access to five sorting centres under the SJSRY Scheme – Colaba, Wadala, Mulund, Chembur East and Chembur West. They also got a motorised vehicle for picking waste in seven wards.²⁴ The cost of operating the vehicle is borne by the MCGM. PVBS pays only for the electricity and water connection at the sorting centres. With the help of this vehicle, dry waste is collected by the PBVS from the women at market rates. This waste is re-sorted at the sorting centres and then sold to the recycling companies. They have been trained to do quality sorting which has eliminated the need for middlemen. Waste is sent directly to the factories. Also, depending on the value of the waste collected by the waste picker in a year, a 4% bonus which amounts to Rs 10,000 to Rs 12,000 is given at the time of the *Diwali* festival. Previously, the waste pickers used to get only a sari and some money from the middlemen as bonus.

Today, the Federation has diversified its activities and runs two canteens in the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) Campus, eight biogas plants and five sheds²⁵. It has also established a business of selling tetra packs to companies for recycling since 2005. PBVS does not have a VAT registration number. VAT adds to the cost and hence is not economical for the Federation. As a result of not having VAT registration, they cannot

The women forming the savings groups come from the following eight areas:

- (1) Rafi Nagar
- (2) Jagruti Nagar
- (3) P.L. Lokhande Marg
- (4) Raman Mama
- (5) Pestom Sagar
- (6) Anand Nagar
- (7) Sathe Nagar
- (8) Pratiksha Nagar

Source: Dandekar; Mahajan (2007)
*Alleviating Poverty and Greening the city:
 Women rag pickers of Mumbai.*

²³ Stree Mukti Sanghatana (2006), Evaluation of Stree Mukti Sanghatana Rag Picker Project.

²⁴ Stree Mukti Sanghatana Annual Report January 2012 to December 2012.

²⁵ Five sheds were provided by the MCGM to parisar bhaginis and these are nothing but the sorting centers. These sheds are used for efficient sorting of the waste. The motorized vehicle provided by MCGM collects all the waste and finally brings it to the sheds for efficient waste segregation after which it goes to the recycling centers.

accept payments by cheque from the companies. PVBS and SMS formed a company called Sampurna Arth in 2005 which now handles the tetra pack domain. PBVS had signed a contract with a paper mill called Daman Ganga for selling of tetra packs. Unfortunately, in the year 2011, a fire engulfed the factory causing huge losses to the company. Thereafter, PBVS started selling the tetra packs to a company called Delux in Palghar. However, there are problems of late payments by the company. Parisar Sakhi Vikas Sangh, a federation of 500 women from Navi Mumbai, was formed in 2011.

Subsidy was given to two *bachat* groups to set up a stationery and grocery store. The stationery store is in operation and works on a barter system between the company and the store. The stationery store takes waste white paper from the company and gives it to the factory for recycling. The recycled paper is bought from the factory and given back to the company. Cash transfers take place only between the store and the recycling factory. As many as 35 Corporates have given contracts to the store; a few of these are Larsen and Toubro (L&T), Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) and Tata Power.²⁶

Over the years, the number of women working as Rag pickers has reduced considerably. There are a number of reasons for this. Firstly, the amount of waste that reaches the dumping ground has reduced considerably due to segregation at the doorstep and MCGM workers taking away some part of the waste. Secondly, after acquiring training in other skills many women have started getting different jobs, and many have reached the age of retirement. Thirdly, some women have their children working and earning sufficiently and hence they no longer want to engage themselves in this job.

Challenges²⁷

The following challenges need to be overcome:

- There is a great difficulty in developing trust among the women; 25% trust the PBVS but the rest do not.
- The problem faced by PBVS is that the women still prefer to sell their waste to the middlemen on account of two reasons (a) The long term relationship that has been established, and (b) The loan repayment that has to be done to the middlemen.
- Fund shortage: Initially, international funding was forthcoming but in 2012 there has been no international funding.
- Space constraints: Ten tonnes of quality material has to be sent to the companies and the five sorting centres do not have that capacity. The transportation costs are huge as the sorting centres are not linked or near the recycling factories.

²⁶ Interview with Sunita Patil, dated 22.08.013

²⁷ Interview with Jyoti Mhapsekar (President, SMS) and Vijaya Shrinivasan, dated 25.06.2013, and Sunita Patil, dated 22.08.2013, Stree Mukti Sanghatan Annual Report January 2012 to December 2012.

- Discrepancies in wage rates: Twenty-five women working in RBI get around Rs. 4000 for part-time work. Rag pickers who work in societies get less than this even after working full-time. Women working with Tata Power and the Naval Colony earn around Rs. 250 per day which works out to Rs. 6000–Rs. 7000 per month for a full-time job. Hence the women fight among themselves to work with the RBI.
- Problems of the old: Old women are not ready to retire as their contribution is necessary to the running of the household. It has been difficult to convince them. The NGO cannot allow them to work as it is against the law.
- Working with the urban local body: Pending payments from the BMC also put a financial load on the Federation. Also as per the annual report (2012), the issuing of BPL cards to the Rag pickers has been a very tedious process even after a GR has been passed that requires BPL cards to be issued to all Rag pickers.
- The Federation can give loans up to Rs. 30,000. However, there is a demand for loans in the bracket of Rs. 50,000–Rs. 1,00,000. The Federation cannot give a loan of more than Rs. 30,000 as it requires the permission of RBI for the same.
- The women perceive collection of dry waste to be more lucrative as they get daily wages after selling the same. The collection of wet waste does not provide short-term benefits as it involves a long process of converting the wet waste to saleable manure. As a result, it becomes increasingly difficult to convince women to look for long-term benefits rather than the short-term ones.
- Vested interests in the transportation of waste, preference for centralised waste management, high-end technologies and promotion of environment-unfriendly incineration technologies are destroying the livelihood of the urban poor.
- There seems to be no clear position on the right to livelihood and right to garbage. Right to livelihood is a civil right and would thus extend to contractors as well. So the question of whose right prevails is important. Municipal workers feel that dry waste is their property. Thus, this also becomes a struggle between the organised and the unorganised sectors. Ironically, if cities really become clean and waste is segregated at source as per the Supreme Court's mandate, the waste pickers will become the first victims.

Sustainability of the model

Sustainability of the model is based on three E's – empowerment, economy and environment. It encourages the *bhaginis* to campaign for their rights and organize their livelihood, leading to empowerment; trains the *bhaginis* with skills and exposes them to self-help groups to achieve economic sustainability; and also creates a zero-waste situation of environmental sustainability.

Empowerment

Empowerment was brought about through SMS's intervention in their deeply engrained attitudes, beliefs and practices. They felt they were inferior as they were looked upon as dirty and as thieves. SMS carved out relevant training modules to cause tangible and immediate effects on the women's living style and to bring about motivation. Through leadership development, health and hygiene, human rights awareness, literacy, child education support and adolescent sensitization training, their mind set has changed and they now feel they are contributors to the society and the environment. The Federation gives the women a sense of identity and a sense of belonging. Previously, the women had no institution which specifically understood their needs and problems. This sense of identity in the women has led to immense confidence and a yearning for improving their lives. The issue of identity cards has increased their status in the community as well as in the dumping grounds. The change has been marked and they have learned to perceive things differently. This paradigm shift in their social, educational, health and economic status is solely due to SMS's untiring efforts and initiatives.

Economy

Initiatives of vocational skills training, creation of self-help groups for savings and credit have contributed to enhanced access by these women to financial resources where business opportunities are developed. The formation of cooperatives has led to access to waste management contracts according to the Management of Solid Waste Rules. This has in turn led to the transformation of the multitude of women who were not capable of coping with the challenges of being marginalized in the society. SMS has empowered them to raise their needs and demands and also provided them with new skills and economic opportunities to be independent.

Environment

SMS has always maintained that rag pickers, if trained, can process wet waste and recycle dry waste to create a near zero-waste situation in any given locality and thus play a crucial role in combating climate change. They have indeed implemented it through their Parisar Vikas Programme, thereby returning nature's resources back to nature. SMS has also negated the local government initiative to burn waste through the process of incineration or adopt refuse-derived fuel (RDF) technology or gasification which leads to heightened electricity consumption and is also harmful for the environment. Above all, these methods will lead to loss of livelihood for the millions of urban poor who are rag pickers. After having done an environmental impact assessment of their programme, it can be said that they reduce emissions by reusing/recycling dry waste, reduce emission of greenhouse gases and reduce carbon dioxide and fuel consumption. Use of biogas leads to reduced strain on fossil fuels and usage of organic manure leads to replacement of urea.

Replicability and Scalability of the Model

SMS has secured international funds for realizing their aspirations. It is expected that collaboration, sharing of resources and dissemination of lessons learned from their experiences will encourage similar initiatives across the globe. There has been intense engagement with the Global Alliance against Incinerators (GAIA) and Women in Informal Employment – Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) where SMS has shared their best practices across the globe. In their consultations at national and international forums organized by the above mentioned groups, SMS has understood the hitches in the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) where climate change is seen by developed countries as purchasing carbon credits by supporting green activities in developing countries while they do little to reduce their own carbon footprint in their own countries. This mechanism also ignores the contribution of rag pickers in their fight for climate change where marginalization of rag pickers occurs simultaneously. They are yet to realize the capability of rag pickers in solid-waste management. SMS supports the demand for rag picker's organizations across the globe and banning the burning of waste which destroys the livelihood of these rag pickers. They argue for recognizing the efforts of rag pickers and hence uplifting them.

Presently, SMS is working in half of the area covered by the Mumbai Municipal Corporation and in few other parts of Maharashtra. The working areas of NGOs do not overlap into to avoid conflicts. These models could be scaled down to local areas by NGOs and voluntary organizations with the minimal funds they receive or can be taken up by municipal corporations and scaled at a city level.

Challenge to Scalability

The lack of cooperation, vested interests in waste collection and transportation, lack of coordination and accountability at municipal levels despite their infrastructure and manpower all discourage voluntary organizations from upscaling their efforts. NGO initiatives and arrangements do not fit in their conventional contractual framework.²⁸

Conclusion

Women have been contributing significantly to the sustenance of the family. Today, more and more women form part of the labour force in the informal sector where they have to put up with the bad working conditions as their household depends on them. Even though invisible to the urban environment, their services are vital to the booming urban population. Especially in a developing country such as India, the municipalities do not undertake any recycling on their own as they still look at solid waste management from a traditional perspective starting from waste collection to disposal at some landfill site. Urban planning has

²⁸ Stree Mukti Sanghatana Booklet.

only reached the level where they allocate space for dumping grounds.

In this context, SMS has indeed identified a robust relationship between welfare and action through its innovative development model, the Parisar Vikas Programme. They have successfully developed the individual's spirited self to transit into a communal movement, enhancing their ability to intervene and also to gain equal rights. As we conclude this case study, it is evident that the multi-sectoral approach initiated by SMS has created an impact which has changed the lives of rag pickers. Skills training has assisted in opening doors to better economic opportunities, increased their access to basic amenities and enhanced the women's sense of well-being, thereby leading to a dynamic role in campaigning for their rights. This model has fashioned an institution that will function as an agency for social revolution for the rag pickers to create an everlasting impact both now and in the future in their homes and communities.

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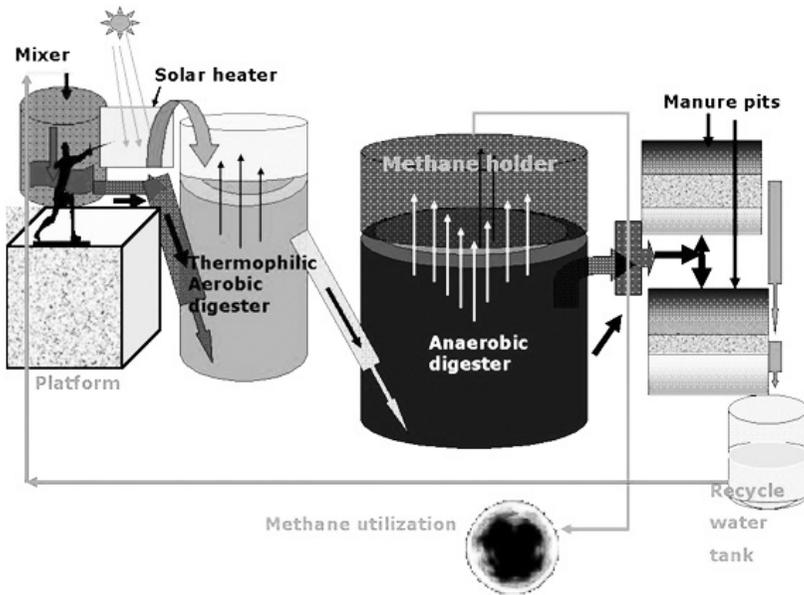
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 - Interview with women working in the canteen, dated 04.07.2013
 - Interview with Deepa, dated 17.07.2013.
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ANNEXURE A

Brief on Nisargruna Technology

The Nisargruna technology offers a good decentralized alternative for processing the biodegradable waste generated on the premises of urban local bodies. The technology offers a comprehensive solution for handling the biodegradable waste material. It is based on the concept of maintaining the elemental balance in nature.



BARC's Nisargruna plant offers a 'zero garbage, zero effluent' method of waste disposal. There is good potential for energy generation in this biphasic biomethanation plant. A substantial portion of our biodegradable waste is food waste (38%–40%) which can generate about 60–100 m³ of biogas (about 20–30 kg of methane) per tonne of waste processed.