

Voices from the Field: Understanding the Lives of Sanitation Workers through Photovoice in Southwest Bangladesh

INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh has an investment pipeline valued at more than \$USD1.3 billion planned for faecal sludge management (FSM) in the next decade (2024-2035). With such a significant investment plan, it is pertinent to review and learn from current FSM service delivery approaches. Thorough understandings of current practices and FSM service performance can inform upcoming investments to maximise efficacy and sustainability.

Thus, in 2024, Practical Action and ITN-BUET undertook a participatory research activity with sanitation workers who provide FSM services 'Photovoice' empowered sanitation workers from six towns in southwest Bangladesh to capture images and videos, and associated commentary, of their lives and work situation.

Through this participatory research, sanitation workers provided insights into the potential of cooperatives as an FSM service delivery model, the necessity of municipal collaboration, and the gaps that still exist in terms of safety, dignity, and recognition in their profession. Their tales encourage local governments and partner organizations to take specific efforts to generate long-term improvements in FSM service delivery systems that will improve delivery quality, while also protecting worker rights and health.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Mechanical equipment provided through investments should be accessible to sanitation workers.** Sanitation workers highlighted how access to mechanical equipment for emptying septic tanks could be withheld – leaving them either without an income, or forced to undertake manual emptying.
- **The sustainable provision of appropriate, gender specific personal protective equipment (PPE) is lacking.** In addition to the current training on occupational health and safety and the PPE provision through project funding, a institutional system for the replacement of essential equipment should be initiated.
- **A fair wage structure, that provides a living wage for sanitation workers, should be established.** This should include salary adjustments based on inflation and living costs. Additionally, formal employment contracts could be provided, guaranteeing timely payments and access to social benefits like insurance and pensions.
- **Support the establishment and strengthening of trained and unified cooperatives. The cooperative model can improve sanitation workers lives and working conditions.** Municipalities and partner organizations should facilitate the establishment of cooperatives, supporting them with training in leadership, legal rights, and gender equity to empower cooperative members, particularly women. The more unified the cooperative is, the more agency, voice and impact it will have.

What are cooperatives? Practical Action has been supporting sanitation workers' cooperatives for the past 10 years. This gives the workers formal status, enables cooperatives to open bank accounts, access Government support and training. Through cooperatives sanitation workers can present a collective voice to decision makers. All 10 cooperatives featured in this study are cooperatives supported by Practical Action and their partner organisations. Many workers are employed as solid waste workers, as well as working in faecal sludge service delivery.

BEHIND THE CLEANING OF OUR CITIES - OVERLOOKED LIVES

Waste and sanitation workers in low and middle-income countries like Bangladesh are among the most vulnerable labor groups, often facing severe marginalization, poor working conditions, and health risks. Their work, which includes handling human and solid waste, is undervalued and stigmatized, especially in South Asia, where many workers belong to marginalized communities like the Harijan community.

This stigma leads to social and economic exclusion, limiting their access to essential services and benefits, unlike their counterparts in high-income countries who often receive health benefits, pensions, and legal protections.

In Bangladesh, sanitation workers frequently engage in hazardous tasks, such as cleaning latrines, emptying septic tanks, and street cleaning—often without protective gear—exposing them to toxic gases, extreme noise, dangerous substances, and sharp objects. These working conditions, along with living in poor quality housing, and financial conditions necessitating a low-nutrient diet, leads to a higher incidence of both acute and chronic illnesses. Despite these risks, most workers lack health insurance and compensation for work-related illnesses or injuries.

Without a healthy sanitation workforce, Bangladesh will struggle to make progress towards the goal of universal safely managed urban faecal sludge services. Regardless of the infrastructure investments made.

Summary of the Photovoice Methodology

| Method | Detail |
|--------------------------------|---|
| Preliminary Training Workshops | Three workshops introduced research aims, provided an overview of the photovoice methodology, and trained 45 sanitation workers from 10 cooperatives in smartphone photography. Each workshop included 40 minutes of brainstorming on photo topics. |
| Photo Collection Period | each sanitation worker cooperative was supplied with smartphones and given 6-8 weeks to take photos of their work conditions, cooperatives, and lives |
| Follow-up Workshops | One follow-up workshop was held in each of the six towns, where sanitation workers described the context and message behind their photos. These discussions were recorded for data analysis. |
| Data Analysis | The recorded discussions were transcribed, and a thematic analysis was conducted to identify recurring themes and sentiments expressed by the workers. |

Common Themes Photographed

1. Positive Impacts of Cooperatives

Cooperative membership has enabled workers to make tangible forward progress. This includes the ability to save money, educate their children, and invest in business opportunities or home repairs. Savings schemes organized through cooperatives have provided a safety net, allowing members to support each other during times of crisis, such as illness or the death of a member.

Many sanitation workers spoke of their increased ability to engage with local decision makers and governance processes.

While access to health insurance, and participation in training on savings and financial planning, were provided universally, the benefits were not experienced equally.

“One of our members took a loan from the cooperative & repaired his broken house. A cooperative member also bought a rickshaw with a loan. Our cooperative has given us financial security.”

"We're in a middle ground—there's some progress, but not enough. We were moving towards positive change but somehow couldn't reach there."

2. Persistent low wage and housing struggles

Economic hardship was a common theme in the narratives of sanitation workers, who often live in poor quality housing and consistently face financial instability. Their wages remain low, remaining stagnant while market prices increase. Workers perceive that they are underpaid for the work that they do. They recognize that they are providing a critical service, that other people do not want to do, but they feel when paid by the municipality, they are not paid fairly. Furthermore, in many locations there was a low demand for pit/tank-emptying services. This places a direct limit the available income that sanitation workers can earn.

Despite some positive changes, economic challenges are still a daily reality for most sanitation workers, who express frustration over their stagnant wages, lack of proper housing, and limited opportunities for better jobs.

“We head out early in the morning before most people even wake up. But what do we get in return? Our families ask us this question too. We can’t even afford a decent breakfast with what we earn. Our salary is only 2,600 taka per month and never increases.”

3. Increased access to PPE, but challenges for utilization remain

Many photos pictured sanitation workers wearing new PPE, or receiving PPE. They spoke of how grateful they were for the dignity that it gave. But many other photos of workers in the middle of jobs showed that PPE is not used consistently in the field. Workers’ commentaries highlighted the heat, humidity, design and suitability of the PPE provided as contributing factors to why it is not used consistently.

4. The importance of local government leadership

Sanitation workers depend on the decisions made by, and leadership of local municipalities and city-corporations. Even in locations where Practical Action was offering the same supports and investments, the outcomes for sanitation workers depended on the leadership of local municipalities.

Some local leaders were supportive of empowering and supporting local sanitation workers, and there were strong trusting relationships between workers and the municipalities. In these locations sanitation workers highlighted the support and celebrated their relationships.

In other locations local sanitation workers felt unseen, unheard and uncared for by the municipality. In some locations, municipality restricted access to essential technology, providing access to technology, and therefore employment opportunities to others at the expense of the traditional Harijon sanitation workers.

“If we could operate the vacuum truck ourselves, it would be in better condition. We’d handle it with care. It was given to us in 2020, but now it just sits at the landfill, unused and neglected.”

“The Municipality doesn’t want to spend a single penny on us. We’re using the PPE provided by Practical Action, but when it breaks, there’s no system to replace it. Once it’s gone, it’s gone.”

ANALYSIS AND IMPLICATIONS

The limitations of awareness raising and training to achieve change

Advocacy and capacity building is critical for achieving positive change in the FSM service delivery sector in Bangladesh. Helping sanitation workers have the skills and competencies needed to do their jobs safely and without risk is essential. Enabling cooperatives to have representatives within local governance structures to have agency and voice is powerful. It is good and important that workers continue to receive business skills, OHS training, awareness of their rights and entitlements etc.

Beyond awareness raising, workers should be included in discussions and decisions about they types and styles of PPE provided in an attempt to increase the utilization of PPE in the field. Awareness alone will not make workers use PPE if it is not suitable and meeting their needs.

Additionally, in decisions like who has access to desludging vehicles, or who the municipality signs a service delivery contract with, or whether the municipality will increase workers' wages, in these and other similar decisions, the workers' ultimately have no power. They can voice their opinions – but the municipalities have no obligation to listen. There remain stark power differences between municipalities and even the most trained and aware sanitation workers.

The limitations of NGOs' role in transformative change

NGOs and development partners can play a crucial role in advocating for better sanitation services and capacity development; however, their ability to impact and achieve transformative change have limitations.

NGO led initiatives, like Practical Action's involvement in FSM service system strengthening can achieve localized successes as seen here. However, they lack the scalability and continuity needed for lasting change in complex sectors like FSM – they rely on the government to institutionalise best practices to enable scaling.

NGOs and their advocacy or capacity development activities are regularly constrained by short-term (6-12 month) timeframes. Short contract lengths limit the ability to embed changes and principles within both sanitation workers communities and municipalities: leading to insufficient local ownership. These short-term activities struggle to address deep-rooted systemic barriers, such as existing power dynamics, that hinder sanitation reform, and effective changes for workers.

NGOs can be effective in undertaking government directed advocacy given their role as external actors. However, without formal authority, they lack the power to enforce change within municipal or national governance structures. While they have made significant strides in advocating for vulnerable communities, the ability of NGOs to drive systemic change is limited without stronger support from governmental structures.

CALL TO ACTION:

A robust, inclusive, and sustainable sanitation system in Bangladesh requires urgent action and a commitment to systemic change. We call on the government, municipalities, civil society organizations, and development partners to collaborate in creating policies and frameworks that ensure the long-term effectiveness of sanitation services. This involves not only infrastructure investments but also the development of clear governance mechanisms, regular monitoring, and the establishment of accountability measures at all levels. Adequate funding and technical support must be allocated for the consistent operation and maintenance of sanitation facilities, ensuring that they remain safe, accessible, and hygienic for all, especially women, girls, and marginalized communities who often bear the brunt of inadequate services.