

# Child Rag Pickers: The Occupation, Obstructions, and its Health Risks

**Dr. Geetanjali Naik**

*Assistant Professor, PG Department of Gender Studies, Rama Devi Women's University,  
India*

Due to factors including poverty, unemployment, easy access to waste, inadequate waste management in developing nations, etc., many urban poor people pursue rag picking as a dead-end career. For a variety of reasons, young children of street sellers, rickshaw pullers, rag pickers, and other petty workers begin rag picking. Due to their young age and inexperience, child rag pickers confront greater professional problems than adult rag pickers. Material collected from roadside debris, bins, and dumpsites is sold by waste pickers to support themselves. Domestic, commercial, and industrial sources are usually the origins of this garbage. Many people have turned to rag-picking because of factors like poverty, a lack of education, skills, or expertise, as well as the fact that this line of work meets the majority of their fundamental needs. The majority of rag pickers are children who started the practice at the age of five or six. They work from dawn to dusk gathering waste such as plastic bottles, metals (tin, aluminum, iron, brass, and copper), rubber, cardboard, and other materials that can be sold to support their or their family's needs.

**Keywords:** Ragpickers, Child ragpickers, poverty, Unemployment, Rikshaw pullers, Developing Nations.

## 1. Introduction

Solid waste generated by human activities has become a significant environmental issue, resulting in widespread contamination and threatening human health(Jha et al. 2003). The individuals who dig through trash cans to extract "rags" for a living are known as rag-pickers. Rag-pickers are typically extremely impoverished, uneducated women, children, and men. However, they benefit society by eliminating a sizable amount of the garbage produced inside a community and, thus, lowering the expenses incurred by the municipal entities in charge of managing solid waste. They work in occupations that expose them to potentially dangerous bioaerosols that could spread a variety of diseases, and they live in impoverished, unsanitary urban slums. The absence of proper protective clothing, along with an abundance of insects and unpleasant aromas, make waste disposal facilities exceedingly unhygienic workplaces.

The pickers of rags Gather paper, rubber, glass bottles, plastics, and metallic and non-metallic materials from communal receptacles and places for disposal, making their operations dangerous.

Rag pickers are significant members of our society. These rag pickers used to gather the trash that we scatter over the community and send it to be recycled. We are all aware of the issues surrounding child labor, child trafficking, and child exploitation. However, we have always made an effort to save any kids who used to gather these rags from the trash. The children's work amounts to a violation of their fundamental human rights. Even if individuals were not coerced into performing such tasks, it would still be a violation of their fundamental human rights. One of the main causes of all human rights violations is poverty and ignorance. The Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986 governs child labour in India in all its forms. Here, the Act lists a number of jobs and activities that are dangerous for children under the age of 14 in Schedule Parts A and B. This covers "rag picking and scavenging" as well.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) states that rag picking is dangerous and that youngsters should not engage in excessive work hours. Despite the ILO's prohibition on such occupations, there is ample evidence of youngsters participating in rag picking in underdeveloped nations (Bhaskaran & Mehta, 2011).

According to a study by Savita G. et al. (2013), children from lower socioeconomic groups mostly work in this profession to supplement their family's income and ensure survival. These children, who range in age from 6 to 15, lack other skills and use garbage collection as a means of generating money for their families or themselves (Sisodia and Piyush, 2018).

Harvey (2003) reinterpreted Marx (1976) in his volume *The New Imperialism* by highlighting the historical continuity of the processes associated with "primitive accumulation." Harvey provided the following justification for his alternative term "accumulation by dispossession": according to Marx (1976: 875), primitive accumulation was the process of "divorcing the producer from the means of production," which served as a springboard for the entry of an existing social or feudal arrangement into a capitalist mode of production. Marx (1976: 876) specifically described this process as "expropriating the agricultural producer... from the soil." Alternatively, Harvey's theory is more flexible. Dispossession is always taking on new forms, such as "bio-piracy in yet another realm, expulsions from the land somewhere else, and privatization of services here" (Harvey 2003: 174).

Waste pickers' eviction occurs along three different axes. The first is due to the informal nature of the activity; rubbish collecting is one of many unofficial activities that urban poor people participate in as part of their ongoing struggle to make ends meet. It runs the possibility of being taken over by formal players, just as other unofficial services. Second, garbage is produced in large quantities and in a variety of forms as a result of urbanization activities. The spatial concentration of waste is the source of rubbish picking as a feasible source of income. As a result, denying people access to garbage accumulation places turns into a method of taking them away. Third, women are disproportionately involved in the process of extracting value from garbage, at least when it comes to aggregated waste. Consequently, being the main victims of dispossession in the garbage industry, female waste pickers are especially susceptible to structural changes in the waste chain (Sankar and Sahni, 2018).

Although exact numbers are difficult to ascertain, waste pickers are known to constitute a sizable and expanding population in Indian cities. Approximately 15,00,000 waste pickers work in India, according to the Alliance of Indian Waste Pickers (AIW). Citing some disaggregated figures from various periods, it was estimated that there were between 1,50,000 and 2,00,000 waste pickers in Delhi (Chaturvedi and Gidwani 2011), 30,000 in Mumbai (Medina 2008), 20,000 in Calcutta (Medina 1997), 15,000 in Bengaluru (Chengappa 2013), 35,000 in Hyderabad (Snel 1999), and approximately 3,225 scrap collector households in Pune (Chikarmane et al 2001). Waste pickers are not mentioned in contracts signed by the state and private parties, despite their quantity. As a result of the state's retreat, formal private players and unofficial garbage collectors engage in direct conflict over issues of access and entitlement to waste. The area's politics are framed by the multiple parties' unclear and disputed ownership of garbage (Cited in Sankar and Sahni, 2018).

Rag picking is the process of gathering, classifying, and reselling waste products from landfills, riverbanks, railroad lines, bus terminals, train compartments, street corners, and residential neighbourhoods. The junk merchant is not legally qualified to be referred to as the employer of the ragpickers; instead, the employer of these juvenile laborers either doesn't exist or exists only by oblivion. Another instance of guardian mode was seen in which junk dealers assisted ragpickers by setting up vehicles, giving them a place to stay, and shielding them from abusive police tactics. The junk dealers were also seen to act as custodians of the daily cash income that the child ragpickers earned, offering interest-free credit when the ragpickers needed it (Choudhary, 2003). Instead of attending school, the children who pick rags dedicate their time to gathering materials that have been discarded from the garbage. They move around due to the unbounded and unclear economic space they find; the garbage, which serves as both an economic space and a feeding ground for pigs, cows, dogs, and other insects that are not readily visible. As a result, the rag pickers compete with stray animals in the collection of materials from the garbage. In the language of civil society, the childhood of the child rag pickers is lost because they are neither in school receiving an education nor at home receiving nourishment from their parents. According to Xaxa 2012: 1, the inclusion of rag-picking children into the economy results in more negative outcomes than the state of exclusion (cited in Majumdar and Rajvansi, 2017).

#### The Interplay of Child Labour and Caste:

According to a survey by Balkumar et al. (2001), the majority of young people who collect rags are from rural areas, particularly from hill and mountain regions. Youngsters from the Dalit, Tamang, and Magar ethnic groups make up a disproportionate share of rag pickers, suggesting that these youngsters are more likely than those from other ethnic groups to engage in rag picking. Boys are more likely than girls to pick rags, and most of them live on the streets, whereas nearly all of the girls said they live in family or rented housing. The children stated that they would go to school if there were financial support, but the school dropout rate is high among rag pickers. A rag picker's age ranges from 12 to 15.

The caste system and work have always been linked in Indian society, and this is evident even in the case of the child laborers in Bihar. According to a 2018 study on the state's child labor issue, conducted in cooperation with San Diego State University in the United States and the Praxis Institute for Participatory Practices in Bihar, SC/ST children are hand-picked to work

as cobblers, barbers, and ragpickers, among other menial jobs. However, due to the notion of "purity" promoted by caste-supporting individuals, non-SC/ST children are selected to work at weddings, celebrations, and other events. The association between caste and work is unequivocally established in the study "Victims without a Voice: Measuring Worst Forms of Child Labor in the Indian State of Bihar." One can only imagine the terrible reality in the state's rural parts, as the survey was carried out in urban areas rather than in rural Bihar. Additionally, the research indicates that youngsters from SC/ST castes are more likely than those from other castes to be working illegally and in dangerous jobs. Children from marginalized backgrounds confront unfathomable levels of prejudice when forced to work in these caste-based jobs. Children from the Dom community, who customarily bury their deceased, are not permitted to work in the agricultural industry. It is an unwritten norm that children from lower-class Muslim neighborhoods, the Dom, and Valmiki can only work as pickers. Children from the Musahar community now known as Mahadalits never work as domestic assistants in homes. They conceal their caste if they ever succeed in finding employment at roadside eateries, or dhabas. The stigma arises from the non-SC employers' apparent notion that the presence of marginalized people may "contaminate" their environment (Chowdhury, 2020).

The dirtiest and riskiest duty in scrap collection is picking rags. These kinds of occupations are carried out by the offspring of Schedule Caste/Schedule Tribes/Other Backward Classes (SC/ST/OBC castes) or impoverished slum dwellers. They are gathering waste materials from trash and unclean areas of the city, including plastic, tin, iron, and bottles. Their naked feet could get hurt by the glass, metal, and iron fragments. They are operating under this model for their bread and butter. Children involved in rag picking are susceptible to several health issues, including skin conditions and tetanus. (Mirza, 2018).

The world's biggest concentration of child laborers is found in India. An estimated 11.7 million kids between the ages of 5 and 14 work, making approximately 4.5% of all kids in this age group in dangerous jobs and procedures, both as primary and secondary laborers. In many regions of the world, the children are employed in a wide range of industries, including agricultural, street children, errand-running or hawking, household work, prostitution, manufacturing, rag pickers, etc. Among all of them, child labor in the unofficial urban sector is becoming more commonplace through rag picking. The most extreme and terrible kind of child labor is rag picking. Rag-picking is the dirtiest and riskiest job in scrap collection. They gather waste materials from trash and unclean areas in urban areas, including plastic, tin, iron, and bottles (Census, 2011).

According to a study by Kamath, it is observed that child ragpickers hail from very poor socio-economic background and are basically illiterate belonging to rural immigrant families. Due to lack of income, they resort in sending their children to rag picking (KAMAT, 1999). The living and working spaces are inadequate and utterly filthy. Children work in dangerous settings that are small and dim, endangering their health. While the majority of children manage to eat two meals a day, a significant percentage of children only consume one meal per day. Their meals are almost entirely devoid of the essential vitamins A, B, and C, which growing children desperately need, and they include a shockingly low amount of protein. The first concern for children is housing. They often pay them little or nothing at first since they see them as apprentices. In 1990, an NGO named "Agape, Bangalore" did another survey

which revealed that rag pickers originate from homes that are violent and broken, possibly from second marriages in which the mother was burnt to death with kerosene and the father was requesting more money from the wife's family to support his intoxication. Unwanted children from the first marriage, beatings, malnutrition, and a lack of love and security are regular occurrences. Some are impacted by peer pressure, some are compelled to work from a very young age in order to make ends meet, and still others are orphans struggling to make ends meet on a daily basis. When boys can no longer stand the abusive and dysfunctional home environment, they flee and end up as children on the streets. In order to ensure both their own and the younger child's survival, girls are compelled to care for younger family members, even to the point of having to beg. Many of them are forced into prostitution at a very young age and are treated like slaves in the home(Bele, 2023).

#### TYPES OF RAGPICKERS :

Bele, 2023 described three categories of Ragpickers can be distinguished based on the peculiarities of their collections.

- The majority of this kind is made up of collectors who gather rags from public trash cans, piles of trash, open spaces, marketplaces, and the areas surrounding bus stops and train stations (inside not allowed). Boys or men make up the majority of this category.
- The second category of collectors consists of young women who prefer working in teams or traveling with their mothers rather than going it alone to gather rags from the street due to a persistent dread of being sexually abused by adult males and older male kid ragpickers. For the purpose of gathering waste and selling it to retailers or dealers of used items on a daily or weekly basis, they mostly rely on industrial and municipal landfills. Before selling the filthy materials for a higher price, the collectors meticulously clean them.
- The third category consists of girls or women who work as domestic helpers and gather rags from households.

#### TYPE OF MATERIAL COLLECTED BY CHILD RAG PICKERS:

The labour-intensive activity of rag picking involves child rag pickers gathering recyclable and reusable items from waste material; these items have resale and reuse value and support a significant portion of the impoverished population (Joshi & Ahmed, 2016). Municipal solid waste, hospital waste, industrial waste, and e-waste are examples of recyclable and reusable items that attract child rag pickers. When it comes to materials, plastics, and metals, such as tin, iron, aluminium, brass, and copper, are the materials that child rag pickers prefer to collect recyclables because they yield higher earnings than paper, cardboard, or clothing.

The availability of recyclable materials also incentivizes rag pickers to gather particular goods, including iron and tin, which are more readily discovered than copper, brass, and aluminium. Furthermore, rather than being collected by rag pickers, articles made of brass, copper, and aluminium are thought to be stolen goods (KC, Gurung, Adhikari, & Subedi, 2001). As a result, kid rag pickers carefully gather these items. Moreover, the material's capacity for reuse draws pickers to collect materials that are in high demand, such as pharmaceuticals discovered in waste and disposable needles and syringes. According to research, rag pickers are enticed to gather disposable needles and syringes from hospital waste because it is a common practice in Pakistan (Rauf et al., 2013). However, scavenging medical

waste is not a very viable option for rag pickers because it poses serious health risks (Patwary, O'Hare, Karim & Sarker, 2012, Cited in Bala and Singh, 2019).

#### CHARACTERISTICS OF CHILD RAGPICKERS:

- Young people who pick rags are typically from rural areas.
- Rag-picking is more common among boys than girls.
- Almost all of the girls live in rented or family houses, whereas the majority of boys live on the streets.
- A significant proportion of ragpickers drop out of school. In terms of literacy, boys outnumber girls.
- The size and makeup of families do not appear to have a direct impact on the prevalence of rag picking among kids in general (Bele, 2023).

#### PROBLEMS AND RISKS OF CHILD RAGPICKERS:

The living and working environments are extremely unclean and insufficient. Children labor in hazardous conditions in cramped, dark environments that pose serious health risks. Even while most kids manage to eat two meals a day, a sizable portion of kids only eat one meal per day. Their diet is almost devoid of the essential vitamins A, B, and C that developing youngsters sorely require, and its protein content is quite low. The most important issue facing children is shelter. They receive modest pay; in other cases, they receive no pay at all since they are viewed as apprentices. Even while most kids manage to eat two meals a day, a sizable portion of kids only eat one meal per day. Their diet is almost devoid of the essential vitamins A, B, and C that developing youngsters sorely require, and its protein content is quite low. The most important issue facing children is shelter. Since they view them as apprentices, they are often compensated at a low rate or for free at first. Children who work long hours in congested, gloomy, hazardous environments from early morning till late at night without breaks or holidays suffer negative effects on their health and development (Bele, 2023).

The materials that waste pickers gather from roadside ditches, bins, and other locations are sold to support themselves. This garbage usually originates from commercial, industrial, and residential sources. According to observers, there is a growing number of people working in Asian cities in this capacity (Hunt, 1996).

#### DIRECT ENVIRONMENTAL RISKS INCLUDE:

- Muscular and skeletal issues may arise from transporting large amounts of commodities over extended distances.
- Waste gives flies and other insects, as well as rats, the perfect environment in which to spread disease.
- On dumpsites and in certain roadside bins, fires are either lit to reduce the volume of materials or occur spontaneously because of the presence of methane and other gases. Waste pickers compete directly with dogs for the waste materials; this can occasionally result in dog bites and the associated risk of rabies. Burns and smoke inhalation are potential risks associated with them.



#### INDIRECT ENVIRONMENTAL DANGERS INCLUDE:

- Unpredictable weather during the rainy season might result in feces being washed into household garbage on the streets due to flooding. Extreme weather conditions can also cause health issues for people who pick up waste.
- The majority of waste pickers list harassment as one of the unfavourable aspects of their jobs. This takes the form of guys harassing women sexually, police pursuing them, locals bothering them, and occasionally waste pickers competing with one another for the same waste products.

#### SPECIFIC RISKS TO CHILD WORKERS:

Compared to adults, children may be more at risk for health problems related to this line of work. Children lack experience, knowledge, and judgment compared to adults. As a result, they might be more vulnerable to injuries and occupational dangers. Children might choose hazardous materials, for example, that adults would know to stay away from.

- A child's exposure to harmful compounds can be more severe. Children, for example, breathe more quickly than adults, which may make them more susceptible to airborne risks (such as chemicals released when waste materials burn). Compared to adults, children's skin is thinner, which could make them more susceptible to burns and chemical absorption. Furthermore, skeletal issues arising from lifting large loads may be more severe in children than in adults due to the softer nature of their bones.
- Children who begin working at a young age have a higher potential number of years in the field, which could raise their risk of low-level chronic exposure.
- This work may negatively impact personality development more in children than in adults. Compared to adults, children might not be as conscious of the stigma associated with the work. Additionally, because there is no option in this employment, the kids miss out on other chances like formal education (Hunt, 1996).

## 2. Conclusion:

According to the study, people frequently struggle with a lack of funds to support themselves. A sizable portion of young rag pickers do not eat twice a day. In addition to developing unhealthy habits like smoking, chewing tobacco, gutka, and pan, they are also likely to be introduced to alcohol. They are more likely to engage in antisocial behaviours including theft, gambling, and pickpocketing. However, they fear young and adult boys and the police because they have been arrested. According to child rag pickers, who are mostly females, they are afraid of drunks since their father frequently beats them at home and is himself intoxicated. Young rag pickers are terrified of strangers because they believe that they will be apprehended and taken to police stations or remand facilities. Children who engage in child rag picking suffer from a number of detrimental effects throughout their lives. They learn aggression, abuse, and maltreatment from the environment they work in, which could lead them to engage in delinquent behaviour.

## References

1. Bal Kumar KC, Yogendra Bahadur Gurung, Keshab Prasad Adhikari, Govind Subedi, (2001): Nepal Situation of Child Ragpickers: A Rapid Assessment, International Labour Organization, Geneva.
2. Bala, R. and Singh S. (2019): Working Conditions, Work Hazards and Job Satisfaction: A Study of Informal Child Rag Pickers in Patiala District, Punjab (India). *International Journal of Research in Social Sciences*. Vol. 9, Issue 1, January – 2019.
3. Bhaskaran, R., & Mehta, B. (2011). Surviving the streets a census of street children in Delhi.
4. Census Survey of India, (2011): Government of India, 2011.
5. Chaturvedi, Bharati and Vinay Gidwani (2011): "The Right to Waste," India's New Economic Policy: A Critical Analysis, Waqar Ahmed, Amitabh Kundu and Richard Peet (eds), New York and Oxon: Routledge, pp 125–53.
6. Chengappa, Chaya (2013): "Organizing Informal Waste Pickers: A Case Study of Bengaluru, India," Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing, <http://www.wiego.org/sites/default/files/resources/files/Chengappa-Organizing-Informal-Waste-Pickers-India.pdf>.
7. Chikarmane, Poornima, Medha Deshpande and Laxmi Narayan (2001): "Report of Scrap Collectors, Scrap Traders and Recycling Enterprises in Pune," International Labour Organization, <https://swachcoop.com/pdf/ILO%20Study.pdf>.
8. Choudhary, B.K. (2003): Waste and Waste-Pickers, *Economic & Political Weekly*, 5240-5242.
9. Harvey, David (1990): 2003: The New Imperialism, New York: Oxford University Press.
10. Harvey, David (2003): The New Imperialism, New York: Oxford University Press.
11. Hunt, C. (1996): Child waste pickers in India: the occupation and its health risks, *Environment and Urbanization*, Vol. 8, No. 2.
12. Jha, M.K., Sondhi, O.A.K. & Pansare, M. (2003) Solid waste management – a case study. *Indian Journal of Environmental Protection*, 23, 1153–1160.
13. Joshi, R., & Ahmed, S. (2016). Status and challenges of municipal solid waste management in India: A review. *Cogent Environmental Science*, 2(1), 1139434.
14. KC, B. K., Gurung, Y.B., Adhikari, K. P., & Subedi, G. (2001). Nepal-Situation of child ragpickers: A rapid assessment.
15. Majumdar, B. and Rajbansi, G. (2017): Migrating to Rag Picking: Unfolding some facts about child rag pickers in the city of Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh.
16. Marx, Karl (1976): Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume One, Ben Fowkes (trans), Great Britain: Penguin.
17. Medina, Martin (1997): "Informal Recycling and Collection of Solid Wastes in Developing Countries: Issues and Opportunities," Working Paper No 24, United Nations University Institute for the Advanced Study of Sustainability.
18. -(2008): "The Informal Recycling Sector in Developing Countries," Note No 44, Gridlines, October.
19. Mirza, Faheem, and Indulkar, Pranali S. (2018): Rag picking: A factory of violations and infringement of child rights. *International Journal of Applied Social Science*, Volume 5 (3&4), March & April (2018): 247-254.
20. National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector (NCEUS) (2008): Report on Conditions of Work and Promotion of Livelihoods in the Unorganised Sector, Academic Foundation, Government of India, New Delhi.
21. Patwary, M. A., O'Hare, W. T., Karim, S. A., & Sarker, M. H. (2012). The motivations of young people moving into medical waste scavenging as a street career. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 15(5), 591–604.
22. Rauf, M. U. A., Saleem, M. D., Anwer, M. O., Ahmed, G., Aziz, S., & Memon, M. A. (2013). HIV, hepatitis B and hepatitis C in garbage scavengers of Karachi. *The Journal of the Pakistan Medical Association*, 63(6), 798-802.
23. Shankar, V.K and Sahni, R. (2018): Waste Pickers and the 'Right to Waste' in an Indian City, *Economic and Political Weekly*, December 8, 2018 vol III no 48.
24. Sisodia, V and Piyush (2018): Saga of child rag pickers obstructions and constraints, *International Journal of Applied Research*, 4 (12): 173-179.
25. Snel, Marielle (1999): "Social Stigmas and the Waste Collection Scheme," paper presented at the 25th WEDC Conference on Integrated Development for Water Supply and Sanitation, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, <https://wedc-knowledge.lboro.ac.uk/resources/conference/25/350.pdf>.