



## INFORMAL WASTE PICKERS - GS III MAINS

**Q.** Analyse the key issues faced by waste pickers in India and discuss the measures needed to uplift their socio-economic conditions as well as integrate them into a sustainable and inclusive waste management system. (15 marks, 250 words)

**News:** *Understanding the world of the informal waste picker*

### What's in the news?

- On **March 1, International Waste Pickers Day**, waste pickers across the world will pay homage to fellow pickers who were murdered in Colombia in 1992.
- The world of the informal waste picker — who is an often-forgotten, hyper-marginalised worker cohort in the waste value chain ecosystem and an indispensable but invisible part of waste management systems in India — needs to be understood.

### Key takeaways:

- Despite their key role in the waste value chain ecosystem, waste pickers face systemic marginalisation, severe health hazards and exclusion from legal protection.

### Informal Waste Management Sector:

- As per The International Labour Organization, they are individuals or small and micro-enterprises that intervene in waste management without being registered. They are not formally charged for providing waste management services.

### Stats of Informal Waste Pickers:

#### Indian Context:

- There are no reliable estimates of informal waste pickers in India.
- However, as per the Periodic Labour Force Survey 2017-18, India has nearly 1.5 million waste pickers in its urban workforce.
- The workforce usually consists of women, children and the elderly, who are often disabled, are the poorest of the urban poor, and face violence and sexual harassment.

#### Global Context:

- Globally, this sector employs about 0.5%–2% of the urban population.

### Significance of Waste Pickers:

- They form the **base of a pyramid** that includes scrap dealers, aggregators and re-processors which has helped large producers to internalise the plastic waste management costs.



- By diverting waste towards **recycling and reuse**, waste pickers also subsidise local governments responsible for solid waste management.
- They reduce the amount of waste accumulating in cities, water bodies and dumpsites
- The SBM Plastic Waste Book attributes India's high recycling rate to this informal sector.

## Challenges Faced by Informal Waste Pickers in India:

### 1. Socio-economic Issues:

- Waste pickers often live below the poverty line and lack access to basic social security schemes and legal protections.

### 2. Caste Hierarchies:

- Informal waste picking sector in India has faced historical and ongoing issues related to caste. With lower caste being mostly associated with waste picking.

### 3. Low and Unstable Income:

- The income generated from collecting and selling recyclable materials is often low and fluctuates based on market variations.

### 4. Lack of Social Security:

- They are often excluded from social security benefits like healthcare, pensions, and unemployment insurance.

### 5. Exploitation and Discrimination:

- Informal waste pickers, particularly women and children, can be vulnerable to exploitation by middlemen and face discrimination and social stigma.

### 6. Health Hazards and Vulnerabilities:

- Waste pickers operate without adequate safety equipment, exposing themselves to various health risks, including dermatological and respiratory issues.
- The physically demanding nature of waste picking, coupled with the absence of protective gear, increases the likelihood of injuries and long-term health implications.

### 7. Irregular Work Hours:

- An individual waste picker collects between 60 kg to 90kg of waste a day in an eight to 10hour span of time.

### 8. Marginalization in the Private Sector Paradigm:

- Private sector participation in municipal solid waste management often prioritizes cost efficiency and mechanization over the welfare of waste pickers.
- Private actors preference for expensive machinery and competitive rates marginalizes informal waste pickers, pushing them into hazardous scavenging activities, such as rummaging through dumpsites.
- The Alliance of Indian Waste Pickers (AIW) 2023 report underscores how private sector involvement exacerbates waste pickers vulnerability and diminishes their rights over waste picking activities.

### 9. Lack of Data:

- There is no reliable data on exact participation of informal waste pickers in India's workforce.
- This prevents their integration into the formal economy.



## 10. Lack of Recognition:

- They are not recognized and acknowledged by society for their work.
- Although, they play an important role in sustainable urban waste management.

## 11. Extended Producer Responsibility:

- According to report of Women in Informal Employment - Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO), it redirects waste away from the informal sector. This leads to large-scale unemployment of informal waste pickers.

## WAY FORWARD:

### 1. Plastic Treaty:

- This is a UN endorsed resolution to end plastic pollution.
- However, it must ensure that employment of informal waste pickers is not endangered.

### 2. Reforms in EPR (Extended Producer Responsibility):

- EPR guidelines should prioritize the welfare of informal waste pickers.
- This will be a win-win situation as waste pickers possess traditional knowledge around handling waste and this knowledge can be utilized to strengthen EPR.

### 3. Improved Working Conditions:

- Providing access to protective gear, sanitation facilities, and healthcare services.

### 4. Formalization and Social Security:

- Integrating informal waste pickers into the formal waste management system and providing them with social security benefits.

### 5. Skilling and Capacity Building:

- Equipping them with skills and knowledge to enhance their income generation and work safety.

### 6. Recognition and Inclusion:

- Recognizing their role in waste management and involving them in policy decisions.

There is urgent need for policy reforms and social inclusion to uplift informal waste pickers and enhance waste management systems. Recognizing the invaluable role of waste pickers is essential for effective waste management. Revising EPR norms and ensuring the inclusion of waste pickers in legal frameworks is critical for a just transition in waste management.