

HEALTH PROBLEMS OF SCAVENGERS: THE CASE OF KATHMANDU METROPOLITN CITY, NEPAL

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Abstract

Present paper examines health problems of scavengers. The Study concentrates on the group of people who normally carry out activities such as collection and selling waste paper, dirty plastic, iron, scrap metal and other materials of dumping site. Findings are based on the survey of 40 scavengers of Teku dumping site, Kathmandu. The study indicates that the occupation seems highly risky and most vulnerable for their health.

Key Words: Health problems, poverty, livelihood, scavenger.

Introduction

Geography meant different things to different people at different times and in different places (Livingston, 1992). In the focus of geography is to discuss place, people and their relationship with environment. This relationship also determines the way of living of human beings. All human beings do not adopt the same ways of living. This depends upon space and social group. Different theories and approaches have been developed to address this relationship. Sustainable livelihood approach is also a recently emerged approach to address the sustainability aspect of people's way of living (DFID, 2002).

The person whose livelihood runs through collection of recyclable materials from the waste is known as 'scavenger'. Poor and socially disadvantaged individuals primarily carry out scavenging in Kathmandu valley. Poor flocking from remote Nepali villages and from some of the Indian States are currently working as scavengers in Kathmandu. The scavengers are chronic urban poor not only in terms of economy, but also in terms of service accessibility, health and social status. Many entered city in search of better income opportunities but being unskilled were forced to work in wage labor. Therefore whenever they do not find wage labor, out of desperation they rely upon scavenging for survival. Thus, scavenging is the last resort for these desperate people (Pandey, 2004).

The scavengers of Teku in Kathmandu prohibit new scavengers from entering the waste transfer depot. Because of large number, each scavenger

will have smaller quantity of materials recovered from the waste. Secondly, if any of KMC's equipments are stored and missing, the existing scavengers of Teku are likely to be blamed. Therefore, to block unknown scavengers entering Teku depot, scavengers of Teku have a unity group.

The scavengers of Kathmandu carry large plastic sack, and use bare hands and sometimes an iron hook to rummage materials through garbage. They put recyclable materials inside that sack and carry on their back. When sack becomes either full or heavy to carry, most of them go to wholesale buyers. There, scavengers on the supervision of wholesale buyers sort collected material. Sometimes they can sell without separating (Pandey, 2004).

Method and Materials

The paper is based on the information collected from the field survey. Questionnaires, field observation and interview with key informants were the techniques used to obtain data and information. The primary information is complemented by literature reviews and other existing sources of secondary information.

Observation was employed during the fieldwork to collect primary data. During the observation of dumping site, the researcher was surprised to see scavenger's dirty and unhygienic job. The researcher observed housing, fooding water supply and their working methods on the dumping site.

Questionnaires included questions related to their health problems. Information on variables such as caste, age, sex, education, health, income, and occupational history are also gathered. Both open-ended and closed questionnaire are included.

In this study, in-depth interview was undertaken with 40 respondents from study area (Teku) and recorded the information obtained during the survey period. Key informant interview was used as a major means of collecting relevant information regarding the scavengers and their job. The researcher selected 40 scavengers from Teku by using random sampling.

Health Problems

Health is a state of complete physical mental and social wellbeing. Health determines physical and mental fitness and enables functioning effectively for the good of the society.

scavengers take bath once a week. Only 15 percent take bath and wash their cloths once 3 to 4 days. More importantly none of them reported to take a bath daily or even once in two days. Scavengers do not change their regular dress for half a month or so. Some of them wear same dress even for months. A significant proportion of scavengers reported lack of water as major cause of bad personal hygiene. Most of scavengers used stream water for bathing and washing, and some times even for cooking and drinking.

Majority of scavengers reported that they use piped water for their daily consumption. Fifty-five percent of those were using piped water supplied by KMC for drinking. The supply hours were limited. Similarly, 45 percent were using underground water through well (table 2).

Limited availability of water directly affects washing bathing, washing foods, cooking and

Table 1: Distribution of Scavengers by Their Frequency of Bathing and Washing Cloths

Frequency	No. of respondents	Percentage
Once in 3 to 4 days	6	15
Once a week	18	45
Once in two weeks	16	40
Total	40	100

Source: Field Survey, 2005.

Therefore health is some one's physical and mental situation that can be

transformed into economy and welfare (Gatrell 2002). This paper deals with health problems of scavengers. Waste piled up for collection, waste dispersed by rodents and insects, seepage of waste into water supply system and unsanitary dumping sites have direct effect on public health of Third Word cities (Hardy et al., 2001).

Table 1 shows that 40 percent scavenger take bath only once in two week. Similarly 45 percent

washing dishes and utensils used in cooking. However water scarcity is a serious problem of Kathmandu, not only for scavengers but all urbanities. The scavengers who are living in slum areas use underground water or water from stream. According to scavengers, sometimes they use stream water for cooking. Drinking water collected from such source is of very low quality.

Table 3 shows that, 85 percent of scavengers do not use brush. Similarly, forty percent scavengers use soap only for bathing and washing their dirty clothes. Some of them do not use any

Table 2: Source of Drinking Water for s Scavengers

Source of Drinking Water	No. of Respondent	Percent
Piped water	22	55
Well	18	45
Total	40	100

Source: Field Survey, 2005.

Table 3: Use of Sanitary items for bathing and Washing Cloths

Types of Materials	No. of Respondent	Percent
Soap, surf	15	37.5
Soap, surf, brush shampoo,	6	15
Soap Only	16	40
Water only	3	7.5
Total	40	100

Source: Field Survey, 2005.

sanitary items like, soap, surf, and brush. About 15 percent scavengers used soap, surf, shampoo and brush.

Falling sick was another phenomena among scavengers. Most of them were not aware of the health risks associated with the nature of their work and were generally uneducated about health. Specifically, as based on the survey about 40 percent scavengers reported that, they were suffering from multiple illnesses. Near 43

work, nearly 90 percent of scavengers reported to have been recently affected by injuries like skin scratch, getting wounds in legs and hands, and also suffering from bad smell, headache, worm and cold. In such situation, curative measures are not sufficient due to poverty and unhygienic conditions.

Table 5 shows that nearly 78 percent scavengers reported to be affected by bad smell of waste. Seventy percent scavengers were having

Table 4: Health Status of Scavengers

Status	No. of Scavengers Affected	Percentage
No complain	4	10
Suffering from illness	17	42.5
Suffering from multiple illness	19	47.5
Total	40	100

Source: Field Survey, 2005.

percent were sufferings from illness. Ten percent of scavengers were not complaining (Table 4). During the field survey they were asked about why they were suffering from various diseases. They answered *Phohor tipera khainchha* (we live eating waste). Overall, the health condition of scavenger is poor.

Health Hazards

The survey showed that a large percent of the scavengers experienced sickness as a result of this occupation. Physical injuries of scavengers such as wounds and cuts inflicted by glass or metal pieces were very common. During their

wounds in their hands because they did not wear gloves while working in the waste. Similarly, 60 percent scavengers reported to suffer from cuts and wounds in their leg during the time of work in the waste disposal area.

Cleanliness Of Scavengers

The study indicates that the scavengers mostly lived in slums and some of them slept on the open place that was full of dirty and smells. This happened because many of them did not have rented room to spend the night. They had no provisions for washing or storing their clean cloths and soap. When they lived in such

Table 5: Health Hazards of Scavenger

Hazards	No. Of Respondents affected	Percentage
Getting wounds on legs	24	60
Getting wounds on hands	28	70
Bad Smell	31	77.5

Source: Field Survey, 2005.

extreme destitute, they could not maintain personal hygiene and keep themselves clean.

Awareness about personal hygiene can be considered relatively high which can be seen from Table 6. Sixty-five percent claimed that they washed their hands and feet with soap and only 35 percent stated that they did not wash their hand and feet with soap. This latter case may be

taking bath and washing cloths are about 67 and 60 percent respectively. Similarly, 17 percent respondents took bath within two weeks and 25 percent washed cloths in 15 days only. Some of the respondents took bath and washed clothes within a month. This proportion was 8 and 5 respectively. Likewise majority of respondents cut their nail and hair in month time. Although some of the respondents informed better personal hygiene, during, field works, they did

Table 6: Personal Cleanliness of Scavengers

Cleanliness Habit	No. of Scavengers	Percentage
Washing hands and legs with soap	26	65
Washing hands and legs without soap.	14	35
Total	40	100

Source: Field Survey, 2005.

because of both lack of money and lack of awareness

Table 7 shows that majority of respondents took bath and washes cloths once a week. For example, among scavengers the proportion

not practice what they said.

During field survey many suggestions were given to improve the overall work - environment of the scavengers. While some stressed on the provision of training and education others

Table 7: Personal Hygiene of Scavengers

Time Interval	Taking bath		Washing cloths		Nail cut		Getting Hair cut	
	No.	Per.	No.	Per.	No.	Per.	No.	Per.
One week	27	67	24	60	5	12.5	-	-
Two week	7	17	10	25	5	12.5	-	-
Three week	2	5	3	7.5	4	10	-	-
One month	1	2.5	1	2.5	8	20	22	55
No fixed time	3	7.5	2	5	18	45	18	45
Total	40	100	40	100	40	100	40	100

Source: Field Survey, 2005

Table 8: Suggestion of the Need of Scavengers to improve their overall work-Environment

Perception	No. of respondent	Percentage
Provision of regular health check	10	25
Provision of Training/Education	9	22.5
Provision of safe water supply	6	15
Restriction of hiring outsider	5	12.5
Formulation and implementation of safety rules and regulation	3	7.5
Provision of shoes and gloves	3	7.5
Do not know	4	10
Total	40	100

Source: Field Survey, 2005

stressed on provision of frequent health check (Table 8). One - fourths especially emphasized on formation of regular health check-up whereas about 23 percent wanted provision of education and training. Similarly, some were concerned with restriction on entry of outsiders.

Conclusion

Scavenging is one of the worst fields of work, where people are involved at work to kill their hunger. Commonly known, it is the most unhygienic and dangerous for their physical growth and development or risk of health. In the whole cycle of SWMP from waste generation to collection -transport, dump to recycling or composting, both occupational groups and

urban dwellers were suffering from varieties of health risk in Kathmandu. These poor waste pickers have high health risk while collecting recyclable materials but are paid low. On the contrary, wholesale buyers and recycle Thecompanies are making large profits with less risk but are neglecting the health of the scavengers completely.

scavengers are homeless, jobless as well as landless urban poor, living in urban slums near dumping sites. Their work is risky and marginal. Scavenging is struggle for the survival of urban poor groups. Significant proportions of scavengers are experiencing health problems.

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