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5. The Treatment Seeking Behaviour and Health Status of Waste Pickers in the Municipal Dump Yard in Siliguri Municipal Corporation, Darjeeling District, West Bengal

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Abstract

Background: In India about 55 million tons of municipal waste is generated every year. Municipal solid waste is residential and commercial waste generated in municipal or notified areas. People who make a living by collecting recyclable waste and selling them are called waste pickers. In India the estimated number of waste pickers is 1.5 million. Waste pickers have several health problems due to unprotected handling of wastes and are often subjected to harassments due to which they suffer low self esteem. **Methods:** A descriptive cross sectional study was conducted in a dump yard in Siliguri municipal corporation. A total of 145 respondents were interviewed in the dump yard using a structured questionnaire collecting details on demographic profile, physical health problems, mental health problems and treatment seeking behaviour. **Results and analysis:** Analysis showed that 91.7% reported physical health problems. Minor psychiatric disorder comprised of 56.6%. The respondents who were older were more likely to report physical health problems. Men were more likely than women to suffer from body aches as well as injuries. Injuries were more common among men and those who were unmarried/single. Those who had mental health problems also reported physical health problems. Among the respondents who reported physical health problems 71.7% sought treatment. Only 70.3% of the respondents used any form of protective gear. **Conclusion:** Significant proportion of waste pickers working in dump yard in Siliguri municipal corporation had physical health and mental health problems. The waste pickers were aware of the protection needed but lacked resources for it.

Key words: Waste pickers, Dump yard, Physical health problems, Minor Psychiatric Disorder, Treatment seeking behaviour.

pickers in the dump yard i.e. respondents who are young tend to spend more hours in the dump yard. Females had higher odds of developing body ache compared to males which could be due to the physical stress females undergo as they not only work at their work area for the study has garbage piled up in the form of tall hillocks. The waste picker has to climb all the way up the pile of garbage to collect waste and climb down with the pile of bags hence carrying of heavy weights could also be a reason for females showing higher odds of developing body ache as many women have lesser physical strength. Association of gender and injuries which showed males had higher odds of getting injured when compared to females; this could be because males engage themselves or are more willing to take risk when compared to females. Respondents with mental health problems were more likely to report physical health problems; this could be psychosomatic which means a physical disease that is thought to be caused by emotional or mental factors. This has to be interpreted along with the presence of mental illness in this population. There were several vector breeding sites in the dump yard, but no comments regarding vector borne disease could be made as the data regarding was not collected. The child labour act in India defines child as below four-teen years of age. During the course of data collection in this study a child aged 12 was noted picking waste in the dump yard, it is not appropriate to state that there were not many child waste pickers or child labourers in the area of study because during the time of study though there was only 1 child aged below fourteen, there were waste pickers who were aged below 25 working for the past 10-15 years indicating they were below the age fourteen when they joined this profession. Use of protective gear by waste pickers were 70.3%, though the numbers seem good the gears they use cannot exactly be called protective gear; as the gears were usually picked up from the garbage pile. Low usage of face masks could explain the significant proportion of respiratory problems and use of gloves picked up from the pile of garbage which results in poor hygienic conditions of the hands could possibly explain gastro intestinal problem and skin problems. The waste pickers were aware about the need of protective gear during work but did not have the appropriate resources. Results of this study cannot be generalized as this was conducted only in one dump yard, the sample size was low and a convenient sampling was done. One of the main limitations of the study was that medical examination was not done to diagnose physical health problem. Respondents of required sample size were difficult to obtain due to summer season (lean period for waste picking) and lack of permission to enter the yard. Further research should emphasis on mental health problems among waste pickers in India.