

World at Work: Indian Women Ragpickers

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Abstract: Background: Society, as a whole, regards rag pickers as antisocial elements, an embarrassment to the community, and unfits to live. However, their useful contribution to society and ecology is little understood and generally ignored. The waste collected by these women is recycled and produces 25% of the paper, the packing materials, egg trays, plastic and metal household items, etc., used in homes. This benefits the society and world-ecology enormously by the production of cheaper household goods, and the slowing down of the destruction of the already threatened forests

Objectives: To study the socio-economic condition of women rag pickers in the present-day scenario. To understand the health problems of women rag pickers. To examine the earning, spending and debt patterns of women rag pickers.

Methods: The present study is based on primary and secondary data. The primary data have been collected from three towns of Warangal, Karimnagar and Khammam of Telangana State, India and the sample of the study comprised of 100 rag pickers and selected purposively by using a snowball sampling technique.

Results: Majority of women rag pickers age group 21-30 years, 80 per cent are married, 74 per cent of illiterates, 50 per cent of scheduled caste, 87 per cent belong to the nucleus family, their family size is 5-7 members and 83 per cent staying at small huts. Nearly 68 per cent of women rag pickers income is below Rs. 11,000/ per annum. Eighty per cent are in debt. Fifty-two per cent has drawn loan from moneylenders, the purpose of the debt on medical expenses, 90 per cent means of transportation for collecting garbages on foot. Majority of women rag pickers opinion that they do not continue this job for a long period, 85 per cent are facing health problems and 94 per cent also opinion that rag-picking is not an appreciated job. Most of the hazardous content was quite high in developing countries since the regulatory and enforcement system to control such waste disposal is usually not in operating.

Key Words: Women, rag pickers, poverty, health problems, India.

1. INTRODUCTION:

The rag pickers often collect rags from the garbage bins or in the dumping ground. Most of the fly fields for children are coming now the dumping grounds. Children are facing the risk to come upon needles, syringes, used condoms, saline bottles, soiled gloves and other hospital wastes as well as ample of plastic and iron items. Rag pickers suffer from many diseases, such as respiratory problems, worms, anaemia, fever and other problems which include cuts, rashes, and dog bites. On a global level, approximately two-thirds of a kilogram of waste per person per day was generated. However, the difference between high and low-income countries was considerable, especially in terms of composition. As economic prosperity increases, the amount of solid waste produced consists mostly of luxury waste such as paper, cardboard, plastic and heavier organic materials. On the other hand, waste densities and moisture contents are much higher in developing countries, Devi (2014).

The World Bank estimates that our global waste production will be rose by 70 per cent by 2050 unless we take urgent action. Humankind currently produces two billion tonnes of waste per year, between 7.6 billion people. Population increase may be part of the problem. However, it is levels of consumption within a handful of developed nations, and their gross mismanagement of waste that have led to this environmental catastrophe. The United States is the biggest generator of waste per capita worldwide, with each citizen producing an average of 808 kilograms per year almost a tonne and more than doubles that of citizens of Japan, WB(2018).

Marine litter/debris is solid waste that enters the waterways either directly through dumping or indirectly by beings washed out into streams, rivers, and seas. It is created by humans and discharged into coastal or marine environments, resulting from activities on land or at sea. A significant source of marine debris and waste can be attributed to land-based pollution, which includes pollution from municipal solid waste. The debris items can broadly be divided into macro-debris (>20 mm diameter), meso-debris (5–20 mm) and micro-debris (<5 mm). Plastic is a significant source of this pollution, at least 8 million tons of plastic leaks into the oceans every year. There is over 150

million tons of plastic waste in the oceans today, and without significant intervention, there could be more plastic than fish in the seas, by weight, by 2050. Other persistent materials discarded into the sea include metal, lumber, glass, rubber, styrofoam, cloth, foam rubber, etc., Mehar Kaur(2019).

Solid waste is an environmental concern throughout the world. The work of handling this waste involves various hazards and is the focus of many prevention activities. The increasing consumption of goods has generated an enormous volume of waste, raising questions about the impacts of inadequate collection and traditional waste disposal technologies on the health of workers, the public, and the environment. Recycling presents many benefits, but like any new productive enterprise, its effects on those who do the physical labour must be weighed when assessing its full societal and environmental impact, Silva (2005).

Rag picking is a rapidly increasing trend of child labour in the informal sector of urban areas. Rag picking is the severe and worst form of child labour. The most unclean, dangerous job in scrap collection is rag-picking. They collect waste materials of plastic, tin, iron and bottle from garbage and dirty places of urban area Census Lal(2019).

Women play multiple roles, of which 'work' for wages/employment / income-earning is one among the most significant ones. It not only contributes to the augmentation of the household income (which in many cases is the sole income for the household), but it also determines, in a significant way, the status of women and their well-being. For one, it also places women's health on a precarious balance Chatterjee, (1990). Studies have observed that women's general health and well-being is often not a high priority for the family. This also pertains to women's own perceived need for health which is generally below the actual need. The vast majority of Indian women who work in the informal sector face several health problems emanating from the workplace and their domestic situation. They are engaged in monotonous, repetitive, backbreaking tasks, either as casual workers in the public sphere or as home-based producers in the private sphere. Ninety-six per cent of the women workers are in the informal sector. Their work is insecure, irregular and often unrecognized. They balance children, home and work, and more often than not, their income is not commensurate with their work Lakshmi(1998), Ela,(1995).

The two segments, which can be easily seen, are organized and unorganized or formal and informal sector. It is, therefore, quite relevant to examine one area which is employing poor people. We have, therefore, taken up the urban informal sector for our analysis Government of India (1988).

Urbanization in developing countries has been accompanied by many glaring manifestations of poverty. Notable among them is rag picking activities in the urban informal sector—the estimates of the size and gender dimension of the informal sector in India. Two hundred fifty-two million male and 118 million women were engaged in informal work in India, including agriculture. 95.9 per cent of all female workers are in informal employment. About 22 million female non-agricultural workers were engaged in the informal sector, accounting for 85.6 per cent of the total female workers. Home-based workers are an overwhelming 57 per cent amongst women. The contribution of women to the GDP in the unorganized sector works out to 32 per cent, including agriculture. The paper also explores the relationship between gender, informality and poverty Ray(2004) empirically.

Rag picking means a person(s) who picks rag is called as rag pickers. Rag means a piece of old, often torn materials like scraped metals, paper plastics, glass bottles, plastic bottles, medical used plastic injection and garbages etc.; Rag pickers collect these materials and sale to local dealers, they get some money. Therefore, rag picking becomes an occupation of the poor, unemployed, neglected downtrodden people choose this occupation. As a result rag picking is an essential occupation in urban informal sector Lal (2019).

A rag picker is not a beggar. He works hard and considers rag picking as a source of livelihood and a profession of his choice. It enables him to earn money and gives him ample amount of free time. The rag picker feels proud and considers that he is master of his own life. Rag pickers socialize among themselves, share food, money, problems and love with children of their age group, Lal(2006).

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

The researcher Lal(2006), find out that amongst various causes of child labour, unemployment, poverty and indebtedness of the households are the most important. Many parents secure advances from the landlords or the employers and repay the loans in terms of their child labour. In some cases, the children are compelled to migrate temporarily to the nearest cities or the urban areas of adjoining states to earn the necessary subsistence.

The acute diarrhoeal problem was basically due to the reduced environmental hygiene, lack of safe drinking water, improper disposal of human excreta which was further aggravated by low literacy, low socio-economic status coupled with blind cultural belief, lack of access to medical facilities leading to serious public health problem encouraging the faecal-oral transmission of enteric pathogens, it was observed that majority of child rag pickers suffered from acute diarrhoea, Lal(2011).

Health care and health practice behaviour are still rudimentary in these areas. They still follow their own traditional beliefs, customs and practices depending on unqualified Para-Medical and Quacks. Health services

availability is dismal though there are Primary Health Centers (PHCs) and sub-centres, because of lack of specialists, the unwillingness of the doctors to work in these remote areas. In the case of thandas, the availability of these services is very poor Lal(2015).

Debt Trap: Nearly 72 per cent of Banjaras who are living in rural areas and practicing / working in agriculture as small farmers or as coolies are in high debt traps. Non-beneficial cultivation led them into debt traps. Low level of productivity and high level of inputs cost and lack of institutional credit facilities push them into Poverty Lal(2015).

Inadequate sanitation, poor hygiene and lack of safe water supply result not only in more sickness and death but also in higher health costs, lower worker productivity, lower school enrollment and retention rates of girls and perhaps most importantly the denial of the rights of all people to live in dignity Lal(2013).

"A review study on the impact of hand-washing with soap, concerning the risk of diarrhoeal diseases showed that washing hands with soap could reduce the risk of diarrhoeal diseases by 42 to 47%." Lal(2013).

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

- To study the socio-economic condition of women rag pickers in the present-day scenario.
- To understand the health problems of women rag pickers.
- To examine the earning, spending and debt patterns of women rag pickers.

4. RESEARCH METHODS:

The present study was conducted to understand the working, living and health condition of women rag pickers working in various areas of North Telangana. The sample of the study comprised of 100 rag pickers below the 40 years of age selected purposively by using a snowball sampling technique. These women rag pickers were chosen from various parts of the towns of Warangal, Karimnagar and Khammam of Telangana State, India. The researcher has taken care of the fact that selected rag pickers must have sufficient exposure to the rag picking and its related issues and problems.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION:

5.1 Women Focus

Firstly, women constitute one –half of the segment of the population in India. They cannot be kept out of the mainstream of development. Secondly, women are vital and productive workers in India's national economy. They make one-third of the labour force. Thirdly, enhancing women's economic productivity is an essential strategy for improving the welfare of 60 million Indian households below the poverty line. Fourthly, there is a significant gap between women's, especially rural women's potential and actual productivity. The productivity gap of poor women is much broader than that of poor men. Fifthly, studies have shown that Indian women contribute a much larger share of their earning to essential family maintenance than men. Improving women's productivity income and quality of life, therefore, implies a multi-dimensional contribution to overall growth and development Srilatha (1984).

5.2 Rag pickers' Work

The work process of rag pickers can be found out in three phases: collection, separation, and sale of materials. 98% of rag-picking consists primarily of plastics, glass bottles, cardboard, papers, tin, iron, copper, and aluminium. These waste materials that can be found at waste dumps, street corners, or in residential areas. Separation of waste material is often performed in or just outside of the rag pickers' houses, or on abandoned land along roadways, rivers, and old industrial sites. Occasionally bicycles may be used, or the rag pickers carry their loads themselves, Lal(2019).

5.3 Demographic Particulars of Sample Households

This section provides the information of age-group, marital status, education, community-wise, family type, size of family and play of stay of women rag pickers in the study areas.

Table-1 Demographic particulars of sample respondents

Variables	Parameters	Frequency	Percentage
Age in Years	Above 15	31	31.00
	21-30	52	52.00
	31-40	17	17.00
	Total	100	100.00
Marital Status	Married	80	80.00
	Unmarried	20	20.00
	Total	100	100.00

Education Status	Illiterate	74	74.00
	Literate	26	26.00
	Total	100	100.00
Community	SCs	50	50.00
	STs	35	35.00
	BCs	15	15.00
	Total	100	100.00
Type of Family	Nuclear	87	87.00
	Joint	13	13.00
	Total	100	100.00
Size of a family (Members)	Below 4	32	32.00
	5-7	55	55.00
	Above 7	13	13.00
	Total	100	100.00
Place of Staying	As a Tenant	17	17.00
	Small hut	83	83.00
	Total	100	100.00

The Age-wise distribution of the sample respondents as shown in the table-1, reveals that majority of the respondents belong to the age of a group of 21-30 years, i.e., 52 out of the 100 accounting for 52 per cent. Further, 31 out of 100 belong to the younger age group—the age group between 31-40 years respondents 17 per cent. The figures presented in the table indicates that out of the total 100 samples of women rag pickers 80 are married and 20 are unmarried respondents. The literacy component of the sample respondents as shown in the table reveals that 74 out of 100 women sample rag pickers are illiterates, i.e., 74 per cent and 26 out of 100 samples are literates accounting for 26 per cent. The data reveals the evil effect of illiteracy. It confirms our understanding that illiteracy causes ignore. This ignorance is the mother of all evils. That is why there is more than fifty per cent of differences between the literate and illiterate women in the occupation of rag-picking.

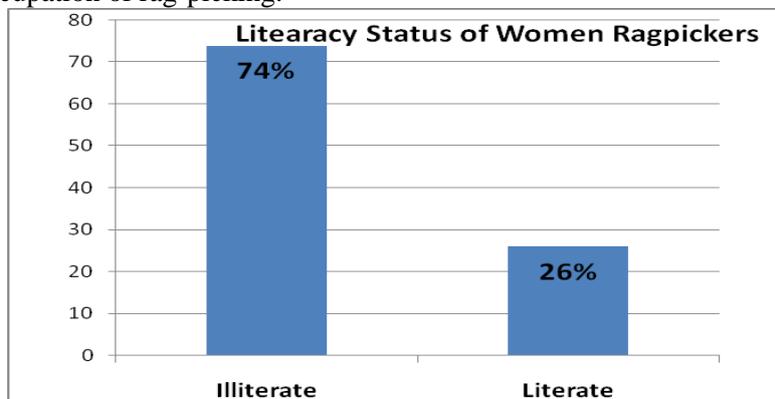


Figure 1: Literacy level of women rag pickers.

Community is said to be a unique social institution, which established its kind of working and living values among its members. Traditionally, because of this very reason, one finds socio-economic difference between one community and another community. Moreover, like other factors, in backward areas, communities still becomes an essential factor in picking up tradition/ modern values of living, adjustment. The table reveals that the distribution of respondents to rag picking turned out to a significantly different from equality. Hence there is a clear trend of significant difference in rag picking between community groups. Further, the percentage analysis of the information collected by the women respondents indicates that participation of rag picking practices has emerged in almost all classified caste-like backward caste, schedule caste and schedule tribe. However, the participation of women belonging to scheduled caste in the study area is as high as 85 per cent it indicates that the problem of scheduled castes in the study area is still weak. Similarly, the participation of women belonging to backward caste is 15 per cent.

Table-1 reveals that 87 per cent of the women belong to nuclear and 13 per cent to joint families. It indicates that family which keeps less number of helping hands is producing a higher number of children. It may be to supplement the income of the family. Under the present study, there is a domination of the nuclear family. A family which is longer in size with less income cannot lead a happy life. As a result, the members of the family have welfare and opportunities to be developed in a healthy family atmosphere. On the other side, a family, which is limited in size and is well planned, assumes all possible development opportunities to its members and helps them to protect

themselves from insecurities of life? In the area of study, the average size of the women ragpickers family was seven. However, in view of the above facts, information regarding the type of family has been drawn from the sample respondents. The family member presents that the 55 out of 100 sizes of the family members are 5 to 7, 32 per cent of the sample rag pickers family has below four members, and 13 per cent of the family has more than seven members in the family. The table presents that the majority of rag pickers are staying at a small hut, i.e., 83 per cent 17 out of 100 rag pickers are staying as a tenant.

5.4 Economic Information of Women Rag pickers

This section provides the detail account of economic information like income, expenditure on food and non-food items, debt particulars, and sources of debt and purpose of borrowing.

Table-2 Earning, spending and debt particulars of sample respondents

Variables	Parameters	Frequency	Percentage
Income Particulars (pa)	Below Rs.11,000	68	30.00
	Rs.12,000-15,000	32	68.00
	Above Rs.15,000	02	02.00
	Total	100	100.00
Expenditure on Food Items	Below 1500	59	59.00
	1500-3000	39	39.00
	Above 3000	2	02.00
	Total	100	100.00
Expenditure on Non-Food items	Below 500	88	88.00
	Above 500	12	12.00
	Total	100	100.00
Debt Particulars	Below 20,000	20	25.00
	21,000-40,000	52	65.00
	41,000-60,000	08	10.00
	Total	80	100.00
Source of Debt	Relatives	20	25.00
	Moneylender	54	67.50
	Finance	6	7.50
	Total	80	100.00
Purpose of borrowing	Health	40	50.00
	Marriage/Ceremonies	20	25.00
	Economic Aspects	20	25.00
	Total	80	100.00

The economic position of a family plays a useful and vital role in the proper welfare and development of its members. A family with better income keeps adequate resources for the proper future development of its members. The economic condition of the family to which the rag pickers belong and which is discussed in the table-2. The data presented in the table shows that 68 per cent of women rag pickers income is below rupees 11,000 pa, 30 per cent have it between rupees 12,000 to 15,000 pa. It depends on the season, some seasons they will get, and in rainy they may not. The figure presented below shows those earnings of rag pickers.

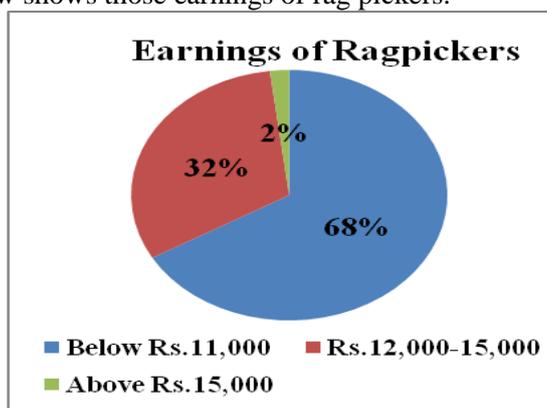


Figure 2: Earnings of women rag pickers.

The economic compulsion of the women rag pickers leads them to borrow money from one source or the other. The majority of the rag pickers who are illiterate do not understand the situation they live, nor do they feel concerned about proper planning and management of their family. Therefore, whatever money they earn during the day is spent on alcohol by their husband without thinking of insecurity of income in the next day and most of the consumption on unproductive things like celebrations (birth and death) marriages. The table-2 reveals that the majority of women rag pickers are in debt, i.e., 80 per cent while the rest of 20 per cent are not. Hence, there is a clear trend of indebtedness among rag pickers of sample respondents.

Information gathered regarding the sources of loan taken of respondents table-2 shows that more than 52 per cent of the respondents drawn loan from private sources such as moneylenders and relatives. Just 6 per cent of the respondents borrow from "Finance". Further, the table-2 reveals that the purpose of the debt like medical expenses (health treatments), the marriage of daughters, religious and cultural ceremonies and economic aspects like the construction of huts and for food items. This practice of taking loans continues unabated, which does not solve the problem of poverty.

Table-3 Transportation, health problems and diseases of sample respondents

Variables	Parameters	Frequency	Percentage
Means of Transportation	By four wheelers	10	10.00
	On foot	90	90.00
	Total	100	100.00
Duration of Rag picking No. of Years	1-5 Yrs	78	78.00
	6-10 Yrs	22	22.00
	Total	100	100.00
Problems faced by Ragpickers	Yes	94	94.00
	No	6	6.00
	Total	100	100.00
Nature of Problems	Health	85	85.00
	Police	10	10.00
	Goondas	5	5.00
	Total	100	100.00
Suffering from Diseases	Chest pain	37	30.00
	Cut injuries	100	100.00
	Eye	71	59.20
	Fever	90	75.00
	Joint pain	100	100.00
	Respiratory	81	67.00
	Skin	86	71.00

Table-3 presents that the women rag pickers were going for collection of garbages, 90 out 100 women go to on foot, i.e., 90 per cent. 10 out of 100 respondents are going by four-wheel cycle. This indicates that the majority of women sample rag pickers are collecting garbages on foot next to four-wheel cycle. As figures in the table indicates that 78 sample respondents working in the field of picking below five years and the remaining 22 sample respondents working 6 to 10 years. This shows that rag-picking is a source of livelihood and the only job they got more comfortable. 94 out of 100 samples opinion that they are faced problems while collecting garbage's and rest of 6 per cent said that "No".

The table-3 also focused that nature of health problems rag pickers was faced 85 per cent said health, 10percent said police and rest of five per cent said goondas. These anti-social elements depend on small earners because it is straightforward to threaten them.

5.5 Health Problems of Women Rag pickers

The problem of rag-picking is not an old phenomenon; it is relatively new, which is restricted to urban and industrial cities only. In fact, the recycling of the waste material has emerged due to increasing in the cost of raw materials for producing paper plastics, glass bottles etc. however, the materials which rag pickers collect include waste and unused paper, paper boxes and cartons sackings, plastic containers, bags, tins, boxes discarded utensils, glass bottles, jars, broken glasses, medical used plastic injection, medical waste like contaminated plastic bottles, screws, bandages tablet containers, from garbage, roadsides, drains, and such other places. By and large, these materials

produce chemical poison, including pesticides, skin infections, gastric infections, etc., which causes various health problems of women engaged in this occupation is given below in the figure.

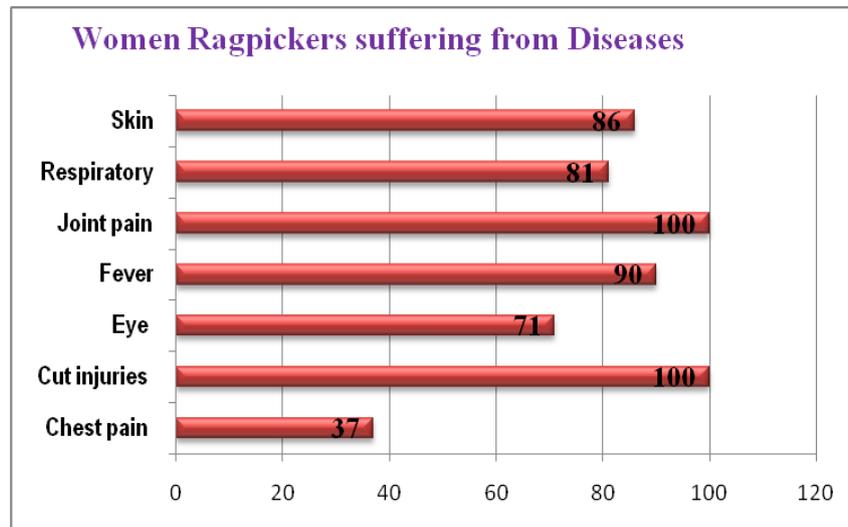


Figure 3: Suffering from Diseases of women rag pickers.

The hazards that emanate at the picking place, coupled with poor living conditions, low access to food, discriminatory treatment, multiple pregnancies and domestic violence at the household have implications on the physical and mental health of women. Hazards at the picking place include accidents, injuries, cuts, and bruises, which further lead to now healing ulcers and tetanus. Biting by dogs and other animals who feed on refuse is quite common in this occupation, and illness related to the occupation. Women rag pickers complained of pain in the abdomen, pelvic region, and waist, legs during menstruation and in the uterine region. They suffer from gynaecological problems like irregular bleeding, which include having a heavy or scanty discharge of menstrual blood; on the other hand, the husband is a boozer.

Indian household expenditure on alcohol varies between 3–45 per cent of their income. Alcohol misuse is one of the leading killers of young men in India today. But its real impact is on the social and family dynamics that underlie its communities. Domestic violence and exacerbation of poverty have made alcohol misuse the most critical problem for women in India. Most of the families have on roads because of alcohol drunken their husbands, and now they are in debt traps, Naik(2013).

The workload, both inside and outside the home and multiple pregnancies, result in anaemia and malnutrition. Personal hygiene was neglected due to scarcity of water and other facilities. Also, the majority of the women was found to be habituated to the chewing pan and roasted tobacco with calcium powder, and this has long term implications on health. Though women can access urban health centres and government hospitals, they use it less due to unsuitable timings and negative experiences. These services are used only for treating a significant injury or illness; otherwise, most women use private hospital services.

A rag picker woman is not respected by society. They work in filth, garbage bins and dumping ground from morning to evening. They have no water or other sanitary facilities on the dumping ground or in their community. They smell of dirt. Nobody from the society likes to touch them or give respect and dignity.

There are no proper facilities for electricity, water, standard toilets, Balwadis, open spaces. We have to wait until it is dark to go to the toilet. We suffer from innumerable skin diseases as well as other serious ailments. We cannot go to hospitals in the mornings, as we have to go to work. There is no OPD in the evening in the municipal hospitals. So we go to private doctors or even quacks. If we do not get proper treatment, we fall victim to black magic and blind faiths and superstitions. Inadequate sanitation, poor hygiene and lack of safe water supply result not only in more sickness and death but also in higher health costs, lower worker productivity, lower school enrollment and retention rates of girls and perhaps most importantly the denial of the rights of all people to live in dignity, Lal(2013).

5.6 Benefits to the Society

Society, as a whole, regards rag pickers as antisocial elements, an embarrassment to the community, and unfits to live. However, their useful contribution to society and ecology is little understood and generally ignored. The waste collected by these women is recycled and produces 25% of the paper, the packing materials, egg trays, plastic and metal household items, etc., used in homes. This benefits the society and world-ecology enormously by the production of cheaper household goods, and the slowing down of the destruction of the already threatened forests. It

also helps to prevent the waste materials piling up like mountains in city centres. The rag picker's valuable contribution to society should not be ignored and taken for granted Lal(2006).

6. Major Summarized Findings:

- Majority of women rag pickers age group 21-30 years, 80 per cent are married, 74 per cent of illiterates, 50 per cent of scheduled caste, 87 per cent belong to the nucleus family, their family size is 5-7 members and 83 per cent staying at small huts.
- Nearly 68 per cent of women rag pickers income is below Rs. 11,000/ per annum. Eighty per cent are in debt. Fifty-two per cent has drawn loan from moneylenders, the purpose of the debt on medical expenses, 90 per cent means of transportation for collecting garbages on foot.
- Majority of women rag pickers opinion that they do not continue this job for an extended period, 85 per cent are facing health problems and 94 per cent also opinion that rag picking is not an appreciated job.
- Field observations, personal interviews reveal that factors such as face the health problems and socio-economic conditions space to construct toilets, availability of water, lack of awareness, cultural factors and traditional practices are the significant constraints to making the behavioural change away from open defecation.
- Most of the hazardous content was quite high in developing countries since the regulatory and enforcement system to control such waste disposal is usually not in operating.

7. SUGGESTIONS:

- By providing the employment opportunities to improve the economic conditions of women, particularly poor and downtrodden women so that they cannot choose occupation like rag picking.
- Medical facilities should be provided to the women rag pickers and their family members living at the slums.
- Educational facilities should be provided to children of rag pickers. Different Government schemes can be applied to the downtrodden poor people so that they can uplift.
- Women should be provided with infrastructure facilities like a supply of water, gas stove and electricity so that need not waste time and energy for their domestic works.
- The concerned authorities should be provided minimum sanitary facilities as well as housing. As a result, sanitary related diseases can be avoided. The authorities of regulatory and enforcement should control waste disposal properly.

8. CONCLUSION:

Therefore, it is concluded that only income generate programmes/ schemes can bring a change in the socio-economic conditions and providing minimum health and sanitation facilities could curb physical abuses. The authorities concerned can provide infrastructure facilities and accessibility to use those facilities for the empowerment of women.

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