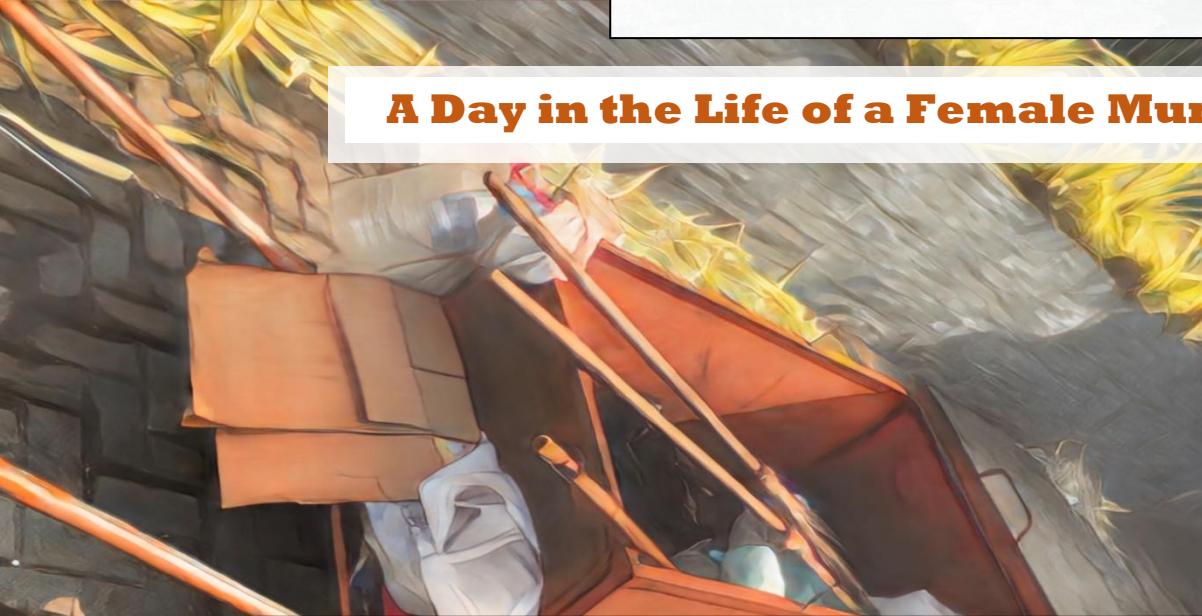


A Clean Sweep

A Day in the Life of a Female Municipal Waste Worker in Sri Lanka



An illustrated book by Yeshani Fernando, Malith De Silva & Nishara Fernando.



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ILLUSTRATED BOOK SERIES OF THE SPIRIT PROJECT ON TRANSFORMATIONS OF WASTE MANAGEMENT IN SOUTH ASIA DURING AND AFTER COVID-19

This illustrated book series publishes results of the research project “Transformation of waste management practices and policies in South Asia during and after the COVID-19 pandemic: Impacts on gender equality and sustainability” funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation under the Swiss Programme for International Research by Scientific Investigation Teams (SPIRIT). The project is carried out collaboratively by a team of researchers from the Institute of Geography and Sustainability, University of Lausanne; the School of Social Work Fribourg, University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Western Switzerland; the Federation of Sri Lankan Local Government Authorities; and the Nepal Centre for Contemporary Research. The illustrated books & working papers are openly accessible through the repository of the University of Lausanne (<https://serval.unil.ch>) and the project website <https://lifeofwaste.com>.

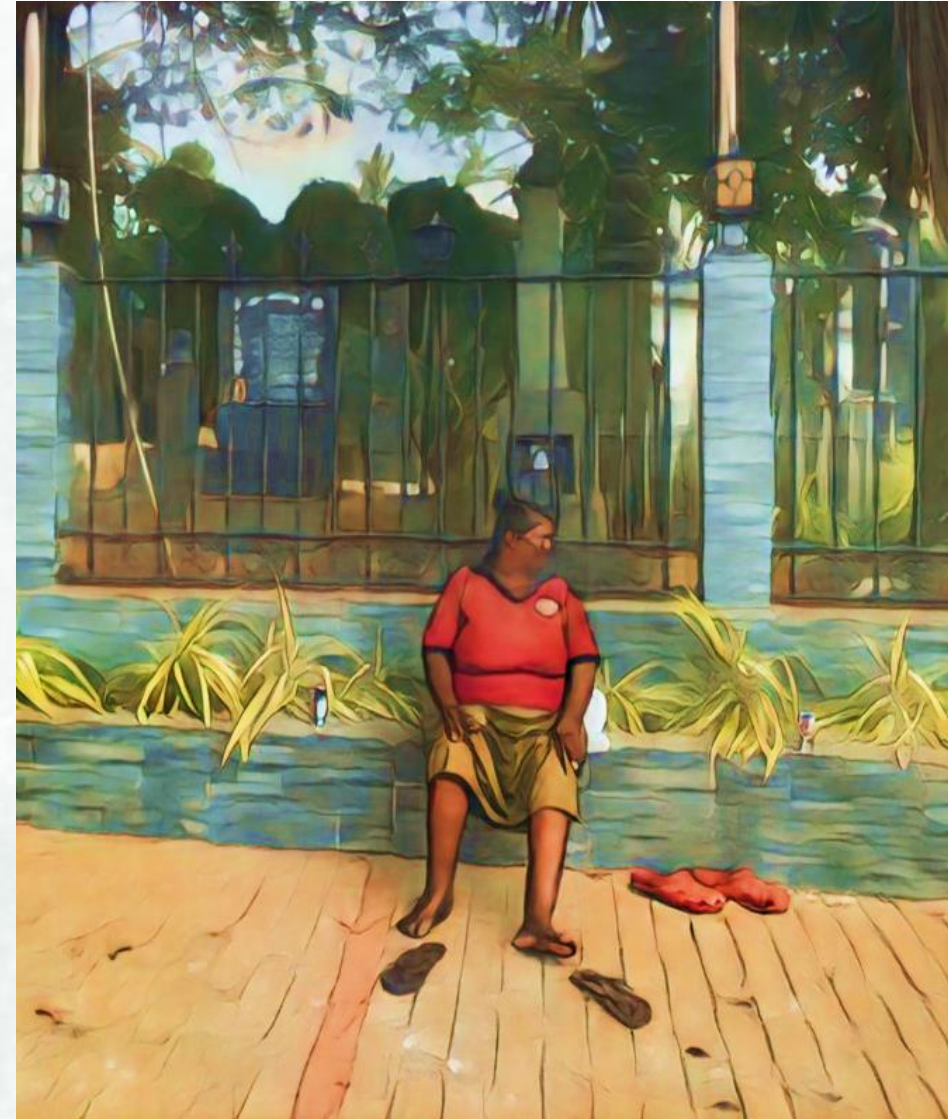
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Introduction

This book is the second issue of the illustrated book series published under the SPIRIT Project. The aim of the book is to enlighten the public and academics alike about the complex work life of a municipal waste worker in Sri Lanka.

It is based on a day in the life of a female waste worker employed in a local council of the Colombo District. We will refer to her as Malini, to hide her real name and protect her identity.

The book is based on a research activity where the researchers followed her in her workspace; the street. We observed her collection practices, interactions with residents and other waste workers, facilities available and etc. Here we share with you the work life of Malini as we saw it and as we understood it.





Malini

Malini is a 55-year-old married lady that lives with her husband, son with disabilities and two grandchildren in Colombo, Sri Lanka. She and her husband are responsible for caring and raising her son and grandchildren. Malini has worked as a formal waste collector in a local council of the Colombo district since 2004 to make ends meet. Her job role is to sweep and clean the roadside in a selected ward of the council area. Malini's makes a monthly salary of LKR 30,000.00 (nearly USD 100).

Malini suffers from diabetes and hypertension and is also overweight. As a result, she is often short of breath. During her workday, she stops at certain intervals to rest and catch her breath. Additionally, she is scheduled to undergo surgery for back pain. Malini's health conditions make it extremely difficult for her to take on work alone. So, with the permission of her work supervisor, she has recruited an 'assistant' to ease her workload. This helps her to keep her job intact.



Malini's Assistant

Malini's assistant is none other than her husband. He is an entrepreneur, operating a mobile toy shop for concert and carnival goers. During the COVID-19 pandemic, concerts and carnivals were outlawed in Sri Lanka^[1], putting a temporary stop to his main income-generating activity. Around the same time, work became too physically tiring for Malini and she contemplated retiring. Her husband, however, had a different idea; he proposed that he could accompany her as a helper.

Therefore, instead of the sole female waste worker we had planned to study, we encountered a semi-formal unit of waste workers: Malini, a female waste worker, and her husband, the unofficial and unpaid assistant.

[1] Colombo Gazette. (2020, October 6). *Public gatherings banned until further notice*. <https://colombogazette.com/2020/10/06/public-gatherings-banned-until-further-notice/>

Work Hours

The couple has also managed to negotiate flexible work hours. Since the end of the pandemic, Malani's husband has resumed running his mobile toy shop at night carnivals with Malani joining him for support.

After working at carnivals, they head directly for waste collection, arriving at the division at around 5.00 a.m. in their three-wheeler. Although they begin working at 5:30 a.m., their official shift starts at 6:30 a.m., when Malani clocks in at the waste collection office. They typically finish their tasks by 9:30 a.m., but because they need to account for 8 hours of work, they remain at the office until 2:30 p.m. In this period both of them get a much-needed nap in their three-wheeler.





The Work

The couple has a well-established system when working together. While Malini sweeps the road, her husband collects mixed waste bags, from commercial shops and households in a small waste cart. The residents and shop owners are appreciative of their service and often gift them small sums of money. These gifts have become a secondary income source for the couple.

The couple then segregate the bags of mixed waste by hand, before disposing them to the waste collection vehicles that pass by, as shown in the picture. Twice during our observations, the couple handed over the segregated waste to two such collection vehicles. First, they will dispose all the degradable waste in the designated truck. Then, they will wait for the truck collecting non-degradable waste, to dispose of the leftover polythene bags.



Lack of Facilities

We observed that Malini lacked access to basic facilities such as dedicated washroom facilities and lockers. Although not in great condition male waste collectors had lockers and used the common washroom facilities in the office space.

Malini on the other hand, shared with her husband the public restroom facilities at the nearby public cemetery and a makeshift laundry line in place of a locker. She revealed that she has been using these facilities since the waste collection centre's office was demolished for renovations in 2019. At the time of our study, the renovation work had yet to begin.

Malini's arrangements discussed above are adaptive strategies she employed to cope with the challenges she faces in the workplace.^[2]

[2] Lomnitz, L. A. (1988). Informal exchange networks in formal systems: a theoretical model. *American anthropologist*, 90(1), 42-55.

Use of Informal Arrangements

It is evident that Malini has made several informal arrangements to manage her work effectively. These include informally recruiting her husband as an assistant, volunteering to segregate waste for residents, which provides a secondary income, and using restroom facilities at a nearby cemetery.

All these efforts are aimed at making her job more manageable and ensuring she can continue working until her retirement in 2025, which is when she is able to start receiving her pension.^[3] These arrangements showcase how informal arrangements come into existence in formal environments when formal arrangements fail.

The conditions she works in, especially lack of sanitation facilities and having to wait to complete her work shift, raises questions regarding the opportunity available to her to work with dignity and in decent working conditions.^[4]



[3] Minutes on Pensions. (1972). https://www.pensions.gov.lk/images/publication/minutes_pension_English.pdf

[4] Harriss-White, B., & Rodrigo, G. (2016). Discrimination in the waste economy: narratives from the waste workers of a small town. *Journal of Social Inclusion Studies*, 2(2), 3-27.



Conclusion

Studying the life of Malini sheds light on how informal mechanisms blend within formal waste management systems. She relies on informal arrangements to manage her physically demanding job, in the face of severe health issues.

Furthermore, the lack of access to decent working conditions to engage in her employment with dignity is a key concern. Unfortunately, Malini alone can not find solutions to the challenges it creates, as addressing these challenges require institutional changes and adaptations.

Malini's story underscores the importance of calling for greater recognition and support for women in formal waste work. Building better employee safeguarding mechanisms and gender-sensitive policies in formal waste management can help improve the lives of waste workers like Malini.

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