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Josie Wittmer

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"I salute them for their hardwork and contribution": inclusive urbanism and organizing women recyclers in Ahmedabad, India

Josie Wittmer

Institute of Geography and Sustainability, University of Lausanne, Lausanne, Switzerland

ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the politics of inclusion produced in the roll-out of recent Solid Waste Management (SWM) initiatives seeking to formalize informal recycling labor in India. I contest the notion that formalization is necessarily the antidote to the precarities of informal work by taking seriously the experiences of women recyclers and organizers in responding to exclusions produced in the city of Ahmedabad's increasingly privatized solid waste landscape since the early 2000s. Drawing upon mixed qualitative methods and interviews with women recyclers and organizers, I argue that recent governance initiatives discursively aiming to "integrate" informal recyclers in SWM can paradoxically result in the material exclusion of most workers from opportunities. This paper contributes an articulation of how livelihood opportunities, organizing strategies, and citizenship experiences are always shifting and contingent in relation to local groundings of capitalist and colonial power geometries and dynamics of gendered and casted social differentiation.

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Introduction

On 11 September 2019, India's Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, tweeted a video of himself sitting with a group of women, clad in gloves and face masks, as they sort through a pile of plastic waste. The three-minute-long video features the PM talking with the women as they segregate the plastics, and he then accompanies two of the women over to a trash compactor machine. Each woman dumps their bowl of plastic into the compacter and Modi presses the button to crush the material and they watch the compactor crush the plastic. The tweet's text reads: "As we begin 'Swachhata Hi Seva' and pledge to reduce single use plastic, I sat down with those who segregate plastic waste. I salute them for their hardwork and contribution towards fulfilling Bapu's dream" (Modi, 2019).

The "hardworking" women represented in this salute are informal recyclers, also referred to as waste pickers or ragpickers. Informal recyclers are stigmatized, exploited,

CONTACT Josie Wittmer josie.wittmer@unil.ch Institute of Geography and Sustainability, University of Lausanne, Lausanne, Switzerland

and precarious urban workers who collect, segregate, and sell recyclable materials from city streets, waste bins, and dumpsites in cities around the world (Dias & Samson, 2016; Uddin et al., 2020). These workers are often poor and are situated at the bottom of local informal waste economies. They work to earn subsistence daily incomes, lack protection from occupational hazards, and take on the highest health burdens in their labor of cleaning up cities around the world (Chikarmane, 2014; Parizeau, 2015). In Ahmedabad, India, informal recycling is a feminized occupation dominated by women from Dalit communities. Here, the stigmatizations and exploitations of informal recyclers are compounded and reproduced not only because of workers' occupational affiliation with waste, but also because of the perceived ritual and embodied impurity tied to this so-called "polluting" labor and to "untouchable" bodies in public space (Kornberg, 2019; Ranganathan, 2022; Sreenath, 2019).

The Indian PM's "salute" to these workers in a staged media photoshoot leverages the image of their labor to promote his neoliberal Hindu nationalist *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP) government's aesthetic visioning of clean urban spaces. The symbol of women recyclers in this tweet serves to recruit citizens' voluntary labor in Modi's flagship national cleanliness mission, the *Swachh Bharat Abhiyan* (SBA), in announcing a nation-wide plastic recycling campaign and in-home plastic recycling practices. However, while this tweet praises Dalit women recyclers for their presumably altruistic contributions to the SBA, it paradoxically promotes the removal of plastics from the public domain, or the spaces where recyclers access materials for their livelihoods.[1] This symbolic acknowledgement thus serves as a mechanism for the material displacement of this labor, while simultaneously promoting a socially progressive image of Modi.

This paper focuses on the politics of inclusion produced in the imagining and roll-out of recent Solid Waste Management (SWM) initiatives that seek to formalize informal waste labor by integrating workers into India's municipal waste collection systems. I contest the refrain frequently promoted by state actors and international donors that formalization is necessarily the antidote to the precarities of informal work. Rather, I take seriously the experiences of women recyclers and local organizers in coping with and responding to exclusions produced in an "inclusive" moment of solid waste governance as multi-scalar initiatives appear to coalesce around notions of integrating and authorizing informal waste workers in an increasingly privatized waste landscape. I argue that recent governance initiatives discursively aiming to include informal recyclers in SWM are paradoxically resulting in the material exclusion of most workers from work opportunities. Such exclusions produced by inclusive politics are not new but are part of larger trends in the aesthetic visioning and governance of the city (Baviskar, 2020; Bhan, 2016; Ghertner, 2015); however, I suggest that solid waste is emerging as a new site for capital accumulation and as a new modality through which state and private actors may attempt to regulate control informal labor in India.

In this paper, I use a feminist anti-colonial approach to engage with the dynamic temporalities and materialities of inclusion, dispossession, coping, and organizing to consider ongoing shifts in Ahmedabad's waste landscape since the early 2000s. Through this lens, I contribute an articulation of the ways that livelihood opportunities, organizing activities, and substantive citizenship experiences are not static, but are always shifting and contingent in the context of local political-economic initiatives, historical contexts, and in relation to dynamics of social differentiation and power geometries over time.

In the following sections, I review literatures concerned with inclusive urban governance, neoliberalization, and differentiated citizenship with a focus in South Asia and describe the methods used in the study. I then detail the case of municipal privatization and organizing women recyclers in Ahmedabad and discuss women recyclers' navigations of exclusion and the limitations of seeing formalization broadly as an antidote to the precarity of informality. I conclude with some reflections on social differentiation, inclusion, and organizing, and provide some recommendations for engaging with the politics of inclusion and organizing.

Inclusive neoliberalization, differentiated citizenship, and temporalities of waste governance

In the 1990s the Supreme Court of India assembled the Asim Barman Committee to evaluate the state of SWM in India in response to growing public concern about the public health threats linked to the growing presence of garbage in cities and the lack of action from municipal governments to manage the problem. The committee's final report, released in 1999, recommended that private companies take on a major role in managing waste via Public Private Partnerships (PPPs), but that this work should be conducted in cooperation with existing informal sector actors via NGOs and cooperatives (Gidwani, 2013, 2015).

Public-Private-Partnerships (PPPs) are a popular market-based response to the challenges posed to municipalities in delivering services to citizens. The PPP model necessitates the privatization of public services, or the outsourcing of public work to for-profit firms, often on contracts (Anderson, 2011). Support for PPPs in SWM service delivery has expanded in India and the global South over the last thirty years as international institutions of development and finance (i.e. World Bank, USAID, etc.) have imposed the shifting of public services to the private sector, buttressed by the notion that market-based approaches and competition will ultimately result in more efficient services (Anderson, 2011; Gidwani, 2015; Luthra, 2019, 2020).

Although the Asim Barman Committee report's recommendation included the nuanced recommendation of including informal workers, municipal corporations have largely followed the path of technological upgrading and corporate privatization as the most efficient way to manage solid waste, only selectively including informal workers and NGOs (Gidwani, 2015). In this moment of SWM in India, one can witness an expansion of waste entrepreneurialism, the growing influence of SWM firms, and the celebration of capital-intensive technologies which increasingly mediate SWM service delivery.

Profits, efficiency, and good governance

The assumption that waste is profitable and that Euro-North American SWM systems are superior to "traditional" informal labor systems has been theorized by anti-colonial urbanists as emerging from longstanding colonial relations and the implementation of structural adjustment by international institutions since the 1990s (Arefin, 2019; Butt, 2019; Fredericks, 2018; Miraftab, 2004). Scholars and activists have documented how the privatization of municipal services in India has led to the increasingly precarious conditions of waste work (Chandran et al., 2018; Gupta, 2022; Harriss-White, 2017) and the

displacement of informal workers by emerging workforces and technologies employed through PPPs (Chintan, 2011; Reddy, 2013; Schindler et al., 2012; Wittmer, 2022). However, the PPP model retains its popularity as a best-practice approach and is even promoted by local governments and international institutions as bringing benefits to the poor because of the efficiency through which services are said to be provided by the private sector (Anderson, 2011; Gidwani, 2015). This interpretation of the inclusive benefits of efficiency is characteristic of emerging modes of "good governance" or "soft neoliberalism," where the appearance of the inclusion of disenfranchized citizens is required to legitimize austerity politics (Peck, 2010, p.xvi; Miraftab, 2009; Mohan & Stokke, 2000). "Good governance" is how women waste pickers become a symbol of a cleanliness program run by a state that perpetuates their oppression and displaces their labor through the same program. It is also how the discourse of formalizing informal labor has gained traction among state and international actors and is premised as an antidote to precarious work.

Paradoxes of inclusion and differentiated urban citizenship

Empirical studies in India demonstrate that exclusions have long been embedded in inclusive policies and programs, notably, within initiatives aiming to improve the welfare of low-income people (Benjamin & Raman, 2011; Chatterjee, 2004; Gupta, 2012) and where participation is used to legitimize urban revitalization and mega-projects (Bhan, 2016; Desai, 2018; Gupta, 2012; Roy, 2005). Foundational to this paradox of inclusion are processes through which urban citizens make claims and have these claims recognized and realized (or not). In India, the judiciary has become a crucial site of urban governance through which a politics of inclusion is produced in alignment with elite and middle class claims to the city (Baviskar, 2020; Bhan, 2019, 2016; Gidwani, 2015; Roy, 2009). Judicial actors are thus increasingly empowered to redefine, re-zone, legitimate, and make illegal the livelihoods and living spaces occupied by the urban poor based on elite aesthetic values, often in the name of "good governance" and modern planning (Björkman, 2014; Ghertner, 2015).

In theorizing the paradoxes of inclusive planning, Faranak Miraftab (2017) argues that universalizing liberal notions of inclusion do not challenge power relations, but instead incorporate, obscure, and compound social difference and oppression. In this context, the neoliberal politics of inclusion become "an alibi for exclusion and normalization of neocolonial domination" (Miraftab, 2017, p. 277). Urban citizenship is thus not egalitarian in theory or practice. Desai and Sanyal (2012) articulate this contradiction as occurring not because a person lacks formal citizenship rights and status in a nation but "because they are *certain kinds of citizens* with particular distributions of disadvantage" (p. xi, emphasis added).

To understand the material exclusions produced in this moment of "inclusive" SWM, it is necessary to pursue a differentiated politics of urban citizenship. Iris Marion Young (1989) argues that a universalist view of citizenship rights implies a transcending of difference in society, producing laws and governance practices that are blind to group and individual differences, thus perpetuating exclusions. A theorization of differentiated citizenship pays attention to power and is sensitive to dimensions of social difference (e.g. gender, class, caste, race, religion, ability, age, etc.). In this view, those who are

disenfranchized can only be included, empowered, or access justice when difference and oppression are recognized and acted upon in context (Holston, 2008, 2009; Young, 1989). This paper is then instructive in foregrounding the social differentiation, heterogeneity, and micropolitics within worker groups, communities, and organizing efforts. Engaging difference at this scale certainly poses challenges for organizing and making claims, but is also essential in ensuring that opportunities reach as many workers as possible (also see, Samson, 2019).

In this paper, I attend to women recyclers' and organizers' navigations of the exclusions produced in Ahmedabad's shifting waste landscape. Despite aspirations to include informal workers at some scales, solid waste governance must be understood in this context as continually shifting in terms of the priories and opportunities available within relatively narrow market – and aesthetic-oriented approaches. By engaging with the temporalities of SWM labor in Ahmedabad, I advance understandings of a politics of inclusion that is not singular or static; rather, experiences of labor, access, organizing, and citizenship are always "incremental, intermittent, and reversible" (Anand, 2017, p. 7; Ramakrishnan et al., 2021). I therefore emphasize not only the materialities of exclusion within SWM-citizenship configurations in Ahmedabad, but also the shifting temporalities as opportunities and challenges for inclusion can simultaneously erode and expand across time, in different places, and for different workers.

Methods

The insights presented in this paper emerge from an ethnographic study I conducted in Ahmedabad over two five-month trips between 2016-2018. At the outset of this research, I reached out and attended the everyday activities of the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) and Paryavaran Mitra, both in Ahmedabad. SEWA is a national trade union organizing and advocating for women informal workers, including waste pickers. Paryavaran Mitra is a social enterprise headquartered in the *Ramapir no Tekra* slum area, which operates two scrap shops inside local slum communities for women to sell their materials and a recycling center at the local military base that employs women from nearby communities. I volunteered, attended events and meetings, and consulted team members from both organizations to ascertain any questions or data that could be useful in supporting their work. I also conducted a series of iterative, semi-structured interviews with local activists, advocacy workers, and NGO employees throughout the research and an ongoing discourse analysis of media and policy documents.

During the early months of this study, I hired a local freelance interpreter and hired and trained a team of five trilingual (fluent in English, Gujarati, Hindi) local research assistants to help with the implementation of a survey.[2] We surveyed 401 women recyclers across 10 commercial and residential areas of the city.[3] We walked a pre-determined route in each area and approached any woman we observed collecting recyclable materials, explained the study, and for those interested in participating, we navigated consent verbally (with RAs being trained to recognize discomfort and refusal) and on an ongoing basis, and either began the questionnaire or arranged to meet the participant at her convenience. Once the entire survey wrapped up, the interpreter and I returned to each area to follow-up with women who expressed that they were interested in continuing to talk

and completed 45 semi-structured interviews discussing their experiences of work and wellbeing in the city. Most of the interviews were held while women were sorting the day's materials, where we sat alongside them, shared some chai, and did our best to help sort as we chatted. Several women invited us to their homes to talk after work, and a few were happy to take a break during their collecting work to sit and chat.

I returned to Ahmedabad one year later and visited with former interviewees with the same interpreter. We conducted 36 follow-up interviews (from the 45 women from the previous year) and organized a series of informal workshops in worker communities and workspaces. In these sessions, we shared snacks, discussed some of the consolidated issues that came up across the city, disseminated information about local resources to address gaps frequently identified in the research (e.g. legal services and ID documents), and provided space for participants to give feedback (Cornwall, 2002). We also organized workshops at SEWA for team leaders and at Paryavaran Mitra for any women wanting to attend. At the end of every interview and group discussion, we always asked respondents to reiterate what they thought was the most important thing they had discussed that day. This strategy served to facilitate recyclers' participation in the analysis and theory-building by highlighting what was resonating with them and in having space to explain why these issues are important or urgent.

As a white foreign woman with affluence relative to participants in the study, I always positioned myself as a learner in relation to respondents' expertise, met at their convenience, and participated in their everyday activities – especially in sorting recyclable materials, sharing food/chai, and visiting home when invited. I always introduced myself as a learner, emphasizing I was there to learn about recycling from the "real experts" (in contrast to politicians, planners, etc.) and wanted to hear their stories. I constantly reflected on the historical and contemporary colonial relations of power shaping the fieldwork context and tried to address the power dynamics inherent in my presence through these strategies of being a learner, touching and working with waste, in being cognizant about recognizing embodied nuances of consent/refusal, and in navigating accountability and responsibility in my relationships with participants (see, Coddington, 2017; Faria & Mollett, 2016; Nagar, 2002; Pacheco-Vega & Parizeau, 2018; Smyth, 2023). To this end, I maintained a core commitment to always do what I said that I would do and to never promise anything that I could not deliver.

Municipal privatization and organizing women informal recyclers in Ahmedabad

India's Ministry of Environment and Forests released the first national set of Solid Waste Management Rules in 2000 (MoEF, 2000). Created in the wake of the Asim Barman Committee's report, the rules solidified support for the privatization of SWM services and resulted in the outsourcing of waste collection and transportation to private firms in over 50 municipalities by 2005 (Luthra, 2020; MoUD, 2005). In 2004, SEWA successfully advocated for the inclusion of 300 women members in a door-to-door waste collection pilot program which served 45,0000 households in Vejalpur, a former self-governing ward of Ahmedabad. The program was a documented success, improving women recyclers' salaries and work conditions, as well as increasing the diversion of recyclable materials from household waste (Acharya & Parasher, 2008; Oates et al., 2018; Zhu et al., 2008).

Despite the successes, the program was abruptly canceled in 2009 when Vejalpur was incorporated into the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation (AMC) and the contract was awarded overnight to a private firm. SEWA staff collected testimonials from Vejalpur households to attest to the quality of their services while their union leaders filed a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) at the Gujarat High Court to contest the cancelation, arguing the AMC could not cancel the contract without providing the workers alternative jobs (SEWA v. AMC et al., 2009). Yet, the AMC claimed the women workers were "too unreliable in their operations" and expected that the private sector would provide greater efficiency in SWM service delivery (Oates et al., 2018, p. 9). The court ruled in favor of the AMC in this case and a contracting system for waste collection mediated by private firms proceeded in Vejalpur thereafter (TOI, 2009). After continued advocacy work after the ruling, AMC granted SEWA members door-to-door collection contracts in three of the city's slum areas – contracts that were still active at the time of research but have since been canceled (*interview with SEWA staff*).

In 2016, the SWM rules were revised and due to sustained work by trade unions, NGOs, and activists across India,[4] the 2016 Rules explicitly acknowledge a potential

Table 1. Summary of key references to informal waste pickers in the 2016 Rules (prepared by author, emphasis added by author; MoEFCC, 2016).

Solid Waste Management Rules (MOEFCC, 2016)
4. Duties of waste generators
(1) Every waste generator shall, – (a) segregate and store the waste generated by them … **and handover segregated wastes to authorized waste pickers or waste collectors as per the direction or notification by the local authorities from time to time;**
(6) All resident welfare and market associations shall, within one year from the date of notification of these rules and in partnership with the local body ensure segregation of waste at source by the generators as prescribed in these rules, facilitate collection of segregated waste in separate streams, **handover recyclable material to either the authorized waste pickers or the authorized recyclers …**
(7) All gated communities and institutions with more than 5,000 sqm area shall (…) in partnership with the local body ensure segregation of waste at source by the generators as prescribed in these rules, facilitate collection of segregated waste in separate streams, **handover recyclable material to either the authorized waste pickers or the authorized recyclers …**
(8) All hotels and restaurants shall, (…) in partnership with the local body ensure segregation of waste at source as prescribed in these rules, facilitate collection of segregated waste in separate streams, **handover recyclable material to either the authorized waste pickers or the authorized recyclers.** (*p*.55)
15. Duties and responsibilities of local authorities and village Panchayats of census towns and urban agglomerations. The local authorities and Panchayats shall,-
(b) **arrange for door to door collection of segregated solid waste** from all households including slums and informal settlements, commercial, institutional and other non residential premises. From multi-storage buildings, large commercial complexes, malls, housing complexes, etc., this may be collected from the entry gate or any other designated location;
(c) **establish a system to recognize organizations of waste pickers** or informal waste collectors and **promote and establish a system for integration of these authorized waste-pickers** and waste collectors to **facilitate their participation** in solid waste management including door to door collection of waste;
(g) direct waste generators not to litter (…) or burn or burry waste on streets, open public spaces, drains, waste bodies and to segregate the waste at source (…) and **hand over the segregated waste to authorized the waste pickers or waste collectors authorized by the local body**;
(h) setup material recovery facilities or secondary storage facilities with sufficient space for sorting of recyclable materials to **enable informal or authorized waste pickers and waste collectors to separate recyclables** from the waste and **provide easy access to waste pickers and recyclers for collection of segregated recyclable waste** … (*p*.58)
(l) provide **training on solid waste management to waste-pickers** and waste collectors; (*p*.59) (zg) create public awareness through information, education and communication campaign and educate the waste generators on the following; namely:-
(viii) handover segregated waste to waste pickers, waste collectors, recyclers or waste collection agencies; and
(ix) pay monthly user fee or charges to waste collectors or local bodies or any other person authorized by the local body for sustainability of solid waste management (*p*.60)

role of informal recyclers in municipal SWM (see Table 1). For example, the 2016 Rules encourage local authorities to "promote and establish a system for integration [of] authorized waste-pickers and waste collectors to facilitate their participation in solid waste management" (MoEFCC, 2016, p. 58). The language of "authorization" appears in almost every reference to waste pickers in the document, which raises questions about what "authorization" entails, given that local governing bodies are presumably granted the power to "authorize."

Despite initial optimism expressed by worker organizations about the opportunities that the acknowledgement and encouragement of "integration" held for workers (see, SEWA, 2016), the AMC interpreted the rules by announcing a tender for door-to-door garbage collection contracts across all zones of the city, expanding earlier PPP pilot programs. Eligibility for bidding on these contracts included an annual average turnover of Rs.4.34 Crores for waste collection and transportation in the last 5 years; work experience of door-to-door waste collection with own close body vehicles for a municipal corporation; and ownership of at least 25% of total vehicle fleet with payload capacities of 1MT and 3MT (AMC, 2016, p. 7). SEWA responded to the announcement by filing another PIL at the Gujarat High Court, stating the tendering process was "tailor made for certain contractors," and that the PPP model was putting "the entire system in the hands of corporates" (TOI, 2017, n.p.; Om Sai Ventures & SEWA v. AMC, 2017). The GHC again ruled in favor of AMC, and recommended AMC adopt "a view to integrating waste pickers in the system" (TOI, 2017, n.p.).

I was in Ahmedabad when the tender was announced and SEWA was pursuing the PIL. When I returned seven months after the high court ruling, I asked how the integration efforts were going. A staff organizer explained that they repeatedly asked AMC to involve the waste pickers, so they eventually connected them with one of the private companies contracted to do the waste collection work. The company offered jobs for forty women to ride in the back of the garbage trucks to segregate out recyclables for the company to earn from. The work required workers to be on the truck for ten hours every day, per company schedule, and the pay was much less than SEWA members were making with the door-to-door contract from 2004.

> Our members voted and all said that they felt unsafe about riding in the trucks, so we did not agree to the terms. The women said "no, we are not going to work with those men, we want to work individually like we used to." – SEWA Staff Representative

Continual shifts in SWM priorities and configurations in Ahmedabad since the early 2000s have continually mediated women workers' livelihoods and their abilities to earn daily incomes and realize the benefits of labor organizing. However, patriarchal, caste, and community norms which control women's productive and reproductive labor and access to home/urban spaces long predate and will outlast these SWM shifts (Anantharaman, 2019; Butt, 2019; Wittmer, 2022). If work opportunities are blind to these gendered and casted constraints and dictate work conditions that don't consider the realities of women recyclers' lives, then even well-intended "inclusive" polices will miss their mark and continue to obscure and even contribute to the embodied oppression of these workers.

In my study, I encountered a few women who had been part of the Vejalpur door-to-door pilot with SEWA and had returned to waste picking after the contract was canceled. Two women explain the impact of the loss of this job:

> I used to go to an assigned area every morning to collect waste from 200 houses. With some other women, we would segregate the recyclable materials from the houses too … but SEWA could not win that case with AMC and a new system started at that time where trucks come and people come outside and throw their garbage into the truck. We were kicked out of our jobs … I have returned to picking waste on the roadsides, what else is there to do?

> I used to go to meetings over there – they arranged door-to-door collection jobs for us in apartments and that was very good, but now all of that work has been taken away. What is the point of going all that way? I have simply stopped going now – there is no longer any benefit.

Women's participation in labor organizing activities can thus be contingent on the material opportunities and perceived benefits associated with participation, despite the broader rights-based benefits of advocacy work. Here, 8% of survey respondents said they were a member or currently involved with an occupational organization;[5] a further 17% said they had been involved with a waste picking organization in their life but did not consider themselves a member now. Similar findings are reported internationally, where despite active organizing in the waste sector, participation is expressed as relatively low in relation to the overall population of workers (Colombijn & Morbidini, 2017; Dias & Samson, 2016; Parizeau, 2013). Participation in worker organizing must therefore be understood as a fluid and relational state of belonging, exclusion, access, and constraint, rather than a static state of member/non-member. The same can be said for the waste picking livelihood itself – while it is frequently a "hereditary" job carried out by casted, gendered workers over generations, in this context, I also observed people coming and going from this work in times of need – for example, residential society sweepers picking up plastic bottles around complex gates or recent migrants to the city with no other options.

The experiences described above reveal how much the work of organizing informal workers can be mediated by shifts in local politics, governing actors (including judicial actors), and development/planning priorities over time. This neoliberalizing context particularly highlights the limitations of including waste workers in municipal SWM when inclusion is interpreted and made conditional by governance actors as "integrating" workers into a pre-defined, privatized labor system where corporate actors are empowered to control the conditions of labor. However, women recyclers were also coping with the challenges posed to their livelihoods and organizing activities by returning to individual waste picking work (as described above) and diversifying their livelihoods – independently, collectively in communities, through forms of clientelism, or by allying with NGOs.

Navigating exclusions

As private firms increasingly displaced women recyclers in Ahmedabad, some women responded by drawing upon their own networks and social infrastructures to diversify their incomes. During the eight months between initial and follow-up interviews, 10 of 36 interviewees had taken up additional income earning strategies in response to new tensions in their work. For example, in two different areas of the city, I encountered groups of women recyclers doing home-based garment finishing work (snipping loose

threads off the seams and buttons of readymade garments from small garment factories) in the afternoons after the morning of recycling work:

> Those trucks come to get the waste everywhere now – my income is less than half of what it used to be. I feel very frustrated working long hours for less money, so I started doing this garment-finishing 2 or 3 months ago (…) my daughter and I make an extra Rs.500-1000, Rs.1-3 per cloth, depending on the type – dress, shirt, kurta.
>
> This work is better in the summer, the heat, than waste picking. Other women here have also started this with me. The merchant I know comes and drops the bags to me and we sit together and work on this in the afternoons.

In both cases, one woman had been picking up recyclables in an area with a garment merchant who knew them and made the initial arrangements. At first, they would get just one or two bags for their households, but eventually the opportunity expanded to other women recyclers in their laneway as more bags were dropped off. Some women similarly used their networks in their work areas to access additional occasional incomes:

> Sometimes these small offices and shopkeepers ask me to come and organize the cardboard or they ask me to sweep the storefront on days when their usual cleaner does not come. They might give me Rs.10-20 or a bundle of clean papers in exchange. They call because they know me – it happens like that, only when they call.

In addition to highlighting the social infrastructures underlying waste work (see, Wittmer, 2021), these experiences also speak to forms of clientelism present in Dalit women recyclers' coping strategies. Here, a moral economy of patronage steps in to provide material support when the state fails disenfranchized citizens, making them dependent on the moral concern of others in providing for their wellbeing (Anantharaman, 2019, p. 5; Chatterjee, 2004; Piliavski, 2014).[6]

Some women have also allied with NGOs to cope with the exclusions produced through the privatization of SWM in the city. For example, at the time of research, Paryavaran Mitra was preparing for daily door-to-door waste collection services within the residential enclosure of the Ahmedabad Cantonment Board, a military base for the Ministry of Defense. The operation now employs 15 workers in daily collection, a segregation center, and a composting program. They also continue to pick up and segregates wastes from specific hotels at two community *pitha* shops, employing 8–10 women. Since the study, SEWA has also arranged for around 40 of their members to work across the AMC's three Material Recovery Facilities (MRFs). MRFs are open spaces in the city where collection trucks working in a specific area come and dump unsegregated waste; SEWA's members glean the recyclables from the pile and the rest goes to the dumpsite. However, the women are not hired or contracted by AMC or receiving any salary from the municipality for their labor; instead, they are authorized to work on the grounds earning only from the materials they collect and sell, with SEWA's support in organizing, selling, and accessing protective equipment. Taken together, these coping strategies reveal a variety of actors, infrastructures, and labors that different women recyclers draw upon depending situationally. I suggest below that these examples indicate the need to attend to social difference and the "distributions of disadvantage" (Desai & Sanyal, 2012, p.xi) that mediate embodied experiences of inclusion and organizing.

Limits of formalization and challenges to organizing

Over the last two decades, formal opportunities for collectives of informal recyclers to participate in door-to-door waste collection in Ahmedabad have been variously negotiated, enacted, withdrawn, contested, re-negotiated, and denied. These kinds of opportunities hinge on the patronage and support of actors in the municipality, judiciary, private firms, institutions, and NGOs, so as politics, priorities, zoning laws, and relationships shift over time, so do the opportunities for participation. This paper problematizes the assumption that the inclusion of informal recyclers in privatized municipal SWM systems will resolve the insecurities and precarities of their labor. Drawing upon the findings in this paper, I discuss below the divergences between inclusive discourses promoted at the national scale and the everyday experiences of Dalit women recyclers and advocates in Ahmedabad. I specifically focus on social differentiation and the implications this lens provides for thinking through labor conditions and citizenship for marginalized urban workers.

Professionalizing conditions of labor

As this case demonstrates, in moments where formal opportunities are not made available for recyclers to directly participate SWM systems, cooperatives and groups may be directed by local authorities, perhaps as the result of judicial activism and/or advocacy work by NGOs, to pursue subcontracting opportunities with private contractors. The practice of underbidding on SWM contracts is quite common, as Luthra (2020) shows in New Delhi, firms aim to obtain the contract by offering the lowed bid and then under-paying informal workers from disenfranchized communities to compensate for the expense of delivering services. In Ahmedabad, the AMC has made contractors responsible for recruiting, managing, and determining the working conditions for its labor force. The wellbeing of waste workers thus becomes the responsibility of an array of private firms, rather than a state or municipal governing body. This system of contracting out labor therefore opens up spaces for further exploitations, humiliations, and oppressions of laborers who are in dire need of daily incomes, particularly those from Dalit or Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) communities.

The formalization of informal waste workers in cities around the world has also been linked to professionalizing this labor through the registration and enumeration of workers, as well as the provisioning of uniforms, ID documents and equipment (Colombijn & Morbidini, 2017; Millar, 2018). Examples of organizing from cities across India have used feminist approaches and international solidarity networks to enhance the protection of workers by building solidarity and a shared worker identity (Chandan et al., 2019; Kabeer et al., 2013; Narayan & Chikarmane, 2013; Samson, 2009). The provisioning of ID cards and uniforms has been effective in increasing the perceived legitimacy of workers in society through their affiliation with an organization and reducing some of the stigmas associated with laboring with waste. However, these means of professionalization may also be leveraged as a tool for neoliberalizing informal labor (and labor organizing) by state actors as workers and organizations are required to re-make their work, routines, and behaviors to "fit a particular, regimented conception of labor … transforming in ways that would make [workers] *recognizable* to the state and wider society as 'real'

workers" (Millar, 2018, p. 137, emphasis in original; O'Hare, 2019). Uniforms and ID-cards are mandatory for contractors to provide to their workers in Ahmedabad; however, the use and effectiveness of uniforms and ID documents for building legitimacy and empowering workers depends on the local context, approach, and sustained support. One interviewee who was collecting recyclables before and on the side of her shift as a municipal sweeper notes:

> People see me coming with this vest and trolley and shout at me: "Take from here, take from there, hurry up and finish your work!" But I can only take a limited amount of waste at a time … I just feel so angry with these people, every day, shouting at me and threatening to report me if I don't work quickly enough.

Although uniforms and equipment can be important for reducing the stigmas of waste work, this visibility of these implements may also have the impact of attracting harassment and abuse. Here, the image of the respondent's municipal vest and cart empowers wealthier and higher caste residents to shout at and threaten her. Her visible affiliation with municipal waste work and particular Valmiki caste status served to reinscribe the humiliations associated with untouchability and hereditary waste occupations (Gill, 2010; Reddy, 2018; Ranganathan 2022; Sreenath, 2019). The mandating of uniforms in Ahmedabad could therefore further entrench the stigmas, harassment, and humiliations of caste relations within waste labor if these initiatives are not adequately supported at multiple scales of governance, through education drives for local citizens, and the creation and enforcement of rules to discourage harassment.

Although these tools can serve to de-stigmatize this labor, a top-down and de-politicized approach to professionalizing workers can also lead to the cooption of these tools for state authorizes to regulate, surveil, and control informal workers. In Chennai, Anantharaman (2019) shows how a digital partnership between the state and an NGO intending to enumerate waste pickers and legitimate their status through an ID card drive conferred the benefits of the program to the municipal corporation rather than the workers. Here, the tools of enumeration and identification enabled the municipality to regulate and surveil[7] the workers deemed legitimate by the program (i.e. those possessing an ID card). In doing so, the program further marginalized most workers in the city who were not sanctioned by the program and disrupted the independent arrangements and networks the recyclers had previously relied upon (Anantharaman, 2019).[8]

Social differentiation, inclusion, and urban citizenship

The findings in this paper show that a critical understanding of the conditions through which informal waste labor is formalized is key to any hope of actually including workers and conferring intended benefits to them. To think about meaningful inclusion, is then to necessarily take difference seriously. India's informal waste economy encompasses not only diverse labor processes and forms of contracts and arrangements, but importantly, the workers are socially stratified (by gender, caste, age, health status, marital status, migration status, disability, etc.) within neighborhoods, work areas, and organizations. Further, because informal recycling is a low-barrier form of work, the population of recyclers in a city is constantly shifting as new migrants and/or people experiencing crisis

turn to this work temporarily or occasionally as a survival strategy, add to the population of people doing this work long-term.

Studies delving into the micropolitics of organizing informal recyclers emphasize the importance engaging with the heterogeneity of workers, the internal divisions produced and maintained among workers, and the difficulties that social difference and power relations pose to organizing and making claims (Harriss-White & Prosperi, 2014; Kornberg, 2019; Samson, 2019). Apolitical approaches to formalizing and organizing workers focused on egalitarian rights – and distribution-based programs for "all waste workers" thus risk reproducing power hierarchies and oppressions of gender, caste, religion, marital status, disability, and migration status, even when equal opportunities are the goal (also see, Samson, 2019).

When inclusion is understood through a lens of social differentiation, it is possible to understand how the national scale encouragement of "integration" and "authorization" of informal workers unfolds differently across time and space, and for different people engaged in this labor. In Ahmedabad, organizers have struggled with municipal and judicial actors for robust and long-standing opportunities for their members to access jobs and security in their work at a large scale. Governance mechanisms like the 2016 Rules advising inclusivity and the symbolic acknowledgement of recyclers in the PM's tweet serve to promote a new socially progressive image and aspiration for SWM at the national level, which then further enables exclusions occurring at the local scale, as "inclusion" is passed off as the responsibility of private firms under contract with the municipality. Attempts to include informal waste workers in opportunities like door-to-door collection and organizing must therefore invoke a differentiated politics of urban citizenship (Desai & Sanyal, 2012; Holston, 2009; Young, 1989). A differentiated approach to inclusion seeks out opportunities for work and participation with difference explicitly in mind. In this case, grappling with the effects of intersecting gender and caste power dynamics on participation and accepting the fluidity of women workers' participation in labor and organizing activities over time.

Conclusion

The experiences of labor and organizing in this paper show how discourses, policies, and programs aspiring to "integrate" informal women workers in privatized SWM systems materially fail to operationalize inclusion and may result in the further exclusion of workers from livelihoods and belonging in the city. This paradoxical production of exclusion via inclusive policy is not a new phenomenon in India but is part of larger political-economic and socio-ecological trends in the aesthetic visioning and governance of cities (Baviskar, 2020; Bhan, 2016; Ghertner 2015). However, what is emergent in this context is the recognition of the profitability of waste by state and corporate actors and the extent to which solid waste is being commodified and marketized. The privatization of SWM is thus invoked as a site not only for capital accumulation, but also as a new modality through which the state might regulate, surveil, and control informal labor (and organizing) through "inclusive" practices mediated by neoliberal state logics and private capital.

While the challenges Dalit women recyclers and labor organizers contend with are certainly due to processes of neoliberalization and capital accumulation by urban elites, I contend that these struggles are also crucially entrenched in the exclusions of

patriarchy and untouchability. Labor formalization and organizing are thus not universally experienced by workers but unfold unevenly for differently situated actors and shift over time and across contexts. Is essential to conceive of informal recyclers as a heterogenous urban labor force – certainly sharing some commonalities in laboring with waste but experiencing varying configurations of oppression and humiliation relating to untouchability, gender, migration status, religion, age, health status, disability, marital status, and more. By listening and emphasizing social difference, power, temporality, and context, we can start to conceive of ways to value and provide robust opportunities for workers that reflect the realities of everyday life in the margins of urban developmental imaginaries and governance. I conclude below with recommendations for advancing the urban politics of inclusion emerging from this case:

First, despite critiques about the dispossessions embedded in the roll-out of contracting models for urban waste collection, municipalities in India continue to privilege capital-intensive systems mediated by private firms deemed to be more efficient and superior in delivering services than informal workers. Key questions emerge about this primacy of the private sector in this context, notably, as Luthra (2020) suggests, in rethinking how "efficiency" is defined and pursued. An anti-colonial lens is instructive here for privileging a definition of efficiency from the urban margins, moving outside of neoliberal market logics and instead, with an eye toward incremental, manual, low-cost, and environmentally sustainable forms of practice. This kind of rethinking of efficiency might also provide an important framework through which to organize, legitimize, and secure informal recyclers' claims and opportunities for recognition as the most "efficient" service providers (Luthra, 2020).

Second, including urban workers who are marginalized by dominant forms of urban development and governance necessitates an approach that starts from what already exists and is critical of power. Given the dominance of the informal sector in India's labor market, the informal economy is the "commonest kind" of work and not a phenomenon that exists outside of a marketed "formal" norm (Harriss-White & Prosperi, 2014, p. 40). Informality, rather than PPPs, should thus be the starting point for building an inclusive SWM system, where waste workers and organizers are privileged as key stakeholders in designing labor opportunities that take into account workers' own definitions of security, stability, and improved working conditions (also see: Dias, 2016; Wittmer, 2021). Through this approach, formalization is no longer posited as *the* antidote to the precarities and exploitations of informality, but informal work becomes the starting point through which to imagine new possibilities working from the everyday needs and practices that already exist.

Finally, a focus on social differentiation also serves in taking seriously the realities and micropolitics of workers' everyday lives and organizing activities. This approach is necessary for the re-imagining of opportunities for diverse recyclers' substantive participation in future SWM labor configurations (also see, Millar, 2018; Samson, 2019). In seeking inclusion, activists and organizers must also be cognizant about the pressures to adopt the apolitical rules of participation within "invited spaces of action" advanced by neoliberal state actors, especially in attempts to improve livelihoods through market-based and caste-blind approaches (Miraftab, 2017, p. 279; Anantharaman, 2019; Sreenath, 2019). It is thus critical to center power relations and difference so that inclusive actions and initiatives challenge power relations instead of obscuring or

ignoring them. One important aspect of challenging these conditions is to ensure that "unorganized" and independent forms of recycling work remain a viable form of livelihood for those who remain outside of opportunities provided by organizing or partnerships with state or private actors. It is important to underscore here that until social norms connecting gender, untouchability, and waste labor change, informal recycling remains a strategy through which disenfranchized urban inhabitants can earn an income. It is crucial that the legitimization (or inclusion) of some workers in particular programs, organizations, or partnerships does not then lead to the exclusion, criminalization, or further dispossession of those who cannot or do not join in that context and at that time.

Notes

1. Recent scholarly and activist work have highlighted the threats embedded in the SBA's imperatives and roll-out of "modern" urban waste and sanitation services for low-income urban inhabitants (Chintan, 2011; Doshi, 2017; Truelove & O'Reilly, 2021; Wittmer, 2022)
2. I facilitated 3 paid training sessions with all team members before we piloted the survey. Training sessions focused on cultivating a feminist approach to data collection, emphasizing the RAs' understandings of positionally and relative privilege to participants; ongoing processes of navigating verbal consent and recognizing refusal; and in connecting with participants through empathetic and compassionate practice. We addressed gaps in the training in two additional team sessions and made some revisions to the questionnaire after the pilot before beginning the survey. I was present with the RAs every day of the survey – I held daily meetings each morning to review the previous day's activities, answer questions, and plan the day ahead. I also guided the RAs through some reflective activities and journaling.
3. Research areas were categorized, randomized, and selected using the most recent city development plan by the Ahmedabad Urban Development Authority (AUDA, 2016).
4. For example, Hasiru Dala in Bengaluru, Chintan in Delhi, Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakari Panchayat (KKPKP) in Pune, among others (Chandran et al., 2018; Chikarmane, 2014; Chikarmane & Narayan, 2005; Kabeer et al., 2013).
5. Involvement with an organization was explained as having paid a membership fee, attended a meeting/event, or receiving information or a material benefit from a waste picking organization (e.g. SEWA, Paryavaran Mitra) in the last 12 months.
6. Similar dynamics are also observable in women recyclers' relationships with *pithawallahs* (scrap dealers), who, while mentioned in the literatures and by local organizers in their capacity of exploiting women workers, are simultaneously important actors upon whom women recyclers rely upon for accessing small loans in times of need (Gill, 2010; Wittmer et al., 2020). In this study, 88% of 401 survey respondents said they sold to a single *pitha*. These relationships are significant as they tie women to a single *pitha* and their prices.
7. Some municipal corporations (e.g Chandigarh, Indore, Nagpur, and Pune) have invested in digital interventions like 'smart' GPS-enabled watches to monitor formalized waste workers' activities (The Indian Express, 2020; Inzamam & Qadri, 2022)
8. Also see Dana Kornberg's (2020) insightful theorization of practical legitimation – that despite lacking legal recognition, informal waste workers in New Delhi maintain jurisdiction and legitimize access to waste through social recognition and action rather than via laws or formal incorporation.

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