

Editorial "Urbanisation, Sanitation, and Social Justice in South Asia: Addressing Inequities Through Social Work and Policy Interventions"

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Urbanisation has emerged as a defining feature of social and economic transformation across South Asia. Expanding cities, changing labour markets, infrastructure development, migration, and population growth have reshaped patterns of work, mobility, residence, and social relations. However, the benefits of urban development remain unevenly distributed. Alongside economic opportunities and improved infrastructure, urbanisation has generated new forms of labour precarity, social exclusion, occupational insecurity, and unequal access to dignity and social protection. These contradictions are particularly visible in the lives and working conditions of sanitation workers, whose essential contribution to urban public health and everyday life frequently remains socially invisible.

Sanitation workers engaged in sweeping, waste collection, sewer and drainage maintenance, septic-tank work, and related activities often operate under hazardous conditions. Despite legal prohibitions, welfare programmes, and policy initiatives, manual scavenging and unsafe sanitation work continue to expose workers to occupational, health, psychosocial, and social risks. The persistence of these conditions demonstrates that legislation and policy, although necessary, are insufficient unless accompanied by effective implementation, institutional accountability, social transformation, and meaningful participation of sanitation workers themselves.

This Special Issue of *Social Work & Society*, titled "Urbanisation, Sanitation, and Social Justice in South Asia: Addressing Inequities Through Social Work and Policy Interventions," brings together diverse scholarly perspectives to interrogate these interconnected challenges. The contributions demonstrate that sanitation cannot be understood merely as a matter of municipal service delivery or public hygiene. It is simultaneously a question of caste, gender, labour rights, migration, health, law, governance, social protection, spatial justice, and human dignity.

Caste, Gender and Structural Inequality

A major theme across the Special Issue is the enduring relationship between sanitation labour and caste-based occupational structures. Historical patterns of caste discrimination continue to influence contemporary labour relations, occupational segregation, and access to alternative livelihoods. Contributions examining women sanitation workers in Delhi, caste and manual scavenging, caste labour and spatial apartheid in Bangalore, and sanitation workers in Bhubaneswar demonstrate that marginalisation cannot be reduced to individual poverty or labour-market disadvantage.

These studies reveal sanitation labour as a deeply structural phenomenon in which caste, class, gender, and occupation intersect. The concept of structural violence is therefore particularly relevant: institutional arrangements and social hierarchies can systematically expose particular communities to insecurity, stigma, hazardous work, and restricted opportunities.

Gender further intensifies these inequalities. Women sanitation workers and women associated with manual scavenging frequently encounter overlapping vulnerabilities related to caste, occupational status, poverty, insecure employment, care responsibilities, stigma, and limited social protection. The Special Issue's focus on women sanitation workers, wives of manual scavengers, and women waste pickers and sweepers highlights the need to move beyond gender-neutral understandings of sanitation labour. A gender-responsive approach must integrate occupational safety, livelihood diversification, financial inclusion, psychosocial support, rehabilitation, and empowerment.

Migration, Precarious Labour and Occupational Health

Migration and informalisation constitute another important dimension of urban sanitation. Migrant sanitation workers may experience insecure employment, inadequate housing, weak institutional representation, and limited access to social protection. The contribution examining caste, migrant labour, and sanitation-related deaths in Kerala draws attention to the problem of workers becoming statistically invisible while remaining highly exposed to occupational risks.

The Special Issue also focuses on occupational health and safety. Empirical and conceptual contributions addressing sanitation workers in Greater Hyderabad and broader questions of occupational hazards demonstrate that unsafe working environments remain a critical social justice concern. Occupational safety must not be treated simply as an administrative responsibility. Preventing sanitation-related deaths and injuries requires effective enforcement, appropriate mechanisation, protective equipment, worker training, health monitoring, emergency preparedness, and accountability, as well as worker participation in safety systems.

Law, Policy and the Implementation Gap

An important contribution of the Special Issue is its critical examination of the gap between law on paper and law in practice. India has developed legal and policy frameworks intended to address manual scavenging and improve the conditions of sanitation workers. However, legislation alone cannot guarantee substantive justice.

To address this, specific policy reforms such as improved enforcement mechanisms, targeted rehabilitation programs, and community monitoring are essential to bridge the implementation gap and ensure tangible improvements for sanitation workers. The manuscripts examining legal frameworks, gaps between law and practice, pseudolaw and impunity, and implementation of the NAMASTE scheme collectively reinforce the importance of examining policy implementation as a political, institutional, and social process. The challenge is therefore not merely to formulate stronger policies but to ensure that legal rights become lived rights through transparent monitoring, local institutional accountability, worker participation, and rights-based interventions.

Urban Space, Exclusion and Spatial Justice

Urbanisation also produces unequal social geographies. Sanitation workers maintain the cleanliness and functioning of cities while frequently experiencing exclusion from the spaces they sustain. Contributions addressing spatial apartheid, spatial injustice, socio-spatial segregation, environmental justice, and experiences in urban public spaces demonstrate why geography must be central to debates on sanitation justice. Urban planning must prioritise

spatial justice by ensuring the safety, dignity, and participation of sanitation workers, fostering hope for truly inclusive cities.

Rehabilitation and the Transformative Role of Social Work

Rehabilitation is central to achieving lasting sanitation justice. Welfare schemes become meaningful when they enable sanitation workers and their families to secure safe livelihoods, social protection, education, financial inclusion, and freedom from hazardous and caste-bound occupations. For example, programs in Assam that integrate livelihood training with social protection demonstrate practical pathways to empower sanitation workers and promote social justice. Highlighting such successful interventions can inspire replication and policy support.

Social work has a distinctive role in this transformation. Its responsibilities should extend beyond individual counselling and service delivery to include rights advocacy, access to welfare entitlements, community mobilisation, collective organisation, legal awareness, psychosocial support, livelihood transition, documentation of rights violations, and institutional advocacy. Emphasising how social work can directly influence sanitation workers' rights and dignity can more effectively demonstrate its potential to drive policy change and advance social justice.

Subaltern Voices and a Just Urban Future

The Special Issue also recognises the importance of history, literature, and subaltern narratives in challenging the invisibility of sanitation workers. Bringing workers' experiences, memories, struggles, and voices into academic discourse can challenge stigma and create alternative understandings of labour, dignity, citizenship, and social transformation.

Taken together, the contributions call for a shift from a service-delivery model towards a rights-based and transformative framework. Sanitation justice requires the integration of legal protection, occupational safety, social security, rehabilitation, gender-responsive policy, inclusive urban planning, environmental justice, and participatory governance.

These dimensions cannot be addressed in isolation because the vulnerabilities experienced by sanitation workers are interconnected. The Special Issue ultimately invites us to rethink what constitutes a socially just city. A city cannot be considered just when those responsible for cleaning and sustaining it remain exposed to hazardous work, caste-based stigma, gender inequality, occupational insecurity, and inadequate social protection. Urban sanitation must therefore be understood within the broader framework of social justice, decent work, public health, human dignity, environmental justice, and inclusive governance. The future of sanitation justice in South Asia requires a movement from visibility to recognition, from prohibition to implementation, from welfare to empowerment, and from representation to participation. Social work can contribute significantly to this transformation by strengthening social solidarity, collective agency, rights consciousness, and institutional accountability. This Special Issue brings together scholarship that connects structural inequality with the everyday experiences of sanitation workers. Its central message is clear: sanitation is not merely an urban service; it is a matter of labour rights, caste equality, gender justice, health, law, governance, and human dignity. A socially just urban future will become possible only when those who clean, maintain, and sustain our cities are themselves able to live and work with safety, equality, dignity, recognition, and voice.

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