

A typical day of a **female landfill reclaimer**



My name is Thabisile and I work at a landfill site in KwaZulu Natal.

I am 60 years old with three children and five grandchildren. I have been doing this work since 1992. The first time that I went to the landfill I was taken by a friend who worked there. She knew that I didn't have work and she said I could make money by collecting and selling the recyclables. But when I got there, I thought, I can't do this! It stank and the people were wearing filthy clothes. I didn't want to touch the garbage. When I went home, all I had was mielie-meal and some tomatoes to feed my family and everyone was hungry. My friend was always able to provide for her children and she went to the landfill every day wearing lovely clothes and came home that way too. I decided that I needed to go work to work with her. It was very hard at first, but I got used to it. Two of my children are in tertiary colleges and this work has sustained my family all this time. I also support my granddaughter who lives with me.

I take taxis like everyone else who is going to work. I leave my house at 06h30 in the morning and arrive at the landfill by 07h00. I arrive at the place where I store my materials, change into my work clothes and carefully store away my street clothes to change into at the end of the day. Trucks start arriving at the landfill from 07h30. Trucks are directed to tip at a certain area and once a few have done so, we go over to that area and start working. I move as quickly as I can to sift through the waste to find good quality materials. The young men always get the more valuable materials first, so I usually take white paper, cardboard, PET (plastic cool drink) bottles, and milk containers. I put all the materials I collect into a sack and then go back to search for more.

I usually stop at noon to buy a freshly cooked meal from one of the eating places near where we sort that have been opened by some of my fellow workers and community members. After a 20 minute break I get back to work. Working at the landfill is hard. We don't have access to infrastructure where we can shelter ourselves from the burning sun and pouring rain. We also don't have access to any toilets, so when I need to relieve myself I have to walk to a more isolated part of the landfill, cover myself with a plastic rubbish bag and relieve myself in public. It is humiliating, particularly for a gogo like me.

When I have collected enough material or the time is getting late, I take the materials I collected that day to my sorting space at the bottom of the hill and divide them into different bags, one for each different kind of recyclable. I also put aside things that I can use or sell, like clothes or household items. Once I even found a cell phone that still worked! I mostly sell my materials on Fridays to buyers who have stalls at the landfill, but I save PET to sell once a month or once every two months as together with other workers we hire a truck to transport the PET to sell outside the landfill for a higher price.

My day finishes at 16h00 when I change back to my regular clothes. I clean up the best that I can before I take a taxi home and start caring for my granddaughter, helping her with homework, cooking a meal, putting her to bed, cleaning the house, and finally go to sleep.



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