South Africa is the most unequal country in the world and also has the highest level of unemployment. At the beginning of 2022, 45.5% of South Africans were unemployed when people who have given up looking for jobs are included. For African women, this number was even higher, as more than half (53.7%) were unemployed.

In this context, reclaiming provides an important way for women to earn a living. As Amelia, a young woman working at Northern Landfill Site in Mangaung, explained:

"My mom taught me this work. It’s not difficult and you can make your own power and success here. I get, food, clothes and everything I need, and I put my child through school from this place."
Because reclaimers control their own working hours, and because women are still mainly responsible for childcare, many women like the flexibility and control that they have when they work as reclaimers. They can schedule their work around when their children are at school, and if a child is sick or has another problem, they can stop work to take the child to the clinic.

If their children are young enough and they don’t have childcare, women reclaimers can bring their children to work if they have to. However, this creates its own dangers. One woman who works in the streets of Johannesburg shared a terrifying story:
One time a taxi driver threatened to bump into me. I was very scared because my little boy was sitting inside the sack on the trolley”

(cited in Mokobane 2016).

This is why reclaimers want government and industry to provide crèches where women and male reclaimers can leave their children while they work.

Women reclaimers also confront a number of other challenges.

There are very few public toilets in South African cities and towns, and racism, classism and discrimination against reclaimers mean that very few residents and businesses will let reclaimers use their toilets. This is hard for all reclaimers, but worse for women, who cannot relieve themselves in public. The situation is even harder when they are menstruating. This negatively affects their health and dignity.

South Africa’s very high rate of gender violence affects women’s decisions about when and how they work. One female street reclaimer in Johannesburg explained the strategic decisions that she has to make every day:

I don’t like walking alone without another man with me because I am afraid my trolley can get stolen. When I walk alone I wait until the sun comes out before I go. I make sure that I dress like a man so people don’t see that I am a woman and try to take advantage.

(cited in Mokobane 2016).

Many women choose to work at landfills rather than on the streets because they feel safer and it can be less physically challenging depending on how they choose to work.

Women reclaimers also face is discrimination from their male counterparts. At some landfills, men have mobilized to prevent women from working there and have kept them out, despite protests by women.

When women do work at landfills, men use their typically greater physical strength to muscle out women and control access to the more valuable materials.

However, that does not mean that women just accept these situations.

As the quote above shows, women who want to reclaim in the streets develop strategies to do this. Even if right now these strategies require them to support gender norms by pretending to be men and bringing men with them for protection, they still manage to do the work that they want to do.
As for the men and their greater physical strength and speed, first of all, many women reclaimers are very strong!

> You know, working at the landfill is not all about running. You just have to know what you are supposed to do. Experience and knowledge! You have to know the trucks that have valuable material, not just running after every truck that comes in, so you can as well be more productive than someone who will be running.

And as Eva Mokoena, the Chairperson of the African Reclaimers Organisation explains, women are organizing collectively and taking leadership in their organisations, fighting for reclaimers’ rights, building reclaimers’ power, and building their own power as they do:

> What I’ve noticed about this work is, it gives you time, strength and courage. And builds your self-esteem. If I didn’t work as a reclamer, I would never have built the courage to leave an abusive relationship or fight for my rights or other people’s rights. I would not have learnt the skill I have to talk to anyone or to talk to academics or to talk in front of a crowd of 300 or 400 people.
Inequality between Women

Gender intersects with other forms of oppression. This means that not all women are gendered in the same way and they can face different challenges. Some women can also use power over other women.

For example, at one landfill in Johannesburg, reclaimers are divided into two shifts that are based primarily on nationality. The longer morning shift is for South Africans and the much larger shift that works for a shorter period of time in the afternoon is where almost all of the Zimbabweans work. Although women earn less than the men in their respective shifts, research found that South African women earned much more than Zimbabwean women because of their advantages based on shift and nationality. During the 2009 global economic crisis, some South African women also mobilized to evict the Zimbabwean women.

It is always important to use an intersectional approach when working on gender issues so that all women are involved; all needs are identified; differences and power relations between women are recognised, confronted and addressed; and strategic, collective decisions are made on the way forward.

A GREAT RESOURCE ON GENDER AND WASTE PICKING

Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) ran an exciting action research project on Gender and Waste in Minas Gerais, Brazil that “sought to provide women reclaimers with a clearer understanding of the practical tools they need to challenge the deeply-entrenched gender hierarchies present in their homes, at work and in the movement”.

IF YOU DON’T KNOW, NOW YOU KNOW
The project website - https://www.wiego.org/gender-waste-project - includes many useful resources on gender and waste picking including: a Women Waste Pickers’ Toolkit; a Toolkit for teachers, researchers and practitioners; videos of women reclaimers telling stories about their lives, their work and their work on gender issues; and links to academic articles and references.

Check it out and put the tools to use in your own work on integration!

The Waste Picker Integration Guideline lists the following 23 possible actions to redress gender inequity and meet women waste pickers’ specific needs. These are just some ideas. Women reclaimers must always take the lead and determine what the types of actions need to be taken related to the gender issues they are confronting in their own context.

Remember, women reclaimers in each place need to identify their key challenges, priorities, goals and dreams and the actions that should be undertaken to address them.

Possible actions to promote gender equity for women waste pickers included in the Guideline:

1. Make explicit commitments to creating gender equity.
2. Respect women’s knowledge, contributions and leadership.
3. Provide childcare for male and female reclaimers when they are working, at meetings and doing organising work.
4. Hold meetings with women reclaimers to identify their key problems and concerns, as well as their proposed solutions.
5. Create safe platforms for women reclaimers to share their experiences and ideas.
6. Ensure that women reclaimers’ issues are prioritised in reclaimer organisations, as well as municipal, national and industry policies, forums and programmes.
7. Create spaces and programmes for women reclaimers to share their experiences and knowledge of gender issues and to deepen their understanding.
8. Support women reclaimers to organise around gender and all other issues.
9. Facilitate provision of information on and access to social services available to support women.
10. Provide ablution facilities for reclaimers that meet women’s needs.
11. Provide crèches for male and female reclaimers’ children.
12. Commit to gender sensitive planning, policy and programme design, implementation and evaluation.
13. Ensure that all research and data analysis is disaggregated by gender (as well as other key social categories).
14. Prioritise and support research on women reclaimers as well as on gender dynamics in the sector.

15. Develop programmes for men to ensure that they understand gender inequalities, reflect on and transform their own gender biases, and have the knowledge and skills required to work with others to create gender equality.

16. Provide education and toolkits for all parties on gender, intersectionality, gender and waste picking, and the importance of including gender analysis in all phases of policy development and programme activities (see Dias and Ogando, 2015a; 2016).

17. Secure and increase all reclaimers’ access to materials and ensure that women have equitable access (for example separating women and men, and rotating access to trucks that arrive at the landfill).

18. Prioritise women when opening up new, higher income generating activities in the sector.

19. Create dedicated budgets for work with women reclaimers and on gender issues.

20. Develop short and longer term plans to raise gender awareness amongst reclaimers and reclaimer organisations with support from academics, NGOs, and different levels of government.

21. Hold general meetings at times when women are available.

22. Ensure that all meeting tasks (including preparing food) are equally shared.

23. Develop women reclaimers’ leadership skills and ensure gender equity in leadership of reclaimer organisations and reclaimer representation on all fora in the sector.

IF YOU DON’T KNOW, NOW YOU KNOW

When women reclaimers begin to challenge the gender-based roles assigned to them, they can face backlash and increased gender harm. Because of this, Dias and Ogando (2015) advise that it is important to put appropriate support measures in place when planning gender programmes and activities. These can include providing women with: knowledge and information on gender-based harm and the ways that other people might respond when they start raising gender issues and trying to make change; skills to engage in these situations; a supportive environment; and contacts with organisations that can support and assist them.

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT WOMEN RECLAIMERS IN SOUTH AFRICA, CHECK OUT THE FOLLOWING RESOURCES ON THE WASTEPICKERINTEGRATION.ORG WEBSITE:

- Reclaimer profiles of – Nthombizodwa Gcabshe, Francelina Lekeno, Anna Mabe, Dorah Mabe, Eva Mokoena, Emily Mrabalalo, Sibongile Muthwa, David Ralikhom and Andronica Nthuthe, Refiloe Sephiri and Sfundo Zungu
- Case Studies – Palmer Street Recycling Facility, Integrating Landfill Waste Pickers (Emfuleni)
- Videos – A Day in the Life of Landfill Waste Reclaimers, Infrastructure of Integration Palmer Street Case Study, and Landfill Cooperatives: Northern Landfill Site in Mangaung
- Photo Essays – Palmer Street Recycling Facility
References


