



Stigmatization in the Realisation of the Right to Water and Sanitation

Submission for the report of the Special Rapporteur on the
human right to safe drinking water and sanitation.

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In response to the call for contributions from the Special Rapporteur on the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation on the question of stigmatization in the realisation of the rights to water and sanitation, WASH United together with partner organisations conducted interviews with sanitation workers and community members in six countries of the global north (Germany and the Netherlands) and global south (Ghana, India, Kenya and Lesotho).

Our decision to focus our research on sanitation workers was based on two assumptions:

1.

In countries of the global south, sanitation workers are among the most discriminated groups in society. The work can be extremely unhygienic when sewage collection and disposal is done with little or no technical tools. This can lead to stigmatisation. Where work standards are higher, stigmatisation may still exist on the basis of perceptions and prejudices in the population.

2.

In countries of the global north, work standards are high, but the general population may still see sanitation work as disgusting or embarrassing. This might lead to stigmatisation of sanitation workers. In her book *The Big Necessity, Adventures in the World of Human Waste*, Rose George describes a scene from the documentary film *Boys from the Brown Stuff*: “A flusher tries to chat up a young woman outside a nightclub. He makes the mistake of telling her what his job is. ‘Does it involve faeces and such? I’m glad I didn’t get you to buy me a drink’”. (p. 20) We wanted to test whether this or similar experiences are common in other places.

This means that of the questions put forward by the Special Rapporteur, particularly the question of ‘how stigmatization is relevant to access to water and sanitation’ was less relevant for our research - in Germany and the Netherlands because literally every household is connected to water and sanitation services; and in Ghana, India, Kenya and Lesotho because our focus was mainly on stigmatization of the workers in their professional and daily lives rather than on their difficulties in accessing water and sanitation services for themselves.

In Berlin, Germany Hannah Neumeyer (WASH United) conducted interviews with a group of canal workers of the Berliner Wasserbetriebe (BWB). The BWB is responsible for water provision and disposal and treatment of waste water of 3.7 million people in the greater Berlin area. We interviewed a group of about 20 canal workers who clean and maintain the canal network in the south of the city.

In Accra, Ghana, Patrick Apoya (WASH United) interviewed an office cleaner and a group of young employees of a waste management company.

In Delhi, India, interviews were held with ten current or former manual scavengers. The Centre for Rural Studies and Development (CRSD)¹, Hilda Grace Coelho of Fresh-water Action Network South Asia (FANSA)², and Usha sagar and Richa Dadeya of Safai Karmachari Andolan (SKA)³, a movement to eradicate manual scavenging in India, conducted the interviews.

In Nairobi, Kenya, Beverly Mademba (WASH United) conducted four individual interviews with cleaners, toilet owners and a community officer and one focus group discussion with 10 participants of seven community organisations/networks in Kibera, an informal settlement in Nairobi.

In Maseru, Lesotho, interviews were held with cleaners of public toilets, sewage truck drivers/company owners, a plumber and with employees at the management level of the Lesotho Water and Sewage Company (WASCO) and the Maseru City Council Department of Health and the Environment. Interviews were conducted by Max Träger, Palesa Moiketsi, and Mantopi Lebofa, Technologies for Economic Development (TED)⁴, the implementing partner of WASH United in Lesotho.

In Breda, the Netherlands, Laura van de Lande (WASH United) interviewed two managers and two sanitation workers of the Waterloket Breda, the municipal water and sanitation service of the city of Breda, responsible for the provision and maintenance of water and sanitation services for a population of 175.000.

¹ <http://www.crsdindia.org/>

² <http://www.freshwateraction.net/node/19>

³ <http://safaikarmacharianandolan.org/index.html>

⁴ <http://www.ted-biogas.org/>

1. “The Global North”: Germany and the Netherlands

Stigma(tization) to a large degree depends on the perception that the general public has of “the sanitation sector”. Where sanitation work is carried out by a particular company, the perception of that company is therefore an important indicator for how the general public looks at and reacts to sanitation work. Generally speaking, the more positive the image of any company, the less negative reactions will employees of that company receive.

Canal workers in Berlin drew an interesting comparison between the BWB and the Berliner Stadtreinigungsbetriebe (BSR), which is responsible for street-cleaning and disposal of household waste:

The trucks used by the BWB in canal maintenance work and the garbage collection trucks of the BSR have the same size and therefore cause very similar disruption to traffic. Yet canal workers experience negative reactions from the public significantly more often than BSR garbage collectors. The canal workers’ explanation for this difference in public opinion is that the BSR has been running a very successful image campaign that changed public opinion about the BSR.

The BSR image campaign was based on the recognition that the work of the company was not known or noticed by the public; that the absence of dirt was not perceived as a service, but presence of dirt was seen as a service not rendered; and that public opinion of the company and its employees was negative.⁵

The director of the canal service station in Berlin explained that the image of the BWB is based on the aspect of water provision. The population knows nothing or very little about waste water disposal and it is a topic that is difficult to relate to the public comprehensively. Past initiatives to inform the public, such as opportunities to visit a canal or events at canal service stations, have been discontinued. The public relations work that remains are visits for example of schools to waste water treatment plants and occasional TV documentaries.

Lack of knowledge and understanding of sanitation was identified as a problem both in Germany and the Netherlands. Interviewees told us that people only take notice of the fresh water that comes out of the tap, but are unaware of the work that is needed to dispose of the waste water. Both in Breda and in Berlin, customers complain about rising prices and blocked pipes, while most problems that occur are caused by people disposing of

⁵ BSR, Imagekampagne 1999/2000 – Eine Dokumentation, p. 5, available at http://www.bsr.de/assets/downloads/020615_Doku1.pdf

1. “The Global North”: Germany and the Netherlands

garbage (and countless other things) through the toilet or pipes. Employees in both cities think that more awareness by the population on the system of disposal and treatment of wastewater would lead to more conscious behaviour and greater respect towards their profession.

In Breda, the Netherlands, all interviewees said that when they talk about their professional life, they never talk about the sanitation aspect; they always only refer to the ‘water aspect’ of their jobs. This is despite the fact that the work on the sewage system takes up most of their time. Only when people are very interested and ask more questions about their jobs will they explain more about the sanitation aspect of their work. Although these employees never experienced tangibly ‘negative’ reactions, they do always catch everyone’s attention, and people start to giggle and make jokes.

Interviewees in Berlin – whose work exclusively consists of canal maintenance - reported a similar handling. One interviewee reported that he at first usually tells people that he works for “the BWB”, which people commonly associate with water provision (the name means “Berlin Water Companies/Firms”). Only when people are interested and ask him further questions does he tell them more about his job.

In response to the question why interviewees chose this particular profession, many interviewees both in Berlin and Breda told us that relatives, particularly fathers, are/were also working in the sector. Interviewees in Berlin felt that the prestige of their job has risen in recent years. They explained this by and large with job insecurity and high unemployment rates. Many friends and acquaintances have lost jobs, especially in the construction industry, and/or regularly experience that wages are not paid fully/on time or at all. While previously some canal workers experienced that their choice of work was frowned upon by friends and acquaintances, today their job often evokes envy among those who work for unreliable employers or who are unemployed.

Interestingly, the managers we interviewed all stated that sanitation work was more interesting than water work. The manager of the canal service station in Berlin reported that he worked in the water sector of the BWB for many years but found the work boring after a while. He decided to move to the sanitation branch of the company because he finds the work technically more interesting and also prefers the atmosphere with his canal worker colleagues.

1. “The Global North”: Germany and the Netherlands

One of the managers at Waterloket Breda (where water and sanitation work is not separated) said he is very proud of the work he does, especially because it is indispensable for a developed and healthy society. He nonetheless still tries to avoid his profession to be directly linked to the sanitation work he does. For example, when he was appointed to his position, the job title initially was “head of sewage and water works”. He objected to this title and now carries the title of “head of waterworks” in order to avoid a direct reference to the sanitation work that he is responsible for.

Last but not least, one interviewee in Berlin had a similar experience to the story reported in *The Big Necessity* that sparked our interest in interviewing sanitation workers in “the global north”: When on holiday in Prague, he and a few friends met a group of women in a pub and they started talking. After a while, the conversation moved to the jobs everybody was working in. The conversation quickly came to a close when the canal workers talked about their jobs, and the women disappeared.

2. The global South: Ghana, India, Kenya, Lesotho

a. Ghana, Accra

In Accra, researchers conducted an interview with a woman (age 44) who has been working as an **office cleaner** for the last 16 years. She takes pride in her profession, particularly because she can financially support her family. While she herself has very little education, the job allowed her to send two of her three children to university.

She explained that colleagues initially looked down on her, but because she would not let herself be discouraged and because of her achievements in supporting her family, she has gained respect among colleagues over the years.

The challenges she faces relate to payment and treatment by management:

“Though the companies are friendly to me, they don't seem to appreciate the importance of my services. Just imagine that even now, I earn a total of about GHc 200⁶ from the two companies I serve. I have two other assistants who I also pay, so you can see that at the end of the day, you feel that you are not getting what you are worth. When you complain, all they tell you is to quit and they will look for someone else. But you know that there is no work anywhere, so if you quit you will even lose the little that you are earning, and that is double-loss. They are just capitalizing on the absence of jobs to exploit us”.

The second interview was conducted with **employees of “Zoomlion Company Ltd.”**, a waste management company providing (household and sewage) waste collection services across Ghana. The company holds over 80% of the private waste collection market in Ghana.

Many of the workers at Zoomlion are part of a National Youth Employment Programme. Under this Programme, unemployed youths are trained and posted to different employers and different professional sectors, with salaries subsidized by the state. Those posted to Zoomlion are deployed as sanitation workers and work both in sewage and household waste collection.

Some of the interviewees reported that they have seen an improvement in their social standing compared to when they were unemployed. Yet others stated that they feel stigmatized. Since starting work in the sector, they noted that socializing with peers has become a challenge and for men it has become impossible to find a girlfriend. They also reported that they are regularly insulted and feel that they have no status in society.

⁶ Approx. 118 USD.

2. The global South: Ghana, India, Kenya, Lesotho

a. Ghana, Accra

These problems are particularly severe in Tamale, the capital of the Northern Region of Ghana. In Tamale, the word “Zoom” has come to signify a person’s worthlessness and is used as a prefix for workers that are part of the National Youth Employment Programme, irrespective of their profession: A community police officer is referred to as “Zoom-police”, a healthcare assistant is a “Zoom-nurse”, etc. Interviewees explained that the initial “Zoom”-prefix for sanitation workers assigned to Zoomlion under the National Youth Employment Programme has gradually broadened to include other professions. While this may point more strongly towards stigmatization of employees under the National Youth Unemployment Programme or to those working for Zoomlion, the stigma no less strongly felt, as the following experience illustrates:

“Life in Tamale as a sanitation worker is not worth living. Sometimes you wonder whether to quit and remain unemployed, or to cope. For now I am coping, but if this perception about us persists for another year, I will consider quitting. Now I am looking around for a Job, and I hope to be lucky one of these days”.⁷

This experience stands in sharp contrast to the experiences of colleagues in other parts of the country. For instance, a Zoomlion Sanitation Worker in Accra reported that he is happy about his work, which has gained him respect among family members. In his own words:

“My family members now respect me. Before I got this job, I used not to be informed about any meetings in the family. But now, I am among the first to be informed on any meetings being planned. It is not only with my family, but also among my friends. Some have even asked me to help them get a similar job.”

⁷ Sanitation worker at Zoomlion from Tamale.

2. The global South: Ghana, India, Kenya, Lesotho

b. India, Delhi

Though outlawed in 1993⁸, SKA estimates that more than one million people – all of them Dalits - still work as manual scavengers in India today. 82% of them are women. Of the ten people interviewed, two used to work as manual scavengers (up to 2006 and 2007 respectively). They now work as garbage collectors, as does one further interviewee. Six interviewees work cleaning septic tanks and public toilets. One interviewee works cleaning public toilets.

The interviews illustrate that stigmatization is based on a cycle: Caste is still a stigma and a determining factor for people to work as manual scavengers, cleaners of public toilets or garbage collectors. These jobs in turn bring with it the stigma of a dirty and demeaning occupation that is looked down upon. As one interviewee put it:

“I do not think that people have the feeling of respect towards Dalit community/ towards me because of my caste. They still discriminate us in the same way. If I get some other work, people will also start respecting my profession”.

All ten interviewees expressed that their caste was the reason to start doing the work they do. Seven of them confirmed that poverty was the driving factor to be in this sector. All interviewees would like to change their profession, also in order to ensure that their children would not have to engage in manual scavenging. One of the interviewees said:

“No, I am not happy with my present profession and want to change my profession so that I can help my children to study well and to do some better job in the future”.

Yet six of the interviewees stated that they do not get opportunities to change their profession because of their caste.

Most interviewees feel that discrimination persists and that people belonging to upper castes continue to discriminate against them. Interviewees reported that they regularly experience how people behave differently. The following quote exemplifies the mix of caste and work that brings about stigmatization:

“People do start behaving differently when they come close to us when I do my work because of my caste”.

⁸ By the Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993

2. The global South: Ghana, India, Kenya, Lesotho

b. India, Delhi

Similar experiences that interviewees reported were that people cover their mouths while talking to manual scavengers or do not allow manual scavengers to have water in their glasses.

Most of the interviewees felt that these opinions and types of behaviour around them had not changed much over the years. All of them stated that sanitation issues and the profession of manual scavenging is still a taboo topic to some extent because people are still not comfortable enough to talk about it openly. They expressed that creating awareness through the mass media about the importance of the work they do and of sanitation in people's lives in general would help to change attitudes towards them.

2. The global South: Ghana, India, Kenya, Lesotho

c. Kenya, Nairobi

In Kibera, most people have to use communal toilets, where they either pay per visit (3-5 Kenyan shillings⁹) or a monthly fee of about 100 Kenyan shillings¹⁰ per family per month. Many communal toilets are overcrowded, with as many as 100 people sharing a toilet. Connections to the Nairobi Water and Sewerage Company sewer lines are rare. Communal and household toilets have pit latrines that are emptied by trucks or – where the area cannot be accessed by trucks – by people, so called human exhausters. The sewage is then dumped in the Nairobi River.

A Community Officer reported that manual exhaustion is mostly done by young people, often uneducated, who have no other jobs but who do not want to engage in crime. They often have other menial jobs. The interviewee felt that

“the community does not appreciate their role, in fact not only are they looked down upon, but even their families are labeled as ‘wife or children of the man who empties the toilets’. [...] Some people will not let them [children of manual exhausters] play with their children”.

As a result of this stigmatization, the entire family is often shunned by the community and not included in community discussions.

The stigma attached to the job also becomes apparent in nicknames that human exhausters are often given. A common label given to them is ‘chura’, synonymous for frog. The Community Officer reported that some manual exhausters even turn the nicknaming around and give themselves nicknames:

“One was calling himself ‘spoon!’. I think it was just a way to feel better about what he does, or to make the situation easier to deal with”.

The **focus group discussion** with members of community organisations reflected the stigmatization attached primarily to the work of manual exhausters, but also to the work of toilet cleaners.

Regarding manual exhausters, interviewees in essence expressed on the one hand that the job is a necessary evil in an informal settlement, but also that there are reasons to avoid manual exhausters.

⁹ Approximately 0.03-0.06 USD

¹⁰ Approximately 1.2 USD

2. The global South: Ghana, India, Kenya, Lesotho

c. Kenya, Nairobi

“It is not so much how the community treats them; it is how they carry themselves. Those people, they do not bathe, do not wash their hands, so I personally cannot greet them”.

“We think that the manual evacuation of toilets is a dirty job, some jobs are just like that, and in fact this one is worse off than those who work in the mortuary! This is a dirty job and that cannot change. Those people also just do not care, they do not take many health precautions, they do not wear gloves for instance and also spill the faeces along the way and people do not like that! Also previously the work used to be done at night, when people were asleep, now they are not ashamed to do it during the day. Also they dump it in the rivers, and sometimes they pour it down manholes, causing blockages”.

“The problem of stigmatization is a vicious cycle. You see, cleaning toilets and manual exhaustion is not a pretty job that anyone should do, but what other choice is there? It is a necessary evil. Some of the landlords do not care about providing us with toilets and other sanitation services, so for people living in informal settlements, we need those who evacuate manually”.

Contrary to the statements made at the focus group discussion, another interviewee who works as an office cleaner and also runs a toilet block built by a women’s self-help group feels that manual exhausters are respected members of the community. In her area, sewage is taken from pit latrines by manual exhausters using buckets and wheelbarrows because the area is inaccessible for vehicles. In her own words:

“The manual exhausters are not seen by the job they do, it is after all, work like any other. In fact, now these people advertise themselves in the village and we pick those who do the best job. These people in my village are respected, they even have families”.

A woman working as **a cleaner at a company** reported that she often faces disrespect from customers who leave the toilets behind dirty. Because of company policy, she is not allowed to react to this type of behaviour:

2. The global South: Ghana, India, Kenya, Lesotho

c. Kenya, Nairobi

“I work at a company, we are employed and they source for clients and send us to clean. We are trained that the client is always right, irrespective of what they do. So sometimes you are cleaning and someone uses the toilet, leaving it un-flushed and you just have to go in and clean it or lose your job. I think some people are just rude or maybe hard headed!”

In response to the question whether the treatment she receives could be improved, the interviewee in essence identified the stigma attached to the job as the reason for this type of mistreatment:

“Yes [these people could improve on how they treat me], if only they realized that I am also a human being, they would not treat me as such; they would clean up after using the toilets. I have friends who do the same job as I do, who have also been mistreated, apparently because of the work we do. I mean, we clean people’s shit! This work is bad. But even with the insults we receive and even though we are looked down upon by society, what other choice do we have? We must earn a living”.

Another interviewee **owns a toilet in Kibera** together with a friend and works as a cleaner in affluent estates. The toilet block she runs has 3 toilets and 2 bathrooms. They charge 3 shillings¹¹ per visit. The toilet block is used by four plots with a total of 31 households, which have anywhere from 2 to 10 members.

She feels that people in the village in Kibera appreciate her work, especially those who do not have toilets in their respective plots because they know how important it is to have a clean toilet. Yet she also experiences that sanitation issues are still a taboo in her community, resulting in mistreatment:

“[...] people still associate the toilet with dirt and disease and this is what they think when they know you wash toilets. For instance, someone once asked me if they could use our toilet [...]; I said yes and when I asked them to pay, he turned violent and started insulting me saying that I am pathetic and this is the only job I can get! Some think that we are stupid and that is why all we can do is clean toilets. But this is not true. Even though I get hurt and I know I do not deserve the insults, I let them talk however they want, otherwise, I will not get customers to use the toilets and I need the money”.

¹¹ Approx. 0.03 USD

2. The global South: Ghana, India, Kenya, Lesotho

c. Kenya, Nairobi

Yet she would like to tell those people “kazi ni kazi’ [work is work]; the money I earn from it is similar to any other money that others earn, it will not be inscribed on top that I earned it cleaning toilets” [laughs].

In her job as a cleaner in households, she also reported experiencing disrespect from her employers because of the work she does. Yet she somehow felt that this was justified. She also expressed, in relation to both her jobs, that she is not happy with her profession, but has no other options:

“I remember once as I worked cleaning clothes and the house [including the toilet] of a certain lady. Her husband had earlier invited me to take some juice when I was done with the work. When the lady found me she yelled, saying ‘how unfortunate I am that I am forced to eat her food, that I am starving and that I am desperate’. I had to apologise, but she was right in a way wasn’t she?”

“[...] I have been working at my jobs for the last five years. My biggest issue is the pay that we receive. It varies depending on the season [...]. In a day I can make anything from 80 to even 200 shillings¹² on a good day. If I had a choice I would be doing other businesses not washing toilets”.

Many of the interviewees from Kibera reported stories where **stigma(tization) results in discrimination** of toilet and standpipe users by denying certain groups access to facilities. This type of treatment was reported in relation to people with disabilities, street children, manual exhausters, ‘unkempt’ people and people living with HIV/Aids. Interestingly, the stigma attached to HIV/Aids seems to have lessened. Interviewees explained denial of access and unequal treatment of street children with their inability to pay and of manual exhausters and ‘unkempt’ people with health and hygiene concerns.

*“I have also seen people stop those who are thought of having **mental illness** from using the toilets. Personally and having a son who has a mental condition, I think this is only due to ignorance and fear, should they be explained to that people with mental conditions are able and can use the facilities well, I do not see a problem”.¹³*

¹² Approx. 0.94-2.36 USD

¹³ Interviewee who works as an office cleaner and co-owner of a toilet block run by a women’s self-help group.

2. The global South: Ghana, India, Kenya, Lesotho

c. Kenya, Nairobi

*“We [...] feel that **disabled people** are also discriminated upon. [...] [Regarding the use of toilets], it is seen as though it would be inconveniencing for the vendors, those who discriminate I mean. Also some of the facilities are not suited to serve or to be used conveniently by physically disabled people, so they defecate in paper bags and throw them out [flying toilets] or have someone dispose it off for them”.¹⁴*

*“I think that the only discrimination that comes is about using toilets; people do not allow street urchins [**street children**] to use toilets, but mostly because they cannot afford to pay “.¹⁵*

*“One thing I have seen is that those people who do **manual evacuation** for us are not allowed to fetch water at the stand pipe? Why? Well, for health reasons you see, they could transmit diseases”.¹⁶*

*“[...] Even those who are very dirty, **unkempt** are allowed to use the facilities, even fetch water at communal water points; only problem is that the other customers shy away from them and so the person maintaining the communal water point, or the water vendor, will not allow them to touch the taps, he fetches the water for them”.¹⁷*

*“Previously people living with **HIV/Aids** were discriminated upon but now we know that HIV/AIDS is not transmitted in this way, so we do not have a problem with those people using toilets, fetching water etc”.¹⁸*

*“Other people who are denied access, mostly to share water points, are those who have **HIV/Aids**, but most important when they have visible sores or wounds”.¹⁹*

¹⁴ Participant of the focus group discussion.

¹⁵ Participant of the focus group discussion.

¹⁶ Interviewee who works as an office cleaner and co-owner of a toilet block run by a women's self-help group

¹⁷ Interview with a community officer.

¹⁸ Interviewee who works as an office cleaner and co-owner of a toilet block run by a women's self-help group.

¹⁹ Participant of the focus group discussion.

2. The global South: Ghana, India, Kenya, Lesotho

d. Lesotho, Maseru

In Lesotho, researchers had some difficulty arranging the interviews. They had to obtain permission to speak to sanitation workers directly (rather than to management). Researchers were under the impression that (1) interviewees were reluctant to say that they are stigmatised and therefore gave overly positive answers; (2) the management level did not want interviewers to speak to sanitation workers directly and therefore arranged interviews with supervisors.

The most overtly negative reactions to sanitation work were experienced by cleaners of public toilets (publicly or privately run). Most cleaners regularly experience customers who leave the toilets behind dirty and then tell the cleaners that it is their job to clean the toilets. Customers also often say that the job of the cleaner is a low profession.

*“They seem very self-confident and therefore do not mind what other people say about them or about their work. Although the majority of the people respects them and is thankful for their work, some people are very insulting: they make the toilets dirty and tell them that they have to clean, because they are the cleaners and are often told their job is very low”.*²⁰

*“Sometimes she gets insulted, some customers even say: ‘You just have this job, because we are making the toilets dirty. So be thankful and clean them!’”.*²¹

Toilet cleaners generally told interviewers that they experienced no negative reactions to their job in their private lives. There was one notable exception from the only male toilet cleaner interviewed (of the 9 toilet cleaners interviewed, only one was male).

*“He sometimes also feels stigmatised out of the working hours [not by customers]. Even some of his friends from school do not want to have contact with him anymore, because they say he is disgusting, because he deals with faeces. He often hears that his job is not good for him, because it is a job for women. They call him sometimes a woman, because he cleans the toilets”.*²²

Like in other countries where interviews were held, many interviewees are not happy with their profession. Particularly the cleaners interviewed reported that they had little education and therefore no other job options. Owners of sewage truck companies in contrast told interviewers that sanitation was good business and were happy with their profession.

²⁰ Excerpt from an interview with two senior supervisors of a private cleaning services company in Maseru.

²¹ Excerpt from an interview with a cleaner of public toilets at the Maseru City Council.

²² Excerpt from an interview with a cleaner of a public toilet at a bus stop, run by a private company.

2. The global South: Ghana, India, Kenya, Lesotho

d. Lesotho, Maseru

“She did not have another possibility than working as a cleaner [first on the streets, now at the toilets], because she is low educated. She says: ‘Any job is better than no job, because you need the money to pay for food and for the school fees!’”²³

“Both of them started to work in the sanitation sector because they did not find another job or have low education to qualify for other jobs”.²⁴

“For him sanitation is mainly business – he sees great business potential in it. Therefore he quit his firm doing construction work, when WASCO handed the emptying of septic tanks to private firms. He is very happy because business runs much better in the sanitation sector than in the construction sector”.²⁵

“He says that some [other] people are interested to work in the sanitation sector themselves as they see sanitation as a business chance”.²⁶

The first and very crucial point to overcoming stigma(tization) is the realisation that it does exist and that it should be addressed. An interview with a manager in Lesotho suggests that the existence of stigma(tization) may be denied or belittled, particularly by those who do not experience it themselves.

“She does not feel any stigmatisation personally because of her job and she also thinks that there is no stigmatisation of the actual sanitation workers. She says that sanitation and hygiene has always been part of Basotho culture and therefore, sanitation workers will not get stigmatised in the society. If the people sometimes say little insults to them, this is just a joke, like the jokes you do about accountants or any other profession”.²⁷

²³ Excerpt from an interview with a cleaner of public toilets at the Maseru City Council.

²⁴ Excerpt from an interview with two senior supervisors of a private cleaning services company in Maseru.

²⁵ Excerpt from an interview with the owner of a company established ten months ago and that empties septic tanks. WASCO (Water and Sewerage Company) is a former government agency, now a private company, that is responsible for water and sanitation in urban areas in Lesotho. The market for emptying septic tanks is open to private companies, but is still coordinated by WASCO.

²⁶ Excerpt from an interview with a sewage truck company owner from Maseru who has been working in the sanitation sector for four years

²⁷ Excerpt from an interview with a Supervisor at the Maseru City Council Department of Health and Environment. The Department is responsible for solid waste management, two clinics and the 13 public toilets in Maseru.

Stigma(tization) of sanitation workers in “the global south” is often grounded in rational fears. When sewage disposal work is done manually, the work is extremely unhygienic and hazardous to human health. As a result, sanitation workers are stigmatised and discriminated against in certain circumstances. In settlements where sanitation facilities and their surroundings are inadequate, the only solution to overcome this “rational” type of stigmatization is the improvement of facilities themselves. Where manual sewage disposal is the only option because of the physical structure of facilities or the inaccessibility of areas for vehicles, stigmatization and resultant discrimination will be very difficult to overcome.

Yet stigmatization of sanitation workers also exists where the work itself is not unhygienic. The stigma then seems to be attached more to poverty than to sanitation work itself. The interviews with toilet cleaners in particular highlight a culture of disrespect towards people who – for reasons of poverty, low education and, notably in the case of India, social origin – have no other options but to work as toilet cleaners and in other unskilled professions that are perceived as dirty. Interestingly, the “higher ranks” of sanitation workers seem to face no stigmatization, as the interviews with sewage truck company owners and managers in Lesotho suggest.

In “the global north”, sanitation work still receives many giggles and at times disbelief in the choice of profession. Lack of knowledge among the general population regarding the amount of work and skill that is needed to maintain highly engineered waste water disposal systems has become apparent in the interviews.

Raising awareness about the importance of adequate sanitation and the proper use of sanitation facilities seems to be the key to work against these types of stigmatization. Where characteristics outside the profession (poverty, low education, social origin) constitute a stigma, wider measures will need to be taken to overcome disrespect, stigmatization and discrimination of particular groups in society.

Examples of stigmatization of users of facilities show that – apart from ensuring that sanitation facilities are accessible for those with special needs – raising awareness can overcome stigmatization. The stigma attached to HIV/Aids has lessened as people have learned that HIV/Aids cannot be transmitted simply through the shared use of sanitation facilities. This gives reason for optimism. As sanitation workers in the global North

indicated; more awareness by the population on the system of disposal and treatment of wastewater would lead to more conscious behaviour and greater respect towards their profession. When tackling the taboo on this topic, people will be less inclined to see this profession as embarrassing or disgusting. Especially in the global South we have seen that people often lack respect, or were excluded from society.

Awareness raising and tackling taboos will open the door to inclusion and respect by society.

Another reason for optimism is the pride in the profession that some interviewees expressed. Many sanitation workers are aware and proud of the importance of the work they do, regardless of the conditions they are working under. It may not be the “dream job” for many, but sanitation work can of course be a good and honourable profession. Again, boosting awareness about the importance of this profession and the importance of adequate sanitation and adequate sanitation work for all seems key to overcome stigmatization.



WASH United is a coalition of international and local civil society organizations, United Nations agencies, governments and leading actors from the world of sport.

One of the main goals of WASH United is to promote the realization of the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation.

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Questionnaire: Sanitation workers

Interview questions: The interview should be semi-structured/guided. So it's not always necessary to ask every question, nor do the questions need to be asked in a particular order. Some questions might not apply to the interview or might need rewording. The questions are just a guide to get the interview going and to keep a common thread. We are looking for information/ stories that show that stigmatization exists, what effect it has, why it happens and what is/can be done against it. If there are any questions/topics that come up in the interview but are not covered by the list of questions, feel free to pursue them!

Our working definition of stigmatization is: Social stigma(tization) is the severe disapproval of or discontent with a person on the grounds of characteristics that distinguish them from other members of a society.

- 1 What were your reasons to start working in this sector?
- 2 How would you describe your profession to someone new? (Would you for example refer to sanitation/sewage disposal directly, or just mention the aspect of water in your profession?)
- 3 How do people around you react when you first tell them about your profession?
- 4 Do you sometimes feel you have to 'defend' your choice of working in this sector?
- 5 Are people in general aware of the importance of your profession?
- 6 To what extent do you have the feeling that people respect your profession? Or that they are thankful for the work you do? If not, what could be done to improve this?
- 7 Did your job, the actual work, change over the last 10, 15, 20 years?
- 8 Do you feel that opinions from people around you differ between now, and 10, 15, 20 years ago? If so, why do you think this is?
- 9 To what extent can you state that sanitation issues, and your profession, is still a "taboo-topic" in your country? What effect does this have on you personally? How could this be changed?
- 10 Do you have any examples of people reacting in a negative way to your profession?
- 11 Are you happy with your choice of profession? What would you like to change? Can you change anything?
- 12 Do you and your family have adequate sanitation at home? If not, why not?

Interviewees

Country	Position of interviewees	Number of interviewees
Germany	Canal workers (different positions), canal service station	About 20
Germany	Manager, canal service station	1
Ghana	Office cleaner	1
Ghana	Sanitation workers at a private company	--
India	Current and former manual scavengers	10
Kenya	Community officer	1
Kenya	Cleaner	1
Kenya	Toilet owner and cleaner	2
Kenya	Group of community members	10
Lesotho	Toilet cleaner	7
Lesotho	Senior supervisor of toilet cleaners	2
Lesotho	Assistant to the CEO, Water and Sewage Company (WASCO)	1
Lesotho	Owner, sewage truck company	3
Lesotho	Truck driver, sewage truck company	1
Lesotho	Plumber, self-employed	1
Lesotho	Supervisor, Maseru City Council Department of Health and Environment	1
Netherlands	Workers at water and sanitation service provider	2
Netherlands	Managers at water and sanitation service provider	2