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Informal waste workers on Lagos dumpsites: analysis of gender difference in sources of livelihood

Adeola A. Obadina, Julie Fisher & M. Sohail (UK)

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Lagos, a city in southwest Nigeria, has been identified as one of the fastest growing cities in the world. The problem of waste management has led to various initiatives to tackle the mounting heaps of waste in Nigeria's cities. The government has supported the introduction of the private sector in waste collection. However, the process of solid waste management does not stop with waste collection. With the gap created in the waste management process, transportation of waste to dump sites provides the informal waste sector with a source of livelihood. This paper reports on fieldwork that incorporates observation, and qualitative research methods. The findings reveal gender differences in the livelihoods available to women in the informal waste sector, specifically focusing on waste scavengers, based on tool usage and waste specialization.

Introduction

Rapid urbanisation of low-income cities and a lack of resources to provide the necessary infrastructure often result in ineffective disposal and management of solid waste (Medina, 2000). The inability of municipal authorities to cope with these challenges results in waste being dumped on vacant land and often burnt in the open air (Medina, 2000). However, there has been an increase in privatisation of solid waste collection services. While has been identified to improve solid waste management in some parts of low-income countries (Kassim & Ali, 2006; Cointreau-Levine, 1994), waste materials are still left uncollected in other areas. Consequently, the informal waste sector plays an important role in compensating for the inadequacy of formal waste management schemes. The men and women who work in this informal sector make up nearly 2 per cent of the world's population, making their living from the collection, recovery, sorting and recycling of waste (Medina, 2000).

In Lagos, a city in southwest Nigeria, solid waste management currently involves private sector participation (PSP) in collection (Idowu et al., 2011). This PSP is known to have some setbacks that have created sources of livelihood for the informal sector workers, that not only collect waste but are also involved in transportation and recycling of waste. Nzeadibe & Iwuoha (2008) estimated that 3000 waste pickers exist in Lagos. Olugbenga (2006) identified that the informal waste sector in Lagos includes waste scavengers, itinerant waste buyers and merchants, although there is no differentiation by gender. The association of waste workers at Olusosun dumpsite consists of 83.4 per cent men and 16.6 per cent women (Afon, 2012), although the different roles they play are not discussed. This paper identifies the various waste activities on five Lagos dumpsites and the corresponding differences by gender in roles, participation, tool usage and waste specialisation.

Research methodology

The data for this paper is the product of doctoral research and comprises observation and interviews. The fieldwork was conducted between July and August 2011. Access to the four government-managed dump sites (Olusosun, Solous 2 and 3 and Ewu-elepe, see Figure 1) began with an initial request to Lagos State Waste Management Authority (LAWMA) and Lagos State Environmental Protection Authority (LASEPA)

for permission to visit these dump sites. The fifth dumpsite (Akanimodo) is not government-managed. In total, 305 questionnaires and 52 interviews were completed. 117 male scavengers, 62 female scavengers, 43 male cart pushers, 18 male waste buyers, 20 female waste buyers, 28 male waste merchants, six female waste merchants, seven male private sector participants (PSP) operators and four female PSP operators were involved in the survey. The 52 interviewees also consisted of 20 female scavengers, 13 male scavengers, three male waste buyers, four female waste buyers, two cart pushers, two male waste merchants, two female waste merchants, three male PSP operators and three female PSP operators.



Figure 1. Map of Lagos showing location of dumpsites visited.

Source: https://www.google.co.uk

Livelihood activities on Lagos dumpsites

Observation at the five dumpsites visited revealed five main activities; these are described below:

Scavengers

Scavengers are the starting point of waste recovery at all dumpsites as they hastily run to the waste brought to the dumpsites. They recover waste materials like clothing, plastic, PET bottles, papers, shoe soles and metals. This is a job for both men and women, although men outnumber women by about 30 to two. Male scavengers can be seen climbing the waste trucks to search for waste materials, while some also run in between the waste trucks as they are evacuating their waste. The women, however, do not get as close to the trucks as this. Scavengers can be seen working in groups of either men or women. Usually, the men begin work at the dumpsites earlier than the women. At Olusosun dumpsite male scavengers could be seen waiting at the gates around 8.30am for the 9.00am opening time. Some of them work till about 18.00pm in the evening, while others could still be seen around the gates after this period. However, female scavengers usually begin work from 11am or later. This difference is attributed to the women taking care of their family before coming to work (Obadina, 2014).

Dump waste buyers

Dump waste buyers are a group who buy waste materials from the cart pushers and scavengers. They are both men and women, most of whom were formerly scavengers, but who become less active in that role due to age or health-related issues or through a decision to start buying waste. Some female waste buyers purchase and resell nylon as packaging material.

Cart pushers

Cart pushers collect domestic waste from households for a fee and transport it to a dumpsite. They are referred to locally as "barro boys". They also sort out recyclables and sell these to dump waste buyers. They are unrecognized and unregulated by the waste management authority. However, their services are often needed as they compensate for the inefficiencies in waste collection offered by PSP operators. In contrast to

the PSP operators who collect waste from households only once or twice a week, they are more readily available for collection anytime during the week and at weekends.

They are also more conspicuous in the low-income areas of the state. They receive ₦20 (£0.08) for a small bag of waste (about 20-30 kilogrammes). These groups of waste actors were found at Akanimodo, Solous 1 and Solous 3 dumpsites. They are mostly men from the northern part of Nigeria. This activity was said to be strenuous work by 70 per cent of the waste workers surveyed.

Waste merchants

Unlike the waste scavengers and dump waste buyers the waste merchants only visit the dumpsites to buy recovered materials. They buy waste materials from dump waste buyers and scavengers in large quantities, then load and resell this to industry. An arrangement where male Hausa waste merchants (from the northern part of Nigeria) bring in male Hausa waste scavengers to work at dump sites while acting as their surety was also observed at dumpsites. None of the female waste merchants interviewed admitted to such an arrangement.

Private Sector Participants (PSP)

PSP operators collect both industrial and domestic wastes. Unlike the cart pushers, they collect waste and transport it to the dumpsite without any sorting or waste recovery. The group includes both men and women who employ people to work for them.

Scavengers' working practices

Waste scavengers' working practices were differentiated by the use of a tool and by their working conditions. This section provides findings on their use of tools, working conditions, waste specialization, and the differences observed for men and women.

Tool use

Observation at all the dumpsites visited revealed that no mechanised tools were used. The main tool in use is a metal hook (locally referred to as an "akoro") which is used in conjunction with a pair of gloves and a sack. The akoro is made of heavy cast iron (weighing approximately 2 kg) usually with cloth wrapped around the end of it to make it easier to handle. Use of this tool is restricted to male scavengers; the female scavengers use their hands although they also wear gloves. The following are statements from both male and female scavengers about the reasons for this difference:

"This tool (metal hook) increases my speed and makes picking easier, I only need to throw the tool forward, and it digs" (PID1 34, male scavenger).

"It makes my work easier, faster with less stress" (PID 24, male scavenger).

"We women have used the metal hook in the past but it hurts our muscles; it does more harm to us than good whenever we use it, as lifting is a problem" (PID 20, female scavenger).

Lifting the tool was identified as a challenge for women. The men also acknowledge the physical effort required in using the akoro but feel they are better able to deal with this. Both the men and the women believe that men's strength is superior to that of women's, thereby justifying the different working practices of each.

Gender differences in waste specialisation

Male scavengers at the dumpsites visited recover waste materials such as shoes, roofing materials, electronic, metal and other metal-related materials. However, female scavengers' interests are in PET bottles, paper, and polythene packaging material (commonly referred to as nylon). According to the male scavengers they are more interested in metal-related materials as they have a higher economic value attached to them. The interest of male scavengers in metal and its ability to generate more profit has been identified in past studies on waste management (Mitchell, 2008; Kofoworola, 2007). Metals and related materials were also

[1] PID: Personal Identification number (for purposes of this study)

identified as one of the materials of higher value and selling price in Lagos (Kofoworola, 2007). In spite of this, the women collect lower economic value materials as already described. One of the reasons for female specialization in less lucrative materials is related to their perceived limited skills and knowledge on certain materials. A female scavenger says:

"We women cannot pick metals or electronic material that we have no experience or know nothing about, it is men specialty. We have always specialized in nylon, PET bottles, it has always been what women have been picking since I started here" (PID: 30, female scavenger).

These were supported by the two statements below which all the women acknowledged:

"We women use our hand to pick waste materials as we only pick PET bottles and nylon. We cannot dig like men who use "Akoro" (PID: 28, female).

"Some of the men can sometimes become very stubborn and troublesome while we are all searching for materials. When we pick the same thing it could lead to a fight, so it is always better we pick different material to maintain peace" (PID: 29, Female scavenger).

These responses from female scavengers underline the gendered notion of work. Firstly, they attribute a lack of experience or knowledge to their particular waste specialization. Secondly, preconceived beliefs (or existing ways of work) shape the role of women in this sector. Furthermore, the need to coexist, avoid conflict and build peace was identified from the responses of the female waste scavengers.

However, despite female scavengers' efforts to maintain the peace, the men do not share the same perspective as women. One of the male scavengers responded thus:

"Scavengers job is not one in which women will just come in and start competing with men. We men are stronger than them. When men and women are to do same job, there are lots of advantage for men over women. If five men and five women are scavenging for ten items I know all the men will pick before the women. If five men and five women are fighting for eight things all the men will take and two women will be left out. There are certain materials that we give to women that even weak men will not pick; this material is PET bottle" (PID: 15, male).

The physical differences between men and women are obvious in terms of their weight, size and strength. The male scavengers, being aware of this, use it to their advantage.

Conclusion

This study has identified the gender differences inherent in waste livelihoods in five dumpsites in Lagos. These can be linked directly to tool usage and consequent waste specialization. Certain categories of waste collection, which require strength but are the most lucrative, are considered suitable only for men. This stereotyping constrains and segregates the women by assigning them to collecting a limited range of waste materials, which result in the lowest economic return. Respondent PID 15 above has control over day-to-day affairs (including workers' entry) at the dumpsite. This suggests that these inequalities exist and are perpetuated at a structural level, although further endorsed by the men and the women themselves.

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Contact details

Adeola A.Obadina
WEDC, Loughborough University
Leicestershire, United Kingdom
Tel: +447737992739
Email: A.A.Obadina@lboro.ac.uk

Dr. Julie Fisher
WEDC, Loughborough University
Leicestershire, United Kingdom
Tel:+44(0)1509222393
Email:J.Fisher1@lboro.ac.uk