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Traditional municipal sweepers in Faisalabad and Karachi

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Abstract

The work of waste disposal is associated with low social status across countries and cultural contexts, and this kind of unpleasant work is eschewed by workers with other options. Moreover, the handling of unwanted material may transmit the trait of ‘unwantedness’ to the worker. In the South Asian context, a religiously endorsed hierarchy of occupations is thought to maintain the association of waste handling with ‘contamination’. Municipal waste disposal has undergone significant changes over the last two decades – with important shifts in the composition of waste material, the economic and social value of recycling, and the increased outsourcing of tasks.

This study aims to investigate the relationship between work and status under these changing conditions in two large cities of Pakistan – Faisalabad and Karachi. It builds on existing research on the municipal waste management system in these cities spanning a period of over two decades. The main focus of the study is on ‘traditional municipal sweepers’ – frontline street cleaners and handlers of solid waste, and communities which have provided the mainstay of this frontline workforce.

These communities are well-known, and are both historically and currently considered, to be socially marginalised. In Faisalabad the main bulk of municipal sweepers has come from ‘low’ caste Christians and

Changar Muslim communities who are spoken of as being recent (and somewhat tentative) converts to Islam. In Karachi, besides 'low' caste Punjabi Christians, municipal sweepers have come mostly from Scheduled Caste Hindu communities of various ethnicity – Gujarati, Kachhi and Marwari. We used a range of qualitative research methods including key informant interviews, individual and household level interviews with current and retired workers, and direct observations, to first select urban neighbourhoods with high concentrations of these communities for detailed fieldwork, and then to draw out key issues and themes in the lives, livelihoods and living conditions of individuals and communities associated with municipal cleaning and waste disposal work.

The unpleasantness of the work and the association of workers with unwanted material remain important factors in shaping how members of these communities are seen by others, and also in part, how they see themselves. 'Sweeping' is not simply the act of wielding a broom, and invariably includes the possibility that the worker may be called upon to handle not only dry solid waste but also to carry out sanitation work involving human waste. Many elements of untouchability which were ascribed by Pakistan's predominantly Islamic polity to Hindu inequality are actively practiced, discriminating against non-Muslim citizens from historically marginalised communities. The entrenchment of these identities implicates other features – such as geographic clustering of neighbourhoods with some degree of agency, autonomy and collective action within – as well as instrumental use of women's bodies, and the spaces they may or may not safely occupy, to ascribe status.

Technological changes in the sector and in the handling of solid waste have hardly disrupted this steady entrenchment. The greater availability of recyclable waste has led to more work, and upward economic mobility for some individuals within some sweeper communities. Education has presented another avenue of mobility but is effectively available to only a few. Greater labour market diversification and the availability of new jobs in the health and personal sectors with some dilution of 'contamination' have offered improved prospects, particularly in Karachi. In the meanwhile, workers from marginalised identity groups see private sector employers adopting practices institutionalised in municipalities of steering them towards sweeping.

Introduction

The Rubbish, Resources and Residue (RRR) research project examines changes in the technology and governance of solid waste management systems across cities and countries. The present report offers an analytical summary of findings of qualitative research on 'traditional municipal sweepers' (TMS) in two large cities of Pakistan – Faisalabad and Karachi. The term 'traditional municipal sweeper' calls for an explanation. For the purposes of this study, it refers to individuals and communities that represent and have represented the bulk, if not all, of the workers employed in the category of 'sweeper' by municipal bodies in the two cities. The implication here is that municipal sweepers belong to, or have traditionally belonged to, compact groups that are readily identifiable using markers that are external to their profession.

At one level this identification is almost trivial. If we ask any informed observer of municipal government systems in these cities, or refer to any historical text,

we get uniformly predictable responses. 'Low caste' Punjabi Christians – historically and derogatorily referred to as *Chuhra* – form one important segment of the sweepers employed by municipal authorities in both Faisalabad and Karachi (Grit 2019, Butt 2018, O'Brien 2012, Beall 1997, 2002 and 2006, Ali 1997, and Streefland 1979). In Faisalabad there are also people belonging to another category – including appellations such as 'Changar', 'Nau Muslim Rajput', and 'Deendar'. In Karachi Hindu Scheduled Castes of various ethnicity – Gujarati, Kachhi and Marwari – are counted among traditional municipal sweepers. These groups may have nothing else in common except for the fact that they happen to have provided most, if not all, of the workforce of municipal sweepers in our two cities. Identity markers of ethnicity, caste and religion are just some of the more obvious ones that differentiate these communities from one another, and from communities that are not associated, traditionally, with municipal sweeping services.

This study aims to add to the existing body of scholarship on the relationship between group-based

identities and work that is regarded, almost universally, as low-paid, unsafe, unpleasant and ‘contaminating’. The disposal of waste – or material considered to be of no value to its owners – is regarded as undesirable work across cultures. Unwanted material appears to impart its unwantedness on the work of handling it, and on the hands that do the handling (Butt 2018 and 2022, Beall 1997 and 2006). The ideological imprint of a vertically aligned hierarchy of caste which ritually orders matter, the act and condition of handling matter, and the hands that handle matter, shapes perspectives on waste work and workers across South Asia (Beall 1997 and 2006).

What is the relationship between waste work and social status? Are waste workers marginalised due to the work they do, or are workers from the most socially and politically marginalised communities deemed to work with waste through discrimination and exclusion? These questions are not new, and there are not likely to be uniquely applicable answers. They have been addressed in different contexts, at different times, using a variety of methods. Answers to these questions are important for challenging marginality, and for a proper understanding of the sector as well as how changes in technology and organisation might alter the relationship between work and status.

Faisalabad and Karachi in 2021 offer useful vantage points. Municipal services in these cities have undergone significant reforms – outsourcing in one case and corporatisation in the other – with implications for municipal workers and their communities. Like other cities globally that have experienced economic growth and changing patterns of consumption, Karachi and Faisalabad have seen shifts in the quantity and variety of solid waste. Recycling has emerged as a major sub-sector in solid waste management in both cities, involving traditional municipal sweepers as well as workers from other communities. Detailed studies are available from around twenty years ago in both cities by way of comparison with a time before some of these major changes in the sector had set in (Beall 1997, Ali 1997).

The present study revisits the solid waste sector in Faisalabad and Karachi from the viewpoint of understanding continuity and change in the lives, experiences and opportunities of women and men

from traditional municipal sweeper communities in the two cities. Our focus on the workers and the communities takes us to neighbourhoods where individuals from these communities reside in large numbers to learn more about their living conditions, work, and mobility. A primary focus, of course, is on the processes of marginalisation (and mainstreaming) which are experienced by individual women and men, as well as entire groups of people identified by social markers including occupation, caste and religion experience and have experienced.

The next section gives an account of the qualitative research methodology used for this study. A brief description of survey sites and communities is provided in the succeeding section, and the following one after that focuses on various aspects of the working lives of individuals from traditional municipal communities. Mobility is discussed in the next section. There is then a section exploring the various dimensions of social identity (occupation, caste, kinship, religion, neighbourhood) that are salient in the stories from our communities of interest, as these turned out to be a significant factor in our analysis. The penultimate section of this paper returns to the initial question about work and status, and lastly, conclusions are offered in the final section.

Methodology

This study is based mainly on interviews conducted with women and men from TMS communities in Faisalabad and Karachi. The research can be divided into two phases. The first phase consisted of a review of existing published and unpublished material, including notes and interview transcripts from earlier studies in Faisalabad and Karachi. Exploratory interviews were also conducted with key informants and workers involved in cleaning and waste disposal who were accessed through personal contacts. This first phase was used to gain a description of the sector and to identify TMS communities and neighbourhoods with high concentrations of residents belonging to TMS communities as survey sites in each city for further interviews. The second phase of the study consisted of a series of interactions – such as interviews and observations – in those selected survey sites.

First phase: identification of TMS communities and survey sites

Researchers from the core team and experienced local researchers were hired to conduct key informant interviews (KIIs) with respondents associated with the waste sector including workers in cleaning and sanitation work in the private and public sectors, supervisors, contractors, waste pickers, domestic workers as well as retired workers. These KIIs were divided into the KIIs of Faisalabad (KIIFs) and those of Karachi (KIIFs). More than 15 KIIs were conducted in each city, and in Karachi the notes and interviews from earlier studies conducted by the authors were also used. Interviews were conducted either in Urdu or Punjabi. A checklist was used to guide semi-structured conversations which were aimed at gaining knowledge about the waste sector in general and for the identification and selection of sites with residents working as traditional municipal sweepers for the second phase of the study. Besides these interviews (and notes from earlier studies), the first phase of the study also collected both published and unpublished literature relating to the sector in Faisalabad and Karachi, as well as relevant material from comparable settings in Pakistan and elsewhere.

Second phase: qualitative fieldwork in selected survey sites

Survey sites were selected in Faisalabad and Karachi based on the findings of the first phase, and in consultation with local researchers. Survey sites were selected from neighbourhoods which had been identified as having a high concentration of households belonging to TSM communities. The sites also needed to represent diverse TSM communities within each city. Three sites were selected in Faisalabad, and two in Karachi.

In Faisalabad we ended up selecting Barkatpura, Ghousia Town, Dar-ul-Ahsan and Jhugiyana Satiana Road. Barkatpura is a mostly Christian locality which provides many workers to the municipal waste disposal services. Ghousia Town, Dar-ul-Ahsan and Jhugiyana Satiana are known in the city as predominantly Changan/Deendar neighbourhoods whose residents include many municipal workers as well as people engaged in recycling work.

In Karachi we selected Narainpura in the old city area where Schedule Caste Hindus of different ethnic groups – Gujarati, Kachhi and Marwari – reside. The second site in Karachi is Pahar Ganj, which is located

in a part of the city which was developed in the 1970s. One segment of Pahar Ganj is inhabited by Christian Punjabis, many of whom are or have been employed as municipal sweepers.

A community profiling exercise was conducted in each of the selected sites by the lead local researcher, outlining a number of basic features of the site including the general socio-economic conditions of its residents, common social identity markers in the site (such as ethnicity, religion, caste), infrastructure conditions, land ownership, tenure security, regularisation status, integration into municipal services, and a brief history of its development. The community profiles (CPs) were divided into the CPs in Faisalabad (CPFs) and CPs in Karachi (CPKs).

Based on community profiling exercises, the core project team and local researchers agreed on criteria for selecting individual respondents in each survey site. Generic criteria were to ensure the inclusion of women and men, currently employed and former workers, and individuals from various ethnic/caste groups from among the TSM communities. These in-depth interviews were to cover life histories (including migration, marriages, and occupation), household composition, income generation, and social networking. Work histories and current conditions of work, as well as social identity and status, were key areas of inquiry. More than 15 in-depth formal interviews excluding short informal interviews and observation were conducted in each site with women and men. The interview checklist was translated in Urdu and interviews were conducted mostly in respondents' languages by local researchers. A core team member was involved in community profiling, including field observations, and took part in some individual interviews. (IIs). These IIs are separated into those which were conducted in Faisalabad (IIFs) and those in Karachi (IIFs).

Limitations

The study was conducted under conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic. This had implications for the planning of face-to-face interviews. Following delays due to pandemic related restrictions on travel and in-person meetings, it was decided to experiment with alternative ways of approaching respondents and conducting interviews. This challenge remained even as government restrictions on movement and

distancing were relaxed, because of widespread violation of the limited guidelines that did exist, and the real danger of fieldworkers getting infected and infecting others. In fact, as official restrictions and guidelines loosened, sometimes in the face of evidence of the infection spreading, the research team needed to assume greater responsibility towards the safety of its own members and others with whom researchers were likely to be in contact.

Initially, the core team attempted to recruit local field researchers remotely using existing contacts in the cities and communities of interest. Potential local researchers who had been identified through various channels were engaged in a series of conversations by phone to both gauge their capacity and to familiarise them with the goals of the study. In addition to discussing the research, in fact, prior to any conversation about the research, core team members attempted to construct a picture of the ‘social bubble’ in which the potential local researcher normally operated. The idea was to get these local researchers to develop and use their contacts in the communities of interest to conduct interviews without disrupting their own or the respondents’ existing ‘social bubbles’.

This strategy was not successful. Although we were able to recruit potential local researchers through our connections with academics, journalists and activists, nearly all of them were from dominant communities. It proved to be difficult to contact, let alone recruit, potential researchers from within the communities of interest. There were few individuals from those communities who had the minimum level of education which was needed to conduct interviews and to convey findings. Those few educated individuals who were identified were apprehensive about becoming part of the study, either as researchers or as respondents. The local individuals we did recruit, mostly from dominant communities, did not have prior connections within communities of interest, and many of them were reluctant to come into contact with members of those communities.

Following the availability of vaccines and the lowering of the risk of infection it was decided to conduct in-person interviews while following safety protocols which were stronger than existing official guidelines. These protocols meant that it was often not possible to conduct in-person interviews of the quality and richness which would have been possible

prior to the pandemic. Before the pandemic, for example, lead qualitative researchers would spend considerable time in building up contacts and getting to know communities, establishing trust, as well as spending time with teams of locally recruited researchers training, supervising and mentoring their work. The normal pre-pandemic practice in qualitative fieldwork of having multiple informal group conversations was not advisable. Individual interviews needed to be conducted over shorter durations, and in open spaces, while also observing restrictions on the number of people present. Unlike pre-pandemic norms when all interviews would be conducted by a two-person team (moderator and note-taker), interviews were conducted by one person who combined the roles of moderation and note-taking.

The resulting material consists of interviews carried out under diverse conditions. They include phone interviews, interviews conducted by local researchers under remote as well as in-person supervision, and limited fieldwork carried out by a core research team member following safety protocols. While this material does not match the depth and richness of qualitative research that would normally be possible in non-pandemic conditions, it does offer the opportunity of observing some common patterns and insightful contrasts in the experiences and perceptions about work and status of respondents within and across cities, communities, sexes and age groups.

Documentation

Interviews were recorded and were also documented using interviewer notes. Interviewers prepared summaries in Urdu based on their own notes as well as audio recordings. These summaries were translated into English.

Brief description of survey sites

Faisalabad

The city of Lyallpur was established as an agricultural market town to service newly irrigated farmland in between the Ravi and Chenab rivers in western Punjab in the late 1880s. It was to emerge as an industrial hub for the textile sector which sourced its raw material from the surrounding countryside. The

region and the city became a recipient of waves of migration from eastern parts of the province as part of the settlement of canal colonies. It also witnessed a massive turnover in its population as a result of the partition of Punjab at the time of independence from British colonial rule. The district and the city of Lyallpur was renamed Faisalabad in late 1970s following the visit of King Faisal, the ruler of Saudi Arabia, to Pakistan (Mushtaq and Tohidahma 2012).

In the Population Census of 2017, Faisalabad District's population was recorded as being comprised of 7.8 million people, of which 3.7 million lived in officially designated urban areas. The Faisalabad City *tehsil* (township) had 3.2 million people (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics 2017).

The Faisalabad Municipal Corporation (FMC) was responsible for waste removal and street cleaning and its functions until 2001 when it was replaced by the City District Government Faisalabad (CDGF) as part of nationwide reforms in the local government system. Water supply and sewerage had been the responsibilities of the Water and Sanitation Agency since 1978. In 2013 the provincial government established the Faisalabad Waste Management Company (FWMC) as a not-for-profit company and transferred the waste disposal functions of CDGF and WASA to it. Currently there are 39 waste management zones across 157 Union Councils (UCs) with around 2,300 permanent sweepers and 2,000 on "work charge" or daily wage workers.¹

After exploratory interviews in Faisalabad as part of first phase of the study, we had selected five neighbourhoods for detailed fieldwork. Barkatpura and Warispura are adjacent localities in the city centre, with a predominantly Christian population. For the purposes of this study, we treat Barkatpura/Warispura as one site. Jhugriyan Satiana Road is a Changar settlement near the city centre, close to the site of a toll collection point which used to mark an entrance into the city. Ghousia Town (also known as Chak 7-JB, with 'chak' meaning a village settlement) and Dar-ul-Ahsan Town are predominantly Changar localities on the outskirts of the city.

Barkatpura/Warispura

Barkatpura and Warispura are two adjacent neighbourhoods in Union Council 89, with similar histories, infrastructure and social dynamics. We had selected Barkatpura as our survey site because it has a high concentration of Christians, many of whom work as municipal sweepers, but did end up conducting interviews in Warispura as well, which also has many residents from the same community. Barkatpura was established about 50 years ago as a formally planned settlement. It consists of four blocks. Blocks A, B and C are mostly inhabited by Muslims, while Block D is a predominantly Christian neighbourhood. Our qualitative fieldwork focused on Block D of Barkatpura and the adjoining segments of Warispura.

Block D of Barkatpura has around 400 households, and a majority of them are Christian. The Christians, who are also referred to as Maseeh (alternatively written as Masih), are mostly Roman Catholic. Several sub-castes – including Matto, Ghori, Khokhar, Sodhay, Bhatti and Sahotray – are to be found among the Maseeh. Almost all residents speak Punjabi and are Punjabi by ethnicity. There are two large Catholic churches, and they offer educational and other facilities to registered members from the community. Many families are migrants from adjacent districts. Many women have migrated here due to marriages in Faisalabad.²

Amenities such as electric and gas supply, private and public schools are available within the main settlement and other amenities such as banks, government offices, and colleges can be found within a five-kilometre radius from the neighbourhood. Most homes have motor pumps for accessing groundwater for drinking and other purposes. There are underground sewage pipes which are connected to a main drain. Two FWMC sweepers are assigned for street cleaning in Block D.

Many of the Maseeh residents, men and women, are associated with sweeping and sanitation work for the municipality, or for private sector employers. Casual daily wage labour, as sweepers or in other sectors such as construction, is a common occupation among men. Women are employed as house help,

¹ KIIF (key informant interview Faisalabad)-39.

² IIF (individual interview Faisalabad)-102; KIIF-30.

particularly to do '*safia ka kaam*' (referring to cleaning work). The daily wage in Faisalabad is round 600 Pakistani rupees.

The neighbourhood is formally recognised and houses are built on plots with legal title. The residents are either owner-occupiers or rent from individual, mostly local, landlords who also belong to the Maseeh community. The original plots of the D Block measured five *marla* (100 square yards) which got sub-divided over successive generations. Many of the property disputes in the area related to claims of multiple legal heirs to parental homes, and there is a rising trend among women heirs demanding their legal shares.³

Ghousia Town

Ghousia Town is a large residential scheme straddling two Union Councils (UC 11 and UC 12) of the Metropolitan Corporation Faisalabad. We selected Ghousia Town I, which is in UC 11 also known as Chak 7JB Panjwari.⁴ We selected it as a survey site because it has a high concentration of the two main communities of our interest. There are over 1,000 Christian and Changar households in the area. The rural origins of Ghousia Town are of some significance. Canal colony villages in this part of the province have land set aside for residential use by 'village servants' – generally members of non-agricultural occupational castes including labourers and sweepers.

Christian and Changar households claim that they reside on the '*ahata*' and '*ezafi raqba*' of the old village respectively. An *ahata* consists of the area of the village settlement designated for the use of village servants. *Ezafi Raqba* refers to land adjacent to the main settlement which could be brought into residential use by the village owners for themselves or for their service castes. In principle, families residing on the *Ahata* or *Ezafi Raqba* do so with the permission of, and at the pleasure of, the village owners. In practice they enjoy differing degrees of security with respect to the possession of their

homesteads, depending on the duration of stay and the relatively political power of village owners. They do not, however, enjoy private property rights to their homestead land. Municipal services such as street sweeping and sanitation, are not provided in the *Ahata/Ezafi Raqba*.

The Ghousia Town Union Council was selected as one of the 'model' union councils to be developed under the Faisalabad Area Upgradation Plan (FAUP) project. Although Ghousia Town has already been urbanised, the FAUP intervention accelerated the development of infrastructure with the construction of roads, street paving and lighting, and drainage. Water and gas pipes were also laid, but the area has not yet been connected to the supply of these services. The FAUP works included all parts of Ghousia Town including those segments inhabited by Christians and Changars in the *Ahata* and *Ezafi Raqba* which still do not enjoy land title.

Even though the Christian and Changar segments of Ghousia Town have access to similar services as the rest of the Union Council, the differences between them and the more 'mainstream' parts are clearly visible. Open spaces adjacent to the Christian segment is used as dumping grounds for solid waste from all over Ghousia Town. The Changar segment is also clearly identifiable. Homes and streets are used for storing and sorting recycled waste and donkey carts and motorcycle mini trucks used for collecting material for recycling are much in evidence.

Dar-ul-Ahsan Town: Block-A

Dar-ul-Ahsan Town was developed at the initiative of Sufi Barkat, a Muslim religious leader who was known for carrying out missionary work in the Changar community. Sufi Barkat and his organisation were facilitated by the government to develop a residential colony for newly converted Muslims – from Changar and/or Deendar to Nau-Muslim Rajput – on state-owned land. Dar-ul-Ahsan Town was established some 35 years ago, housing around 600 Nau-Muslim Rajput families. The

³ IIF-102.

⁴ Chak 7JB Panjwari is the name of the village whose land became UC 11. Village names continue to be used to identify union councils.

neighbourhood is located in UC 136, around ten kilometers from Faisalabad city centre along the embankment of an irrigation drain which has now serves as an open sewer. Many of these families moved here from various settlements from around the city, including Jhugiyān Satiana Road, People's Colony and Ghousia Town. All homes are 'pucca' (meaning durable) structures. They have electricity supply and have been promised gas connections. There are no government services insight the settlement, and it is managed by Sufi Barkat's organisation. A school was started by the organisation some five years ago. A majority of resident households are involved in waste recycling work. Some men and women are employed as sweepers by the FWMC. Women and children from the poorest households, particularly those with no male breadwinners are involved in begging and street-vending.

Jhugiyān Satiana Road

The word 'jhugi' refers to a one room dwelling or shelter made from non-durable material such as sticks, bushes, and rags stitched together. It is often used to convey the temporary nature of a dwelling and is associated with nomadic populations. In many rural areas, jhugi also indicates a family unit – or the inhabitants of one dwelling. Jhugiyān Satiana Road is a cluster of around 40 family dwellings of the Changar community, located off a main road leading into the old city centre, but not visible from the road. Jhugiyān Satiana Road is the least developed of all our fieldwork sites. Homes are makeshift structures erected using mud walls, small pieces of timber, and reeds, and covered with tents and stitched-together rags. The little furniture that people have is mostly used and damaged. None of the homes have electricity, gas, water supply or in-door latrines. Food is cooked on mud stoves using waste wood. Residents purchase drinking water sold in canisters. There are no municipal sweeping or waste disposals services in the area.

The settlement has existed for over 20 years, and is seen to be temporary in the sense that its residents live here at the pleasure of a landlord from the locally-influential Kamoka Jat kinship group. The land of the settlement is the private property of Kamoka landlords, who remind the Changar residents of their power over them by threatening them eviction from

time to time. The Changars live on two plots of land that are divided by a road, and are closed off on three sides by the walled compound of a residential scheme. They were moved here by a Kamoka landlord from another location which also belonged to him. The landlord family is known to be involved in violent crime and has also become influential in electoral politics. There have been allegations of abduction, rape and sexual harassment of Changar women and girls at the hands of the men of this family and their associates.

The 40 families share a common ancestor. They say that they are 'Deendar' by religion. There is a story of migration from Amritsar in Indian Punjab at some time in the 1960s. The migration was led by the head of the village in Amritsar. The group initially remained intact under the village head after migration, but then dispersed into smaller family units. None of the adults in the settlement have any formal education, and few children go to school. Men work as rag-pickers and sweepers, the latter mostly as casual wage labourers for the FWMC. One man has a permanent job with the company, but he too does not enjoy all the benefits of regular employment. Women mostly work at home. They do housework, but also take care of livestock, and help in sorting waste for recycling. Many of the adults do Computerised National Identity Cards (CNICs), and those who do possess these documents, are often listed as residing at other places. At election time the landlord whose family is also active in electoral politics simply instructs them whom to vote for.

Karachi

Karachi is Pakistan's largest city with over 16 million residents. It is the country's main port and commercial centre. Karachi Division has seven districts – South, Central, East, West, Kaemari, Korangi, and Malir. Independence from colonial rule and the partition of India in 1947 represented an important milestone in the city's development. Much of the city in 1947 was within what is now District South. This included the original pre-colonial town, as well as other parts of what may be referred to as the old city. The pace of suburban development accelerated in the 1947 when Karachi hosted waves of migration – firstly partition migrants from India, and then from other parts of Pakistan.

Karachi's history is also one of successive waves of formalisation. In the colonial period, regularisation of informally settled neighbourhoods alongside infrastructure development in those areas was seen as an important municipal function. Regularisation slowed down notably after 1947 when the focus of urban planning shifted to the establishment of planned housing schemes for migrants. But this period also saw a rapid increase in number and size of informal settlements. Regularisation was restarted in the 1970s and many of the informally settled neighbourhoods across the city were given security of tenure and provided with basic infrastructure. Around half of the city's population resides in informally planned settlements, of which a vast majority have been regularised (Gazdar and Mallah 2013).

Historically, street cleaning, solid waste disposal, and water and sanitation were functions of the Karachi Municipal Corporation (KMC). The water and sewerage functions of the KMC had been handed over to an autonomous body called the Karachi Water and Sewerage Board (KWSB) in 1996. The Sindh Local Government Ordinance 2001 initiated a series of reforms in Karachi's local government system. It led to the establishment of a three-tiered structure of local government with the City District Government of Karachi (CDGK) at the top, 18 Town Administrations below the CDGK, and 187 Union Councils at the lowest level. Street cleaning and solid waste removal were made the responsibility of Town Administrations. CDGK was responsible for waste disposal at landfill sites. The Sindh Local Government Act of 2013 restored the Karachi Municipal Corporation, but also devolved many of its functions to District Municipal Corporations managed by administrative officers of the provincial government. The Sindh Solid Waste Management Board (SSWMB) was established in 2014 and it took over, in partnership with district administrations, the tasks previously assigned to Town Administrations and the city government. SSWMB has engaged private sector companies – notably a Chinese-based firm – for the removal of solid waste from collection points to landfills.

Narainpura

Narainpura is also known as the 'KMC Compound'. It is in near the old city area in District South. Several

KMC Compounds were established by the city around a century ago, mostly in what is now District South, to house municipal cleaning and sanitation workers and their families. Narainpura is one of the largest such compounds and is home to over 2,500 families. Another story about Narainpura's origins is that it a wealthy upper caste Gujarati Hindu merchant called Naraindas provided land and financial assistance for its establishment. According to this account, Naraindas was particularly concerned about the living conditions of poor municipal workers from Scheduled Caste Hindu communities. Scheduled Caste Hindus of various ethnic groups – Gujarati, Kachhi and Marwari – form the majority of the residents of Narainpura. There are also some Punjabi Christian residents – also families of current or former municipal sweepers and sanitation workers. Besides municipal work many women and men from Narainpura work as cleaners in homes, offices and other private premises.

Being a long-settled planned neighbourhood, Narainpura has reasonable infrastructure – paved streets, underground sewage drains, and water, electricity and gas connections. There are frequent water shortages here, as there are in many other parts of the city. Houses are built to a set plan – they consist of one room, a toilet, a kitchen and a small courtyard. Being a municipal property implies that its residents do not enjoy title to their homes. Residents are formally tenants of the KMC and being its employees, rent is deducted directly from their monthly salaries.

While there appears to be no imminent threat of eviction, the absence of legal title creates hurdles with respect to conducting transactions or carrying out significant construction activities to properties which have been with the same family over generations. It is common practice in the old city for homeowners to expand their living space to accommodate growing families by adding further storeys to an existing structure or rebuilding their houses. This option is not available to Narainpura residents, even though they have increased their living quarters by encroaching on available open spaces adjacent to their homes. The practice of sub-letting a home or additional rooms constructed on encroached space is also relatively common, but care is taken to sub-let only to members of the same community. It is against the backdrop of these constraints that the

Naraindas story is evoked by some of the local residents, to argue that they ought to receive private titles to their homes, and that the municipality's management of the compound is, somehow, in breach of the original intent of its philanthropic benefactor to help poor Scheduled Caste Hindu families.

Pahar Ganj

Pahar Ganj grew in the 1970s as part of the outward expansion of the city. It is a settlement on a hill range overlooking the North Nazimabad which was planned as a relatively high-income locality for the growing and upwardly mobile middle classes. North Nazimabad was one of several such projects developed by the Karachi Development Authority (KDA) from the 1960s onwards. It lies along a rectangular corridor in Karachi District Central between a ridge to its northwest and a seasonal river (originally Gujjo River, which later became known as Gujjar Nala) to its southeast. The KDA plan for North Nazimabad had left the ridge undeveloped. Land in the lower reaches of the ridge was allotted for various public purposes including a hospital and an electricity supply station. It was subsequently decided to locate the hospital to a location closer to the existing population centres. Some of the land set aside for the hospital was allotted, by way of compensation, to families who got displaced by an infrastructure project closer to the city centre. These families, most of whom were Punjabi Christians who had been employed as municipal sweepers, became the first set of migrants to settle in Pahar Ganj in the 1970s.

More migrants from within Karachi and from elsewhere joined this initial group and Pahar Ganj began to expand onto public land which had not been earmarked for urban development. The expansion of the settlement took place through informal means, as various groups of migrants put up makeshift homes, which then gradually began to acquire security of tenure. Various segments of Pahar Ganj have been regularised over the decades, and many of its residents have acquired formal title to their homes. Electricity, gas and water supply connections were acquired by residents through the 1970s and 1980s. Streets were also paved at that time and underground sewage pipes laid. While the Punjabi Christians occupy the lower reaches of the ridge, other

communities such as Urdu-speaking Mohajirs and Pashtuns live further up the hill. The Christian segment of Pahar Ganj has around 3,000 households. Residents pay a monthly fee to a private street sweeper to clean the streets and to remove solid waste from homes.

Work

Municipal sweepers

Municipal sweepers in Faisalabad and Karachi start their day early. They report to work at five or six in the morning, and then go directly to their assigned 'beat'. A beat consists of a stretch of the road or streets measuring around 1 km to 1.5 km. The work consists of sweeping the streets and pavements (where they exist), gathering the dust, debris and other solid waste into small mounds, and then carting this material off to a designated site for onward disposal. Municipal staff are not responsible for removing waste from domestic or commercial premises along their beat. That is done either by householders themselves, or by privately hired sweepers and cleaners from the same community as the municipal sweepers. In some localities and in some cases municipal workers are also employed privately after hours for this work.

The working day usually ends in the late morning or by midday. Some municipal sweepers report collecting recyclable waste from their beat and using it themselves or selling it onwards to a '*kabari*' (referring to a rag-picker or a rag merchant). Waste such as pieces of wood may be kept for kitchen fuel, while plastic bottles and cardboard might end up in recycling.

Sweepers include both men and women, and they report, invariably, to a male supervisor who is most likely to be from their own community (and himself a former or senior member of the sweeping staff). Although the organisation of solid waste management has diverged in Faisalabad and Karachi there are some shared features. In Faisalabad a company established by the provincial government, the Faisalabad Waste Management Company (FWMC) has taken over street cleaning functions of the Faisalabad Municipal Corporation (FMC). Workers formerly employed by the FMC are now on the FWMC payroll with continuity in their pay and

conditions. The FWMC, moreover, hires casual workers who are paid the statutory minimum wage.⁵ In Karachi the conveyance and disposal of waste from collection points to landfills was brought under the mandate of a provincial waste management board (Sindh Solid Waste Board, abbreviated to SSWB), and in some districts this task has been outsourced to private companies (including one that owned and managed by a China-based group).

In both Faisalabad and Karachi, street sweepers complain that their work burden has increased due to larger volumes of waste and the failure of municipal service providers to keep up with this workload by hiring more staff or deploying new technology. Older municipal workers interviewed in Faisalabad report that they managed to get hired without too much difficulty. Some of the younger workers are those who have been employed under municipal rules which allow the recruitment of children of former staff to 'take their places'. Others are mostly hired as casual staff without job security or other legal entitlements and their salaries are calibrated with the official minimum wage. The case of Amir Maseeh, a 23-year-old Christian man who works as a daily wagger, is illustrative of the changing labour conditions. Amir reported that his father started working as a permanent staff sweeper at the FMC 20 years ago. His father got the job without any bribe or reference. At the time virtually the only requirement to get a sweeper job was to be a Christian. Amir believes that he was able to secure a daily wage job only because FMC officers were happy with his father's good service record.⁶

In Karachi workers mention a court-mandated 'freeze' on new appointments. Formal jobs in the KMC have been subject to political interference and rent-seeking for decades. It has been customary for workers to pay bribes to officials in order to confirm their appointment, and also for accessing other entitlements such as pensions and gratuity. The practice of appointing 'ghost' workers was also cited. An influential political party would appoint its activists as workers who would draw salaries and benefits but not show up for work. This practice was

mentioned with reference to the nominal (but not effective) induction of individuals from outside the TMS communities into municipal jobs.

The actual work of sweepers has not changed very much over the decades, even if the conditions of work have changed. They still sweep streets by hand using 'jharoos' (referring to a large broom made of straw), collect the waste using small wooden boards as dustpans, and cart it away to collection points using wheelbarrow.⁷ They complain about the lack of provision of masks (to protect them from fine dust, and more recently from COVID-19) and any other equipment. Some workers claim that they have to supply their own jharoo. Wheelbarrows are always in short supply, and workers have to await their turn to use them. They do receive florescent jackets but claim that these offer little protection on busy roads with fast-moving traffic.

A number of workers in both cities recounted instances of accidents on the road, resulting in injuries that require hospitalisation and long periods of recuperation. Rafiq Maseeh, a 54-year-old Christian employee of the KMC, reported that, during the course of his 27-year service, he had been in work-related road accidents on three separate occasions. The repercussions of these accidents included bone fractures and hospitalisation.⁸ His case is similar to that of other workers who claim that in even in the case of work-related accidents, their employers do not provide support for treatment, let alone any assistance for health conditions arising from unprotected proximity to fine dust and other waste. Casual workers such as the 27-year-old Rashid report that they are not entitled to paid leave in the case of work-related sickness or injury.⁹

Municipal sweepers – permanent employees as well as casual labourers – are and remain close to the bottom rung of the economic ladder. The pay of a regular employee with over ten years' service is around 25,000 Pakistani rupees. The starting salary is pegged to the legal minimum wage, and annual increments generally match or exceed the rate of price inflation. Casual labourers' pay is pegged to or below the minimum wage, and is not subject to

⁵ KIIF-39.

⁶ KIIF-23.

⁷ KIIF-23.

⁸ KIIK (key informant interview Karachi)-12.

⁹ IIF-106.

annual increments. Unlike employees in many other formal sector jobs, municipal sweepers have virtually no prospects of ‘promotion’ into non-manual work. But even at this low level, there are important contrasts between the conditions faced by permanent and casual workers. Job security is the obvious difference. A permanent employee is virtually guaranteed a job for life, whereas a casual worker can be laid off. Some casual workers do get regularised into permanent jobs; in practice, however, they may remain in continuous service for decades without the possibility of acquiring the legal entitlements that are available to permanent staff. Permanent employees are entitled to sick leave and retirement benefits, and there is provision in the law for a family member to take their place in when a worker retires or in case the worker dies before attaining retirement age. Although this provision is available to any member of a retired or deceased worker’s nuclear family, it is generally referred to as the ‘quota’ (Government of Punjab 2017).¹⁰ No such provision exists for casual workers. In some cases, permanent workers have been entitled to housing while they remain in service, and ‘sweeper colonies’ in Karachi have families which have resided in the same municipal property for generations.

There are differences in the treatment of permanent and casual municipal workers in other significant ways. Casual workers are often asked by their supervisors to do unpaid work on special occasions such as visits by dignitaries, holiday festivals, and instances of urban flooding during the monsoons, when extra cleaning staff are required for longer hours. Supervisors also exercise their powers to punitively dock workers’ pay in the case of complaints about work or behaviour. Many of the casual workers hired by the municipality in Faisalabad are posted, informally, to work at the homes or farms of powerful local politicians.¹¹ The FWMC has not been successful in ending this informal system. Permanent employees are not vulnerable to such extraneous demands because they enjoy job security.

Both casual and permanent workers report vulnerability to what they regard as unfair, even extortionate, credit arrangements. Among Christian permanent workers the government-owned Bank of Punjab (through which most public sector salaries are paid), has emerged as an important source of credit. The bank offers loans to these workers and deducts repayment from their monthly salaries. Many of the workers who have taken bank loans complain that they feel trapped by the loans they have taken – the repayment schedule can be stretched over years, depending on the size of the loan. Changar permanent workers report that the bank does not extend loans to them. Instead, like many casual workers (Christian and Changar alike), they rely on private moneylenders who charge high rates of interest.

The only group among the TMS in our fieldwork sites that was actively engaged in recycling work was from the Changar community in Faisalabad. Many Changars or Deendar Muslims – those who are employed by municipal services as well as those who are not – collect, sort and sell recyclable waste. Among municipal workers, Changars/Deendars seemed more likely to be employed as casual wage labourers than their Christian counterparts. Changar/Deendar municipal workers reported that they carried out waste recycling activities after finishing their assigned sweeping duties for the day in the late morning. These workers report that they make around 25,000 Pakistani rupees monthly from their sweeping work and can earn an additional Rs 10,000 or so from recycling.

There are many in the Changar/Deendar community who do not have municipal jobs, and they rely entirely on recycling work for their livelihoods. Their work includes collecting waste from homes and the street, sorting it and then selling it on to different buyers. Individual interviews with Changar women and men reveal that there is a blurred line between going around asking for recyclable waste and begging for alms. At the ‘upper’ end of waste collection is the buying and selling of recyclables. Most of the kabaris who source reusable waste from pickers, and then sell

¹⁰ Since 1974, this rule (17-A) is applicable “mutatis mutandis for employment of one of the unemployed

children, wife/widow of a civil servant who dies while in service or is declared invalidated/incapacitated”.

¹¹ KIIF-27.

onwards to manufacturers and other users, are from the Changar/Deendar community. Many of the households own their donkey cart or motorcycle powered mini-trucks, and this is apparent to any visitor to their neighbourhoods.

Sanitation work

The boundary between street cleaning and solid waste disposal on the one hand and sanitation work on the other is a critical one in how traditional municipal sweepers communities understand and explain the relationship between their work and social status. This boundary is constructed, maintained and breached in various ways. Sanitation work, commonly referred to as ‘gutter cleaning’, involves the maintenance of wastewater and sewage drains. Historically, before the construction of covered drains, human waste (or ‘night soil’) was removed manually (Butt 2018). This practice continued in smaller towns and villages until relatively recently. But even in some neighbourhoods in Faisalabad older workers recall a time when it was the job of (municipal) sweepers to carry night soil away for disposal.¹²

The English word ‘sweeper’ was applied, euphemistically, to workers who handled waste. In Urdu an analogous Persianised term *‘khakrob’* (meaning dust cleaner) was and is considered a polite alternative to the commonly used pejorative *‘bhangi’* (which has the same origins as ‘chuhra’). *‘Jamadar’* is another polite alternative to terms like *bhangi*. It literally means labour manager and is used in other sectors such as construction and crop-harvesting for male labour contractors who hire and manage workers for specific tasks, and likely came into use to sanitise the appellation of a sanitary worker by calling giving him the nominal status of a manager or supervisor. But the fact is that in everyday parlance a worker whose job description might include wielding a broom or sweeping dust off surfaces is never referred to as a sweeper, *khakrob* or *jamadar* unless there an intention to convey that he or she is also required to handle waste.

Traditionally, rural areas and small towns generated very little waste other than human excrement. Most plant and animal by-products were used within the rural setting as fertiliser, fuel or building material. Apart from human excrement the main form of waste which required safe disposal consisted of carcasses of animals which were not specifically butchered for meat. In rural communities across South Asia the task of manually removing the night soil from the houses of well-off residents and that of disposing off animal carcasses was assigned to the same set of workers. Hence the *bhangi* was also, often, the same as the *‘chamar’* (literally meaning skinner-tanner).¹³ Other recycling work such as recycling animal waste may be handled by the householders themselves or by their private servants. But the *bhangi* and *chamar* were often village servants whose work was considered necessary for public hygiene.

The distinction between municipal sweepers and sanitation workers arises, for the most part, from the changing nature of waste. As sanitation systems developed in urban areas, and then in small towns and villages, the task of carrying away the night soil was replaced with cleaning toilets and maintaining sewage drains. Meanwhile solid waste disposal became an increasingly salient aspect of municipal cleaning activities. Workers who came to work about a century ago to emerging municipal governments were, by and large, from the same communities which had been assigned the roles of *bhangi*, sweeper, *jamadar* or *khakrob* in rural communities. Since street cleaning, solid waste disposal and sanitation were all seen as municipal services, traditional municipal sweepers included workers who were responsible for all these tasks. Today the job of sanitation workers involves unblocking clogged drains manually, using rudimentary equipment such as split bamboo staves as prods, and physically going down manholes or into main drains to remove silt and other blockages using by hand.

Water and sanitation services were taken away from municipal control around 40 years ago. In Karachi this happened when the Water and Sewerage Board

¹² KIIF-37.

¹³ Colonial records began to create sharper distinctions between the *‘bhangi’* and the *‘chamars’* (or *‘chamgars’*). Both these terms were given official

sanction, but remained external to the communities involved. Those who removed the night-soil, and/or disposed of animal carcasses, did not refer to themselves as either *bhangi*, *chamgar*, or *chamar*.

of the KMC was established as an autonomous entity in 1996. In Faisalabad and other cities, the provincial Water and Sanitation Authority (WASA) took over these services in 1978. The specialisation of cleaning workers into street sweepers and sanitation workers within municipalities gave way to entirely distinct organisations for dealing with each service.

The hierarchy of work between sweeping and sanitation is clearly articulated in our interviews with municipal sweepers in Faisalabad and Karachi. Workers and other community members in Faisalabad asserted that sweepers employed by the FWMC did not do any 'gutter work'. This was the domain of workers from the same Christian community who were employed by WASA. Changar/Deendar municipal sweepers, who were recruited in the FMC in the 1980s prior to the devolution of water and sanitation services to WASA were not called upon to do gutter work which even under FMC was done exclusively by Christians.¹⁴ The Changar/Deendar claim they were exempted from gutter work because of their Muslim faith. In Karachi we heard about sweeper and sanitation worker jobs given to Muslims in KMC and KWSB respectively, but also that these Muslim were never asked to do any tasks that are considered 'dirty'.

Work and status

Questions about status were quickly framed by our respondents as being about respectful treatment on the part of the dominant community. Dominance was articulated in terms of religious majority by non-Muslims, but also in terms of class, caste and power. These are, obviously, sensitive issues as evidenced by the multiple layers of words and phrases used in different settings to refer to cleaning work and workers. We also came across several layers in this conversation.

The first perspective which was articulated widely in Faisalabad and Karachi, and by Christian and Scheduled Caste Hindu respondents alike was some variant of "everything is fine, there is no discrimination and people of all other religions,

classes and castes are very good with us." For example, according to Kalsoom, a 55-year-old Nau-Muslim Rajput woman who works as a permanent sweeper:

*"People treat me well and they think well of me because they see me working hard rather than rely on alms and begging."*¹⁵

Examples of kindness would include households providing drinking water to workers on hot days. These beneficent attitudes were ascribed to employers, municipal officials, work supervisors, and ordinary residents whose premises or streets were being cleaned.

As our conversations developed further, the view of universal beneficence got replaced by the qualification of manners, culture and education on both sides. "Because of my polite behaviour people also behave well. Educated people are well mannered so they deal with me nicely".¹⁶ Kanwal, a sweeper in a KMC-run school was pleased that the teaching staff "did not practice social distance with me as a 'Christian Sweeper'. I used to make tea and serve them after doing my cleaning and dusting work."¹⁷

While kindness is, undoubtedly, part of the experience of these workers, other attitudes that they come across routinely and find disrespectful only begin to receive mention once there is some assurance of a relationship of respect and trust with the interviewer:

*"Here at the workplace people call us different names. Some people call us Bhangi-Baala, the new generation call us by using the English word 'sweeper' but the majority call us 'Jamadar'."*¹⁸

*"People don't call us with respect. They call us 'Chuhra' as an insult."*¹⁹

*"The Christian supervisors are called 'Sardar [meaning chief] of Chuhras'."*²⁰

¹⁴ KIIF-23, 25, 26, 30.

¹⁵ IIF-323.

¹⁶ IIK (individual interview Karachi)-647.

¹⁷ IIK-645.

¹⁸ KIIK-08.

¹⁹ KIIF-27.

²⁰ KIIF-36.

“Our clothes, especially the government-provided [luminescent] jacket is enough for us to be identified. We are not offered water, tea and food in their utensils.”²¹

There are also other perspectives, on dirty work in general, as well as gutter work in particular. Many workers say that they do not do this ‘dirty’ and ‘unhygienic’ work by choice. They would not want their children to be sweepers or sanitation workers if they could help it. Yet there continues to be demand for permanent jobs and the employment security these jobs provide.

Kumar Marghat, a Scheduled Caste Hindu sweeper from Narainpura says, “what is dirt for others is livelihood for us”.²² This view touches on the necessity and dignity of labour. “It is a fact that they generate the dirt, and we clean their dirt. If we stopped cleaning their dirt, they would have to live with that dirt.”²³ Gutter work is also considered a skilled job. It is also relatively well-paid because ordinary labourers are unwilling and unable to do it.

There are mixed views about the exclusive association of certain communities with municipal and other cleaning work. Public sector organisations often specify in their job advertisements for cleaning staff that the jobs are reserved for non-Muslim applicants only (Aqeel 2018, Eternal Vision Ministries 2017, OpIndia Staff 2021). Christian and Scheduled Caste Hindu respondents in Faisalabad and Karachi, particularly those who have either left the sector or are hopeful of leaving it, believe that such formal association holds them back. Robert, a Punjabi Christian who is a retired KMC worker says, for example, “people call us like ‘come here, Bhangi’ and there is no honour in this work but now even educated children are going into sanitation work. This is because they are sure that they will not get a proper job in any other sector in their lifetimes.”²⁴

There are well-known stories in these communities, particularly in Faisalabad, of educated applicants for office jobs in public or private sector organisations being told by interviewers that they ought to apply for cleaning jobs in the same organisation. At the same

time, some members of the traditional sweeper communities, particularly in Karachi, expressed resentment at the fact that Muslims were now being considered for cleaning jobs which were previously the exclusive domain of their community (Shaukat 2020). According to Mukesh Harichand, a 40-year-old worker from a Scheduled Caste Hindu community:

“Nowadays there is lesser demand for workers [in the sector] than in the past because at that time only Hindus and Christians were doing the sweeping and gutter work. Now for the last decade Muslims have also started doing this work. Hunger compels you to do any type of work.”²⁵

Women workers

Women’s mobility outside the home is a signifier of low status in Pakistan’s patriarchal order. The normative assignment of women to ‘private’ spaces is prevalent across the country, particularly in the smaller towns and cities. The women who are visible in public spaces in many rural regions are those who are ‘forced’ to be out due to economic necessity. There are, of course, women in public spaces in large urban areas, and also many with education who pursue professional careers. But the fact remains that the female labour force participation rate is among the lowest in the world, and around three-quarters of women who do report working are employed as ‘contributing family workers’ in agriculture. Despite significant change in labour market norms and women’s employment, there is still a strong negative association between work and socio-economic status. Women from poor families and those with low social status work outside the home, and in other people’s homes.

Given that sweeper jobs have been filled by people from historically marginalised communities with limited economic opportunities and low status in the social hierarchy, it is not surprising to find many women workers among traditional municipal sweepers. Women municipal employment, particularly in permanent jobs, is seen as an improvement among these communities compared

²¹ KIIF-22, 24, 31, 37.

²² IIK-5343

²³ KIIF-37

²⁴ KIIK-13

²⁵ KIIK-06

to alternative opportunities, which were historically limited to cleaning and other domestic services in other people's homes. The difference between formal government jobs and alternative sources of livelihood is more pronounced for women workers than their male counterparts.

However, women workers within the sector however, women workers have even fewer opportunities of advancement than men. While many women work as municipal sweepers, there are no women to be found at the supervisor level or upwards. The views of Munawar Maseeh, a 38-year-old Christian who works as a supervisor in FWMC, were typical of how 'protective' language is used to marginalise women workers. "As supervisors, we use our discretionary power to be 'lenient' to women workers, allowing them leave and excusing them from the second duty in the afternoon. Dealing with women is a sensitive issue." He added that because of this 'sensitivity', the government had decided to "to ban women's job entry into sweeping work" and that he had seen such a notification."²⁶ When our fieldwork team investigated further, they found that the information provided was based on hearsay, and that no such notification existed.

As with caste, work and status, there was much reluctance, within the constrained conditions of our fieldwork to get elicited conversations about the sexual harassment and abuse faced by women from marginalised communities, especially women sweepers in particular. Women and men interviewees from these communities were eager to maintain the sentiment that attitudes towards women workers were respectful. Among men, there was reluctance to even acknowledge that women worked outside the home, besides the somewhat institutionally protected domain of formal sector jobs.²⁷

When asked about women's work in recycling, Changar men in Jhugriyan Satiana Road insisted with seeming pride that "our women stopped going out for work some three or four decades ago, even though

our women relatives in rural areas still do '*pheriwala kaam*' (working the streets) to collect waste material and to beg".²⁸ Insecurity and sexual harassment were cited as important factors in Ghousia Town for women wanting to avoid public spaces. Individual interviews such as the one with Shabiran Chohan, a 40-year-old Changar woman engaged in rag-picking, suggested that older women did *pheriwala kaam*, younger ones like her daughter-in-law stayed home doing household chores as well as any sorting work that could be done at home.²⁹ The conversation in and around the Changar community with respect to women's work and sexual harassment was associated with proximate threats of transgression of the person and status. There are allegations of abduction and rape of Changar women and girls by the dominant landlord family and their associates. The narrative of the Changar community about women stopping work outside the home is an extreme example of the normative association between women's seclusion and family status. While there is a blurred boundary between women going out for *pheriwala kaam* and begging, there are other blurred boundaries too: between begging and vulnerability to sexual harassment and abuse, and between begging and 'availability' for sex work.

A few months after our fieldwork in Faisalabad, a harrowing public spectacle brought home the intersectionality between work, social status, and violence against women in the very setting we had studied. Four women were accused by a shopkeeper of theft and were beaten, stripped and paraded on the street as 'punishment' by a mob of men (Hussain 2021). The story was quickly put out that the women were either rag-pickers or were shoplifters who were working under the cover of being rag-pickers. The incident took place close to one of our fieldwork sites in Faisalabad, and telephonic interviews with our local informants suggested that the nature of the public 'punishment' meted out to the women was not unrelated to their 'rag-picker' identity.

²⁶ KIIF-34.

²⁷ For example, in Karachi, Kamala Moon, a 50-year-old woman municipal sweeper named Devi Moon reported: "earlier I was posted in Safari Park; it comes under control of the KMC. Being a woman, I had to

face many problems as the park was often full of male visitors. I had to request officers for a transfer." IIK-528.

²⁸ KIIF-36.

²⁹ IIF-211.

Mobility

Migration is a significant part of the story of all of the TMS communities in our study. The Punjabi Christians and Scheduled Caste Hindus in Karachi trace their origins to Punjab and to western India respectively. There are long histories of migration. Most of the Scheduled Caste Hindus in Karachi – who speak Gujarati, Kachhi or Marwari languages – were born in the city and report that their ancestors came from Gujarat or elsewhere from the time of British colonial rule before 1947. Many of the Punjabi Christians also date their families' presence in the city to before 1947, or to soon after. There are, of course, more recent migrants as well, from various parts of Punjab.

In Faisalabad the Christian community includes those who have arrived in the city from surrounding rural areas, or from districts such as Sialkot and Narowal to east of the province. There is also evidence of an older presence of Christians in the city from the time of its foundation in the late 19th century. Many of those who are labelled as Changar or Deendar report that their ancestors came to Faisalabad (then Lyallpur) from areas that are now in the Indian part of Punjab. Their mother tongue which they continue to use amongst each other is a distinct dialect of Punjabi from the language commonly spoken in Faisalabad. The Christians also say that their accent (presumably from the Sialkot region) is readily identifiable by people in the city.

For Punjabi Christians, both in Karachi and Faisalabad, waste disposal work, sweeping as well as sanitation, is one strand in a longer history of economic change. While waste disposal was part of the work that many of their forebears undertook, their primary occupational identity was that of farm servants and/or agricultural labourers. Their relatives and broader social networks in rural areas are not exclusively identified with waste disposal work.

In Faisalabad, members of the two main communities which provide municipal sweepers speak of distinctive channels of socio-economic mobility. Christian interviewees, even those who are

grateful for the job security that municipal work offers, are clear that they would not like their children to continue in this profession: "I work as a supervisor of Chuhra and Chamars because there is job security here and there are few alternate opportunities for our community. But we pray that our coming generation should be away from this work."³⁰

Education and better-paid, decent and clean jobs acquired through qualifications, appear to be promising paths to some. Many of the workers and their families who were interviewed make great efforts to ensure that their children – boys and girls – get through school and beyond. Rashid Iqbal, who is a 34-year-old Christian man who took the place of his deceased father as permanent worker with FMC, says "My children are in schools, I will discourage them from joining sweeping work. I want them to get respectful jobs."³¹ The same sentiment is expressed by Shahzad, another Christian FMC permanent worker: "I don't want my children to get employment in FMC but wish that they complete their studies and join any respectful and clean job."³²

There are prominent – even if conspicuously few – examples of close and distant relatives in Faisalabad and elsewhere who have gained upward economic mobility and social standing through education. We did not come across any stories, however, of Christians having started or grown their own businesses.

The Changar/Deendar community presents a contrasting picture. There are no role models with respect to education and entry into well-paid jobs or professions. School participation appears to be low, and many children start contributing early to the family's recycling work. Unlike the Christians there are many more families that are engaged in some form of self-employment in the recycling trade. Many have some assets – such as donkey carts, or mini-trucks – which they use of this work. We also came across cases of individuals who had 'graduated' from being rag-pickers to kabaris. A distinguishing feature of individuals who experienced economic mobility is their reputation for being tough and street-smart.³³

³⁰ KIIF-37.

³¹ KIIF-22.

³² KIIF-24.

³³ CPF (community profile Faisalabad)-3 and 2.

The traditional municipal sweeper communities in Karachi appear to have access to more diversified channels of economic mobility compared with their counterparts in Faisalabad. The recycling sector does not, however, have any present of either the Punjabi Christians or Scheduled Caste Hindus. In Karachi, young men of Afghan origin are the main workers at the bottom rung of the waste recycling value chain. They are linked up to *kabaris* many of whom are also of Afghan origin. Education and various categories of service sector jobs are the main avenues of economic mobility for both the Punjabi Christians and Scheduled Caste Hindus. Many members of these communities, including those without much formal education, have nevertheless moved out of cleaning jobs into other skills.

One important area of work for women and men from the Punjabi Christian community in Karachi is nursing, and other such personal and health care jobs in hospitals, as well as at home. This sector used to be considered a virtually exclusive domain of the Punjabi Christian community, partly due to the work of a missionary hospital in setting up a nursing school and the association of nursing with 'Christian values'. Another view is that personal care services are simply a step above and away from the 'dirty' work traditionally assigned to members of this community. Women from Punjabi Christian and Scheduled Caste Hindu communities are also a significant source of labour for beauty parlours in Karachi.

Identity

We approached 'traditional municipal sweepers' in Faisalabad and Karachi utilising markers of community identity that are commonly available and used in Pakistan in everyday conversations, existing studies, and state's dealings with citizens. Communities are implicated, of course, because the profession of 'sweeping' is readily associated with overlapping identity markers including religion, ethnicity, and caste. Most if not all municipal sweepers in Faisalabad are Christians or Changar/Deendar. In Karachi, they are Punjabi Christian or Scheduled Caste Hindu. But these broad identity markers are just the more accessible ones which are constructed or shaped by dominant groups.

The ideology and practice of untouchability is often associated by the Pakistani Muslim majority exclusively with upper caste Hindu society. '*Chhoot chhaat*', literally 'touch taboo', is portrayed as a cornerstone of a hierarchical Hinduism, in contrast with the egalitarianism spirit of the majority faith in Pakistan (Jodhka and Shah 2010, Devji 2013). As Devji (2013) explains, practices reminiscent of untouchability are justified in various ways, the most common rationale being one that seeks to validate Islamic egalitarianism by insisting that these are leftover influences of Hinduism. In our fieldwork we came across a range of pretexts such as the question of how we can touch or share utensils with someone who works with dirt, and the justification that Muslims cannot mix or eat together with people of other religions who may consume food and drink that are forbidden in Islam. The practice of untouchability then remains unchallenged in an Islamic setting, and is available as one among several instruments for perpetuating the marginalisation of entire groups.

In this context, the very definition of a 'group' requires explanation. The use of the term 'caste' is illuminating in some ways but may be misleading in others. The dominant view in Pakistan that the 'caste system', or a religiously sanctioned and ritually enforced hierarchical ordering of (mostly endogamous) occupational castes, is a Hindu phenomenon mirrors the Islamic view on untouchability. The formal identification of Scheduled Castes among Hindu citizens is seen as a hangover of British colonial period during which this category was introduced for affirmative action, and the 'non-Muslim' qualification for sweeper jobs in the public as well as private sectors is justified in similar vein. The emphasis on religious sanction detracts from the ubiquity of endogamous groups – described interchangeably as caste, tribe, clan, kinship group, '*biraderi*', '*qaum*', and '*zaat*' – as elements of social organisation in Pakistan. These groups, bound together by lineage, and perpetuated through the practice of endogamy, form the basis of social, economic and political networks for mutual support and collective action.

The fact that individuals belong to more or less powerful groups, that the history of discriminatory laws, policies and practices circumscribe current economic and political endowments of individuals in

various groups, and that social proximity and hence economic opportunity continues to be shaped by the perceived status of traditional occupations, means that a religiously ordained caste system is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for the perpetuation of caste-based inequality (Gazdar and Mallah 2012).³⁴

For regions of India that became Pakistan, the 1931 population census of India was the last major effort at coding and enumerating caste and its interaction with other officially sanctioned markers of identity such as religion and language. The Punjab census, following contemporary law and policy, used the dividing line between 'agriculturalists' and 'non-agriculturalists' as a major organising theme. Agriculturalists were, obviously, on the top; non-agriculturalists included a range of occupational castes, and a significant segment of the population classified as 'vagrants and menials' (Khan 1933). The census recognised the fact that many of the castes and kinship groups listed under this classification were, indeed, agricultural labourers. But they were not deemed to own land and were placed on the margins of the landlord/peasant dominated village community. These disparate groups were clubbed together as people who were thought to be aboriginals, many of them without fixed homes in settled villages, or others who had been made entirely servile to the agriculturalists. The caste or kinship group names mentioned in this category include all of the ones which are or have been associated with the following communities: Bhangi, Chamar, Chuhra, Mussali, Changar, and Deendar.

Other parts of British India used similar caste names. The 1911 Census of the Bombay Presidency mentioned Bhangi, Chamar or Mochi as unclean or polluting castes. The Bhangis with dual status, sometimes act as sweepers and sometimes as 'shikaris' (meaning hunters) who consume the flesh of animals that are considered forbidden among upper caste Hindus and Muslims alike. Bhangis were thought to be Hindu by origin but also included converts to Islam who became known as 'Sheikh

Nau-Muslim'. "Most Bhangis, both men and women, are scavengers and night-soil carriers. They also sweep the roads, make baskets and other things out of bamboo, and bury dead animals, cattle excepted" (Mead and Macgregor 1912).

Chamar, Mochi, Mochigar and 'Chamgars' were caste names signifying leather work. Meghwar (also written as Meghval) also known as Dedh, were found in Gujarat, Kathiawar and Kachh. Many of them reported working as domestic servants in Karachi in the 1911 census. In Kachh (also written as Kutch), some Dedh Meghwars were recognised by the government as Brahman religious priests and were assisted by the authorities in maintaining an exalted status through the levying of fines on members of 'lowly' castes – such as the Maheshri, Marwaris and Gojra Meghwars – if there were complaints of harassment on the part of the priests. The Maheshri or Kachhi were labourers in Palaydari – loading and unloading and they had to drag away the bodies of dead cattle, but they were not called for sweeping or any other unclean work (Mead and Macgregor 1912).

The first half of the 20th century saw movements around changing religious identities in Punjab. Much of the focus of religious missionaries was on these very 'vagrant and menial' castes. Converts to Christianity, Islam and Sikhism from these castes became known as Masheeh, Deendar or Mussali, and Mazhabi, respectively. Comparison between the 1921 and 1931 rounds of the census showed significant shifts towards these categories. Hindu reform organisations attempted to stem apprehensions about the demographic haemorrhaging of an originally Hindu community by addressing the matter of 'untouchability.' Against this backdrop of a communal competition, activists from the marginalised castes (particularly the Chamar and Chuhra) began to advocate 'Ad Dharm' (meaning original faith). This was the claim that these marginalised communities were indigenous people with their own faith identity. This movement was successful in having large numbers of these castes

³⁴ A caste-based hierarchy, in fact, is embedded in the legal framework of land ownership in rural society. The Punjab Land Alienation Act of 1900 which divides society into 'agricultural' and 'non-

agricultural' tribes and privileges the landed property rights of the former, remains on the statute unlike India where it was repealed in the 1950s.

recorded as Ad Dharmis in the 1931 census in Punjab (Ram 2004, Gill 2019).

Christians

Christians account for 1.59 per cent of the population of Pakistan. In Faisalabad and Karachi, they account for 3.4 and 2.1 per cent of the population respectively (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics 2017).³⁵ Converts from historically marginalised castes in Punjab represent just one (though perhaps the most numerous) segment of the overall Christian population of the country (Pervaiz and Mahmood 2018). The descendants of these converts, many of whom are associated with sweeping work, can be thought of as a broadly identifiable group – named at times by derogatory words and at other times by honorific ones with common origins and still-active connections. Some of the Punjabi Christians interviewed in Karachi, for example, are migrants from Faisalabad and its environs, and many others are from the same districts in Punjab such as Sialkot, Gujranwala and Narowal which are identified as places of origin by the Christians interviewed in Faisalabad.³⁶

There are, of course multiple other markers of social identity that become salient in different contexts. Kinship plays a role in defining boundaries, and Punjabi Christian converts from historically marginalised castes maintain strong networks of family networks among whom marriages can be contracted. Like other non-Muslim communities in Pakistan, they also follow well-defined rules of prohibiting marriages within the same patrilineal sub-caste, and among blood relations. Sub-caste names such as Gill, Bhatti, and Sahotra, are common among the communities in our fieldwork sites in both Faisalabad and Karachi. Lineage identity matters in determining eligible marriage partners, and family lineage histories are maintained carefully. Another dimension of within-group identity is that of church or sect. The two main established churches are the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of Pakistan, and evangelical organisations are also active and have established churches in many communities.³⁷ Cross-denominational marriages are

not uncommon, and the wife is generally expected to join the church of her marital family.

Churches play an important role in the collective life of the community, and there is a history of social service associated with the church. There are also, of course, social activists and community leaders who are autonomous from any church. Collective action rarely takes the form, however, of organised political activity or resistance to social discrimination.

Changars/Deendars

There are multiple stories about the identity and history of the Changar or Deendar community in Faisalabad. People outside the community refer to them as '*khanabadosh*' (meaning nomads). They also use other labels generally associated with communities such as Gagrai, Pakhiwas, Chhurimar and Sansi, that are deemed to be peripatetic and are not regarded as integral to settled villages. There is a view that the Changars or Deendars originate from hunter-gatherer communities who lived in and made their living out of jungles and bush. They are also known to possess knowledge of herbal remedies and healing practices such as leech therapy. The Changars are also referred to as Chamar for the work of skinning animal carcasses and tanning.³⁸ Members of the community claim to be followers of the 10th century saint Shah Shams Tabrez whose shrine is in the city of Multan in southern Punjab. They say that the title Changar literally means 'virtuous' from the Punjab word '*changa*' (literally meaning good). Another view is that the word Changar was proposed in place of the similar sounding Chamar which was considered derogatory.

There are different stories also about the religious affiliation of the Changars. They are classified as Muslim, and are followers of a Muslim saint, but the dominant narrative about them questions their actual adherence to Islam. It is widely held, for example, that the Changars (if not now, then in the past) consumed foods such as carrion and the flesh of wild animals forbidden to Muslims.

³⁵ The survey site Pahar Ganj is situated in District Central where per cent of Christians is (1.2).

³⁶ KIIK-29; IIF-107.

³⁷ KIIK-02, 10, 11; KIIF-34, CPF-1.

³⁸ KIIF-36.

The word Deendar, literally, means a person of religion. As noted above, this and other honorific terms became common in the early 20th century as a way of referring to religious converts from the historically marginalised communities in Punjab.

In the 1980s a former soldier known as Sufi Barkat (previously mentioned in the survey site description of Dar-ul-Ahsan Town: Block-A) emerged as a spiritual and religious figure in Faisalabad. He took special interest in the conditions of the Changar/Deendar community in the city and began a movement to convert them into being 'proper' Muslims. Sufi Barkat then proposed the term 'Nau-Muslim Rajput' (newly-converted Muslim Rajputs) as a preferred appellation for the Changar/Deendar community. He was able to use his political influence with the government to organise a housing colony for the Nau-Muslim Rajputs.

Sufi Barkat urged his followers (or clients) to fully adopt Islamic rituals, and to self-consciously dissociate themselves from any practices that might be connected with their pre-Islamic past. According to our interviewees, one of the practices to be discarded was the prohibition on consanguineous marriages. "Until some years ago, we did not accept cousin marriages; we treated cousins as sisters, but Babaji [term used to respectfully refer to an old man] told us to practice cousin marriages and now people are inclined to marry among paternal relatives."³⁹ While they appeared to accept Sufi Barkat's teaching in principle, our respondents among the Nau-Muslim Rajputs were not able to identify any family where consanguineous marriages had actually occurred.

The Nau Muslim Rajputs who live in the housing colony managed by Sufi Barkat's organisation, and other Changar/Deendar families living across Faisalabad, maintain strong social ties. Those who are not directly under the influence of Sufi Barkat's organisation, however, have not adopted the new identity that their Nau-Muslim Rajput relatives now espouse.

Scheduled Caste Hindus

Scheduled Caste Hindu municipal sweepers and their descendants in Karachi are generally referred to as simply Hindu by the majority Muslim community. While they share many common features, the communities associated with sweeping are internally differentiated by kinship and place of origin. There are several distinct ethnic groups – Gujarati, Kachhi, Kathiawari and Marwari – many of them with places of origin in different parts of the former Bombay Presidency (Mead and Macgregor 1912). Caste and kinship-based identities are significant identity markers within these ethnic groups. Social relations and marriages are generally conducted within caste groups, and similar rules of exogamy are followed. Consanguineous marriages and marriage with the patrilineal sub-caste or 'got' are not allowed. There are joint gatherings and celebrations at some of the larger temples in the city, and they share major holy sites of pilgrimage, but much of the ritual life of these communities is self-contained. These temples and pilgrimage sites are shared, of course, with other Hindu communities – both Scheduled Caste and upper caste – which may not have any association with municipal sweeping work.

Religion, ethnicity and to some extent caste, all offer overlapping networks of support to the Scheduled Caste Hindu sweeper communities. Middle- and upper-class family homes and businesses of Gujarati and Kachhi origin – Muslim, Hindu and Parsi – have historically offered both women and men workers from Scheduled Caste Hindu communities employment opportunities outside of municipal sweeping. Linguistic proximity appears to have played a role in this regard – facility with the Gujarati language, for example, is cited as a factor.

Scheduled Castes such as Meghwar, who are traditionally associated, with skinning animals, tanning and shoemaking like the Chamars in Punjab, are present among ethnic Gujaratis, Kachhis and Marwaris in Karachi. Some of them have adopted the honorific caste title 'Meghwanshi'. Kachhi Meghwar however, may have not direct social ties with Gujarati or Marwari-speaking Meghwar. Similarly, their relations with other Kachhi-speaking Scheduled Caste Hindus such as the Maisris (also known as

³⁹ KIIF-37.

Maheshwari) would not extend to marriages or shared religious rituals. The case of the Sita Mata *Mandir* (temple) compound in Bheempura in Karachi's old city (not far from our survey site of Narainpura) is illustrative of the hierarchy practiced within the city's Hindu community. The compound is dominated, by virtue of the authority of the temple, by a Goswami priest (known as Maharaj) whose family differentiate themselves from their co-religionist neighbours on the basis of caste. The other residents are mostly Waghshiri who are regarded as unclean by the dominant family. The Maharaj charges rent (on behalf of the temple) and prohibits any repair and reconstruction work by residents who claim to have been there for generations. The situation of the Waghshiri of Bheempura is comparable to that of the Scheduled Caste Hindus in Narainpura in some respects, and to that of the Deendar residents of Dur-ul-Ahsan in Faisalabad in others.

Discussion

Economic opportunity and social status are closely connected everywhere, and individuals are almost always part of groups identified by gender, race, ethnicity, caste, religion and other markers. Individuals from communities that are associated with sweeping in Faisalabad and Karachi are not unique or uniquely disadvantaged. Waste disposal and recycling are regarded as unpleasant and unsafe jobs everywhere, and workers from socially marginalised groups are often the main sources of supply of labour. The association of 'sweepers' with the task of human waste disposal is the necessary addendum to what makes dusting and solid waste removal unsafe jobs across South Asia. Untouchability as an ideology and practice of social discrimination is premised, in part, on some people being contaminating because they are in turn contaminated by waste.

How would changes in the nature of waste and the organisation of waste disposal affect the relationship between work and status? The waste disposal sector is, rightly, seen as a focus of interest and intervention for environmental goals. The rapid increase in the production of solid waste due to the use of packaging, single-use plastics and valuable by-products, has clearly changed how both the market and policy see solid waste. The organisation of waste disposal has

also undergone significant changes as municipal services are increasingly outsourced and public sector workers lose the security of permanent employment.

Past changes in technology and organisation can provide insights into the impact of current and future change. The concept of '*kachra*' (meaning rubbish), and the separation of the tasks of dry and wet waste disposal, are outcomes of a shift from a mostly rural and agricultural setting to an urban municipal one. The emergence of the municipal sweeper, or even just the sweeper, marked the transition of socially marginalised labourers and servants to a new occupational category which was to define caste and status. The separation of dry and wet disposal did little to cleanse the contaminating touch of the sweeper or to separate them from the 'gutter worker'. While the labour market principle (which says that unpleasant and unsafe work ought to attract higher wages) is observed to some extent, the wage premium is not sufficient to overcome the stigma of contamination (Aqeel and Gill 2019). In fact, the existence of workers from marginalised groups that are deemed by formal policy and social norm to remain within or close to the ambit of sweeping, means that technological and organisational changes necessary for rendering waste disposal safer need not be prioritised.

The valorisation of solid waste does not necessarily translate mechanically into improvement in the status of waste disposal workers. Of the municipal sweepers in this study, the only community with any significant entry into the recycling industry – the Changars/Deendar of Faisalabad – also happen to be the ones that became dissociated from 'gutter work'. The recycling business offered them some (albeit limited) avenues of economic mobility, and their ability to extract livelihoods from self-employment was underlined by the acquisition of rudimentary amounts of capital in the form of donkey carts and other vehicles. Some of their number, particularly those individuals who had a reputation for being 'tough' and 'street-smart' had graduated upwards in the value chain to becoming *kabaris*.

However, their counterparts among Punjabi Christians were mostly required to behave meekly before their employers, and not to display any of the characteristics necessary for conducting business dealings. The Changar story, moreover, is certainly not one of radical, let alone effortless, change in social

position. The fact is that status remains deeply entrenched and among other things depends on the ability or willingness of a community to withdraw 'their' women from public spaces. The vulnerability to sexual violence as a consequence as well as reinforcement of 'low' status is vividly illustrated through the everyday insecurity faced by Changar women in Faisalabad.

The preponderance of young men of Afghan origin among waste collectors and sorters in Karachi, and their onwards linkages with older Afghan or Pakistani Pashtun men underlines the importance of 'toughness' in seeing off multiple challenges in the business of acquiring and managing recyclable waste. The reputation of men from these communities as not being prone to physical intimidation on the part of other claimants of value on the street – from rival 'scavengers' to municipal officials or police officers – plays some part in their ability to extract value from something that is, at least nominally, available for free.

A series of subtle changes in the formal position of traditional municipal sweepers have given rise, in Pakistan, to a sanctioned ideology and practice similar to untouchability in a purportedly egalitarian Islamic context. Workers from various castes and kinship groups deemed to be 'vagrants and menials' in the British colonial classification of the population, and as untouchable in dominant upper caste Hindu hierarchy, underwent another round of classification, this time by religion. Punjabi Christians and Changar/Deendar Muslims who had converted into faiths that did not nominally espouse a caste hierarchy, as well as those who remained Scheduled Caste Hindus, were marked out as sweepers. The fact that all 'sweeper' jobs – jobs that required workers to wield the broom but to also be available for sanitation work – came to be 'reserved for non-Muslims' was often interpreted by Muslim-dominated bureaucracies as a mandate to exclude people from those communities from non-sweeper jobs. This pattern was mirrored by the formal private sector, even though it remained relatively more open to employing workers from these communities in other jobs. The exemption of the Changar/Deendar communities who are accepted (at least nominally) as Muslims, from 'gutter work' underlines the use of a formally egalitarian creed for perpetuating the ideology and practice of untouchability.

The social identity markers of caste and religion which are used as instruments of discrimination to order society are not all about marginalisation. They are also utilised by the marginalised to exercise some degree of autonomy, agency and collective action. This is true, particularly though not exclusively, in a cosmopolitan and market-dominated urban setting like Karachi. Punjabi Christians and Scheduled Caste Hindus maintain their religious and ritual lives in semi-publicly in a city where public spaces are otherwise assertively dominated by various Muslim communities. Community efforts to control and improve their neighbourhoods – whether they are municipal compounds or informally settled localities – leverage identity markers. Conspicuous cases of asserting control in the face of powerful challengers – such as entry into an armed political party to protect the privacy of their homes and compounds from 'pushy' members of the majority community – signal the corporatisation of caste and religious identity as effective instruments of power.

Economic diversification by women and men of some of the traditional sweeper communities into a range of service sector activities, particularly in the city of Karachi, has the potential for breaking the association with untouchability. Many of the economic opportunities open to these women and men are in activities that may also have some connection with sweeping, such as domestic work, or 'contaminating' activities such as in health care, personal care, and beauty parlours – however, in contrast with sweeping, these jobs have prospects of outward and upward occupational mobility. Domestic workers may graduate into skilled cooks, for instance. And increasing professionalisation in the health, personal care and beauty parlour sectors imply that a worker's skills are likely to receive recognition and monetary reward.

Conclusion

The case of traditional municipal sweepers in Faisalabad and Karachi – most of them from historically marginalised (and rural) communities – presented an opportunity to study the relationship between work and status in a South Asian setting. Waste disposal and recycling work is generally carried out by people on the margins of society (by the virtue of caste, race, ethnicity or migrant status). This study offers insights from qualitative research

on these communities, to complement research in the RRR project that focuses on the changing technical and organisational dimensions of solid waste disposal.

The construction of ‘traditional municipal sweepers’ from disparate castes and kinship groups deemed to be on the margins of settled village communities was a consequence of the technological and organisational changes which accompanied urbanisation and the establishment of municipal services. Changes in the composition and classification of waste and the specialisations of workers responsible for its disposal did not significantly alter the contaminating association of sweeping with unpleasant and unsafe material. From being work that was undertaken in the rural setting, among many other tasks, by some people belonging to particular groups of families, sweeping came to occupy a central place in the identity of certain castes, and then entire segments of particular religious communities. Technology and the organisation of the sector were not incidental mechanical processes – they were central to this social reclassification.

Moreover, the social status of workers in the sector or those potentially available for it shaped technological and organisational choices; it needs to be made visible that the major technological and organisational shifts quietly presumed the existence of a large pool of actual and potential workers who could be classified exclusively as sweepers. Workers’ wellbeing and safety hardly figured, and still do not figure, into the technology and organisation of waste disposal. Despite evidence of a limited wage premium, the availability of skilled low-wage workers who are willing to undertake unpleasant and hazardous work with no protection, is taken for granted.

The status of workers in part reflects a long continuous history of marginalisation and exploitation of entire communities. Untouchability was and remains a significant instrument in making a link between unvalued, even contaminating, material and those deemed to handle it. Major political shifts have indeed led to surprising reconstructions of untouchability – from a supposed cornerstone of the Hindu caste system to a hierarchy of religious identity in a purportedly egalitarian Islamic setting. The majority religious community in

a state legitimised on the grounds of religion gets to decide on the ideological premises of untouchability. Unsurprisingly, then, economic and political changes outside of the main sector that is central to the practice of untouchability appear as potential arenas of opportunity and agency for the marginalised.

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