

FROM SURFACE HAZARDS TO STRUCTURAL ROOTS: THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF BARANGAY TANDANG SORA, QUEZON CITY WASTE WORKERS

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Abstract

Waste work is vital to urban sanitation and public health yet remains stigmatized and undervalued within labor systems. While earlier studies examined waste management through a historical lens, this study builds on contemporary Philippine research by applying an intersectionality lens to analyze the lived experiences of waste workers in Barangay Tandang Sora, Quezon City. Using qualitative methods including ethnographic immersion (*pakikipamuhay*), interviews, site visits, and transect walks, the research documents occupational hazards, gendered labor divisions, and systemic neglect. Workers earn ₱9,500/month with uncertain employment status and limited access to health benefits, while facing exposure to contaminated waste, road accidents, and social discrimination. Thematic analysis and case study methods reveal how overlapping identities such as socioeconomic status, gender, and employment type, shape vulnerability. Applying the PESTEL framework, the study identifies macro-level forces including political neglect, economic precarity, technological gaps, and weak legal protections. These findings are further interpreted through the Iceberg Model, which uncovers internalized oppression and societal mental models that normalize exploitation. The study demonstrates that waste workers' immediate concerns are embedded in broader structural dynamics, aligning with Mills' concept of personal troubles as public issues. It recommends community-based interventions, stronger government accountability, and comparative research to inform policy reforms. By documenting these realities, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of intersectional labor marginalization and advocates for the recognition and protection of waste workers as vital contributors to public health and urban resilience.

Keywords

Intersectionality; Occupational Hazard; Sociological Imagination; Waste Work

1. INTRODUCTION

Waste is one of the most important, albeit overlooked aspects of social life. The importance of this field was recognized by early medical doctors through studies on morbidity and mortality, wherein the belief was that urban excess mortality was due to the cumulative effects of [a] contaminated ground saturated with putrefying waste and of the human and animal density (Barles 2014). The rapid industrialization and urbanization of the 19th century brought about not only economic upheavals, but also exposed health and environmental issues due to the deleterious conditions of cities with excessive waste generation, on top of the lack of proper waste management systems. Throughout the 19th century, efforts to rectify and improve the unsanitary conditions of highly urbanized cities, specifically in Europe focused on decreasing air putrefaction through improved ground covering, better management of human urban excreta, universalized sweeping and cleaning, and improved distribution of [waste management] services (idem).

This propelled waste management to become a formal occupation and essential public service. However, scholars later noticed that works related to urban waste disposal and management were disproportionately done by marginalized sectors in society. Thus, research on waste work began to develop from biomedical perspectives into more nuanced sociological and intersectional analyses. In his work, *Good People and Dirty Work* (1962), Everett Hughes coined the concept of “dirty work” which describes occupations that involve tasks considered as degrading or unpleasant but are in fact essential to societies focusing on key themes of collective identity among workers in stigmatized occupations. His work provided the foundations critically examining the complex occupational identities and societal perceptions shaping the experiences of those in stigmatized roles, and in the context of this study, the waste workers.

Presently, there are several studies exploring the lived experiences of waste workers; particularly in Puerto Princesa City, in the province of Palawan (Nicanor et. al. 2021); in the municipality of Cardona, in the province of Rizal (Estonanto 2024); and in the City of Baguio, in the Cordillera Administrative Region (Hermocilla 2025). These studies examined the problems faced by waste workers, their coping strategies, and highlighted insights through the Biopsychosocial framework proposed by George Engel (1977) which focused on the topic of health outcomes shaped by the intersection of three main factors: biological, psychological, and social. Aside from the waste workers’ perceptions of their health and resilience, the latter studies (Hermocilla 2025; Estonanto 2024) also highlighted problems faced by waste workers such as occupational hazards, experience of social stigma, and their coping strategies.

The present study contributes to the scholarly inquiry into the lived experiences of waste workers, particularly those in Barangay Tandang Sora, Quezon City, who provide services under its Clean and Green Department. By narrowing its scope to this specific community and

institutional arrangement, the study acknowledges that its findings are limited to localized practices and contexts.

Building on this defined scope, the study's significance lies in situating these localized experiences within the broader urban challenges of Quezon City, wherein, the 2023 Metropolitan Manila Development Authority's (MMDA) report on solid waste generation showed that Quezon City generates about 1,200 – 1,500 tons of waste daily or roughly about 438,000 – 547,500 tons of waste annually. In contrast to the earlier works of Nicanor et. al. (2021), Estanto (2024) and Hermocilla (2025) which examined smaller municipalities or individual cities in the regions, this research builds on the absence of localized inquiry into the lived experiences of waste workers in one of the cities in the country's most urbanized and densely populated metropolitan centers.

Moreover, the present study also contributes to the theoretical gap in the understanding of waste workers' experiences. Foundational literature has largely examined waste work from a macro perspective, emphasizing its role in public service and sanitation, while more contemporary studies have shifted toward micro-level analyses that foreground the lived experiences and daily challenges of waste workers. This study bridges that gap by integrating a meso-level perspective, analyzing the experiences of waste workers in Barangay Tandang Sora from their individually nuanced realities to their collective experiences as a community, and further to the structural factors that shape these experiences. As C. Wright Mills (1959) posited, the goal of sociological imagination is to perceive the intersection of personal troubles and public issues. In this regard, the field study enabled the researchers to understand the personal troubles of waste workers through in-depth understanding of their nuanced experiences and to identify the public issues of social structures faced by the sector. This layered approach is integral to advancing a more comprehensive understanding of waste work, situating the individual narratives within the broader social, institutional, and structural contexts that define the sector.

In this regard, this study intended to (a) examine the lived experiences of waste workers in Barangay Tandang Sora, Quezon City engaged as service providers under the Clean and Green Department; (b) analyze the challenges they encounter at the community level; and (c) investigate the structural mechanisms shaping the waste work sector in the context of Barangay Tandang Sora.

2. METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative research design that combined elements of ethnography and case study to capture the lived experiences of waste workers from personal to collective. To achieve these aims, the study employed a three-layered analytical approach that integrates micro, meso, and macro perspectives. While previous studies emphasized functionalist and biomedical perspectives at the macro level, and more contemporary research works shifted toward micro-level analyses or lived experiences at the individual

level, this study synthesizes both approaches by employing the Intersectionality Framework (Crenshaw 1989; Collins 2015) at the micro-level lens, the PESTEL framework at the meso-level lens (Aguilar 1967), and the Iceberg Model (Hall 1976) at the macro-level lens, thereby bridging the scales of analysis to synthesize and contextualize the experiences of waste workers in Barangay Tandang Sora.

First, at the micro-level lens, the Intersectionality framework which was first coined by Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) described how women of color experience compounded forms of oppression that cannot be understood through sexism or racism alone. This framework was later developed by Patricia Hills Collins (2015) as an analytical strategy for examining the mutual construct of power relations and social inequalities. In the context of this study, the waste workers were profiled through the varying intersectional identities that they are experiencing and how these individual identities overlap with their identity as a waste worker and the compounded challenges they faced along at the center of this intersectional identity.

Second, at the meso-level lens, the study focuses on the barangay community level, wherein, it is the smallest administrative unit in the Philippines and serves as a frontline of local governance. Waste workers in barangays are typically employed under units or departments such as the clean and green and their arrangements typically fall under job orders (JO) or contract of service (COS), which are temporary positions engaged in a specific duration with potential for renewal but does not guarantee stable employment and does not provide full employee benefits such as health insurance or social security. In order to shed the light on the challenges experienced by waste workers of Barangay Tandang Sora, Quezon City, the study utilized the Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Environmental, and Legal (PESTEL) Framework first developed by Harvard professor Francis Aguilar (1967) initially to serve as an environmental scanning model but later became widely adopted as a tool in strategic planning and risk management in project development to organize these challenges into a coherent analytical structure and to make sense of how multiple community-level forces shape the conditions of waste work.

Lastly, at the macro-level lens, the study employs the Iceberg Model of analysis, first developed by Edward T. Hall (1976) as a metaphorical illustration in understanding culture and how visible events are only the surface of deeper levels of systemic patterns, invisible structures, and entrenched mental models. The model was used in the context of this study to provide an in-depth analysis of the experiences faced by the waste workers of Barangay Tandang Sora, Quezon City through situating their lived realities to the structural roots influencing the waste work sector.

In analyzing the findings through a layered perspective from micro to meso to macro-level analysis, this study contributes not only to the sociology of work but also to environmental and urban studies by demonstrating how waste work is embedded in overlapping structures of health, governance, and social inequality. The study contributes empirically by synthesizing the lived realities of the waste workers of Barangay Tandang Sora

through field-based evidence through ethnographic immersion (*pakikipamuhay*) with structural inequalities embedded in the sector of waste work.

Table 1. Waste Worker's Profile

Participant	Age	Gender	Educational Attainment	Civil Status	Family Background
1	50	M	High School Level	Married	Father of 2
2	40	F	College Level	Single, but living with a partner	Mother of 2
3	46	F	High School Graduate	Separated	Living with Extended Family, Mother of 3
4	31	F	High School Level	Single, but living with a partner	Mother of 5
5	49	F	High School Graduate	Married	Living with Extended Family, Mother of 4
6	36	F	High School Graduate	Married	Mother of 4
7	76	F	Elementary Graduate	Widowed	Living with Extended Family
8	33	F	High School Level	Single, but living with a partner	Same-sex gender identifying individual
9	56	F	Elementary Graduate	Separated	Living with Extended Family, Mother of 5

The study was conducted in Barangay Tandang Sora, Quezon City, Philippines, in coordination with the barangay-level local government unit, specifically its Clean and Green Department. A total of ten (10) participants were interviewed, with one (1) being the Team Leader of the Department, categorically as a barangay worker, and nine (9) waste workers.

To capture the profile of the waste workers, the Team Leader was interviewed and it was found that she oversees 30 waste workers under this department. The waste worker's employment status or category was through a Job Order (JO) which is a temporary status that is being renewed for a specific period or duration every six (6) months. The waste workers net salary is PHP 9,500 monthly and their shift is flexible between the schedules of Monday to Saturday.

Amongst the 30 waste workers under the department, nine (9) willingly participated in the one-on-one interview, as shown in the table 1 above. The participants ranged in age from

their early thirties to mid-seventies, reflecting a mix of younger and older individuals engaged in waste work. The group was predominantly female, with eight (8) women and only one (1) male participant. In terms of educational attainment, most had reached the high school level, either as graduates or undergraduates, while two (2) had completed only elementary education and only one (1) had some college experience but eventually dropped out. Civil status varied, including married, separated, widowed, and single but in a cohabiting arrangements, indicating diverse household structures while their family backgrounds revealed that several participants were mothers supporting multiple children, and many lived with extended families, suggesting strong kinship ties and shared domestic responsibilities that influence their social and economic conditions. Notably, three (3) out of nine (9) waste workers stated that it is not enough to support their needs with one particularly advocating for a salary increase. All the waste workers interviewed were unable to indicate any existing programs or medical or health insurance created particularly for their job. Despite this, nine (9) waste workers noted the importance of safety and sanitary equipment, and five (5) mentioned they resort to prayer in seeking guidance and protection against diseases and accidents.

Meanwhile, The data gathering strategy employed was through the following; (1) semi-structured interview with the waste workers; and (2) immersion (*pakikipamuhay*) wherein the researchers were exposed and experienced the day-to-day realities of the waste workers for two (2) weeks; and (3) site visits and transect walks, to observe the physical and social conditions of the workplace, as well as transect walks that allowed for systematic direct observation of daily routines, hazards, and coping practices. These methods were employed to provide a holistic account of waste workers' realities, integrating both collective cultural insights and individual life histories.

Consistent with the study's qualitative design, the data analysis integrates methods that allow both micro-level and macro-level insights to emerge from the field.

Firstly, in order to understand the nuances in their experience, each participant's lived experiences were treated as a separate case study and provided contextualized accounts of individual workers' intersecting identities and vulnerabilities.

Secondly, thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns across interviews and observations (cf. Gustaffson 2017) wherein the responses of the participants from the semi-structured interview were coded until the main themes emerge focusing on the challenges experienced by the waste workers. To further structure and interpret the findings, planning tools such as situational, objective, and alternative analyses were applied, alongside the PESTEL framework (Aguilar 1967) to situate experiences within broader external forces. Stakeholder analysis complemented these methods by mapping the roles and risks of key actors in the sector. To identify the root causes and effects of challenges within the waste work sector, the researchers concentrated on a single priority problem selected from the range of issues faced by workers. This priority concern was determined using the Problem Ranking Tool, which enabled systematic comparison and evaluation of the most pressing

problems. From this process, nine root causes were identified through critical analysis of the waste workers' central difficulties. Coding was conducted inductively, with themes emerging from repeated patterns in interview transcripts and field notes. Examples of themes included "lack of protective equipment," "gendered division of labor," and "uncertainty of employment status." Validation was ensured through triangulation of data sources (interviews, immersion, site visits), peer debriefing among researchers, and comparison of worker-identified problems with macro-level analyses. Afterwards, the PESTEL framework was applied to situate workers' micro-level experiences within broader macro-level contexts, identifying political neglect, economic precarity, social invisibility, technological limitations, environmental hazards, and weak legal protections.

Lastly, the Iceberg Model was then used to interpret the difference between the results of the problem-ranking tool identified by the waste workers and the PESTEL analysis. While the problem-ranking captured workers' immediate perceptions, the Iceberg Model revealed deeper systemic forces that remain invisible in daily life. Together, these frameworks provided a layered understanding of how occupational hazards are embedded in structural and cultural dynamics.

Reflexivity was central to the research process. The researchers critically reflected on their positionality, cultural background, and the influence of immersion (*pakikipamuhay*) on data collection and interpretation. Direct engagement with waste workers in their natural work environment fostered relational understanding but also required awareness of potential biases in interpreting lived experiences. Reflexive journaling and team discussions were used to mitigate these biases and ensure that findings authentically represented participants' voices.

To maintain its integrity, this study adhered to established ethical standards in qualitative research to ensure the dignity, safety, and rights of participants. Informed consent was obtained from all waste workers prior to participation, with clear explanations of the study's purpose, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained by securing interview transcripts and removing identifying details from case narratives. Given the sensitivity of lived experiences and intersecting identities, the researchers practiced respectful engagement during immersion (*pakikipamuhay*), site visits, and interviews, ensuring that participants were not exposed to harm or undue pressure. Reflexivity was emphasized, with researchers critically reflecting on their positionality and potential biases throughout the data collection and analysis process. Moreover, the study followed the principle of beneficence, aiming to contribute positively by informing policy reforms and community development initiatives that uphold the fundamental rights of waste workers as members of the labor force and a marginalized sector.

To ensure trustworthiness, the study adhered to criteria of credibility and reliability. Credibility was strengthened through the use of multiple data gathering tools, including one-on-one interviews, immersion, site visits, and transect walks. Reliability was ensured by

employing both Situation Analysis, which reflected workers' own perceptions of their problems, and PESTEL analysis, which revealed underlying systemic forces. Comparing and contrasting these perspectives allowed for a more rigorous interpretation of findings. Dependability was supported through documentation of analytic procedures, while confirmability was addressed by maintaining an audit trail of coding decisions and analytic memos.

3. RESULTS

The results of the study revealed several major themes that emerged from the data gathered through interviews and observations. These include: (1) the individual experiences and challenges faced by the Barangay Tandang Sora waste workers; (2) the working environment and conditions encountered at the community level; and (3) the overarching themes that shape the realities of waste workers through the lens of the PESTEL Framework.

3.1. Experiences & Challenges faced by the Waste Workers

A total of nine waste workers were interviewed, and each participant's narrative was treated as an individual case. Their intersectional identities were analyzed using Crenshaw's (1989) intersectionality framework. The thematic analysis revealed overlapping identities, such as gender, age, civil status, and educational background that shaped distinct vulnerabilities and coping strategies. Across cases, recurring themes included precarious employment, health risks, and feelings of uncertainty. However, these experiences varied depending on intersecting factors; for instance, women with dependent children emphasized the burden of balancing domestic responsibilities with hazardous work, while older workers highlighted physical strain and lack of social protection.

The experiences and challenges faced by the waste workers revealed eight major themes:

a. Gender-based Issues

Participants described how their roles as workers often overlapped with their responsibilities as parents. Female participants, in particular, experienced multiple burdens of performing household chores alongside their paid work. Many also cared for aging parents, grandchildren, or other dependents, reinforcing gender stereotypes that expect women to manage domestic duties despite employment. Male participants, by contrast, did not report similar dual burdens.

Notably, one of the respondents also highlighted that she worked as a waste worker after she had to separate from her partner due to his drug addiction which caused the participant to experience domestic abuse. In order to remove herself from this situation, this participant left her partner and had to work as a waste worker to sustain herself.

b. Teenage Pregnancy

A recurring theme among participants was teenage pregnancy, which disrupted educational attainment and contributed to intergenerational cycles of poverty. One participant noted that her daughter also became a teenage mother, forcing her to care for both her child and grandchild. Instead of retiring, she continued working as a waste worker to sustain her family.

c. Educational Attainment

Low educational attainment emerged as a major barrier to employment mobility. Several participants attributed their entry into waste work to limited schooling and lack of formal qualifications. One respondent, previously employed as a saleslady, left her job due to pregnancy and later joined the waste work sector to contribute to household expenses while raising her children.

d. Socioeconomic Status

All participants identified low socioeconomic status as their primary challenge. They expressed dissatisfaction with low wages, job insecurity, and lack of health or retirement benefits. Financial distress was a constant concern, reflecting structural inequities in labor conditions for contractual workers.

e. Attitudes & Perceptions

Participants often expressed feelings of fear and low self-esteem associated with the stigmatized nature of waste work. Despite recognizing the environmental importance of their labor, they internalized negative social perceptions, referring to themselves as “merely” waste workers. This self-deprecating view highlights the social invisibility of their contribution to urban sanitation.

f. Health Concerns

Health issues were prevalent among participants due to the physical demands and exposure inherent in waste work. One participant described washing thoroughly before holding her infant grandchild to prevent infection. Another, a senior citizen, reported persistent physical strain but continued working because she could not afford to retire.

g. Religion

Participants discussed feelings of religious alienation stemming from the hardships of daily life. Although some expressed diminished faith, they maintained positive attitudes and moral resilience, viewing perseverance as a form of spiritual endurance.

h. Diskarte Mentality & Resilience Culture

All the participants emphasized their perseverance and resilience which is culturally referred to as having a ‘*diskarte*’ mentality despite their unfortunate situation both in their personal challenges and in the challenges that intersect in their work as waste

workers. This resilience was a recurring theme amongst the participants regardless of any social characteristics such as gender, age, or educational attainment and their perceived being waste workers as part of their effort or *diskarte* to contribute to the sustenance of their family.

3.2. Working Environment & Conditions faced by the Waste Workers

The interview conducted with nine (9) waste workers aimed to elicit their lived experiences in the sector, specifically to gain a deeper understanding of their working environment and conditions, particularly, the challenge they faced at the community-level.

Major findings show that due to the nature of their work and their working environment, they encounter various difficulties. Two (2) waste workers noted road accidents as they were tasked to sweep along the main roads of Tandang Sora. While five (5) of them expressed concerns about health hazards as their work exposes them to hazardous waste, which may harm them as they come into contact with sharp objects or wastes possibly contaminated with chemicals, viruses, and diseases like the COVID-19 virus, especially during the pandemic. Furthermore, as their work involves unclogging blocked and polluted waterways, such as creeks, rivers, and canals, they are also exposed to infections that may lead to high-risk diseases such as typhoid fever, leptospirosis, etc. Due to the nature of waste work, workers also experience discrimination in the form of mockery and unjust treatment from others. In order to combat such hazards to their health and safety, all of the interviewed waste workers highlighted the importance of safety and sanitary equipment, such as gloves, masks, alcohol, and PPEs. On the other hand, five (5) mentioned how they resort to prayer for guidance and protection against risks associated with their work, such as diseases and accidents. When asked, the waste workers were not aware of any existing programs or medical or health insurance designed to protect their sector's welfare and security.

Meanwhile, the transect walk in Barangay Tandang Sora, conducted as part of ethnographic immersion (*pakikipamuhay*) and direct observation, allowed the researchers to follow the routes of street sweepers and document the physical conditions, hazards, and challenges they face in their daily work. The walk revealed that waste workers are exposed to multiple risks across street sweeping, creek cleaning, and garbage collection, including unsafe roads and sidewalks, dangling electrical cables, sharp debris, contaminated waste, heavy lifting, and traffic-related accidents. These findings demonstrate the multi-dimensional hazards inherent in waste work and emphasize the precariousness of the sector, underscoring the urgent need for stronger protective measures, improved infrastructure, and more responsive policy interventions to safeguard worker health and safety.

3.3. Emerging Sectoral Issues faced by Waste Workers

The results reveal that the most pressing concern among waste workers in Barangay Tandang Sora is their high exposure to health hazards, including diseases, illnesses, and accidents. This concern was the most frequently identified by the waste workers, followed by low salary, long working hours, and public discrimination. Waste workers reported that their frequent contact with waste materials and roadside work exposes them to infections and physical risks, which also affect their families' well-being. Interestingly, while low wages were acknowledged, most of the participants viewed their work as a voluntary means to supplement household income rather than their primary source of livelihood. These findings highlight that health and safety risks are the most significant and recurring challenges within the sector.

Furthermore, the participants identified being prone to illness and disease stems from several root causes, including low minimum wage, lack of health insurance, insufficient supply of personal protective equipment (PPEs), and absence of hazard pay. Other contributing factors include workplace health hazards, poor waste management practices, and lack of policies specific to the waste work sector. These conditions lead to severe effects such as poor living and health conditions, family vulnerability to diseases, and discrimination against waste workers. Overall, the results show that the sector's health and safety issues are deeply rooted in structural neglect and inadequate occupational protection.

4. DISCUSSION

In line with the aims of this study to understand the lived experiences of the waste workers of Barangay Tandang Sora, Quezon City through a micro, meso, and macro level, the study highlighted the following: (1) the individual realities of the waste workers through the intersectionality framework; (2) the community realities of the waste workers through the PESTEL framework; and lastly, (3) the sectoral realities of waste work through the Iceberg Model of Analysis. First, the major dimensions that emerged from the identified intersectionalities were the Gender, Socioeconomic Status, and Education.

In terms of Gender and Sexuality, the gendered composition of the sector adds a further dimension. Eight of the nine workers interviewed showed that despite being categorized as a type of physical labor work, women in fact dominate waste workers in Tandang Sora, Quezon City. However, the women are often tasked with sweeping or garbage collecting, while trucking (accompanying garbage trucks in collection) are assigned to men. This observation extends Nicanor et al.'s (2021) findings in Puerto Princesa, which documented gendered divisions of labor in waste management. It also expands Simpson et al.'s (2014) analysis of meaning-making in dirty work, which did not foreground gender. In this context, women's predominance in waste work intensifies vulnerability, as they face both occupational hazards and cultural devaluation of their labor.

While the participants highlighted their lack of educational attainment as the factor for engaging in waste work, it was also notable that they were unable to access education due to

various reasons including poverty, lack of parental guidance, and teenage pregnancy among others. This dynamic shows a cyclical relationship wherein their waste work was due to lack socioeconomic hardship leading to poor educational outcomes which in turn exacerbates their financial instability due to low wage and job insecurity. This is relative to the dimension of socioeconomic status, wherein the participants highlighted concerns including health, safety and security, and compensation. Workers interpret these struggles as personal problems, yet Mills' (1959) sociological imagination shows that such issues are embedded in larger social structures. The tendency to view inadequate PPEs or low wages as isolated misfortunes reflects how systemic neglect is internalized as individual hardship. This pattern resonates with the previous studies, wherein, Hermocilla (2025) documented wage insecurity and lack of benefits among waste workers in Cardona, while Estonanto (2024) highlighted similar vulnerabilities in Baguio City. By situating Quezon City within this broader pattern, the present study extends the geographic scope of Philippine labor scholarship. It demonstrates that waste workers across diverse urban contexts share common struggles, reinforcing the need for national policy attention.

Second, in terms of community realities, working environment and everyday conditions emerged as the main concern of the waste workers in Barangay Tandang Sora. Participants consistently identified the lack of personal protective equipment (PPEs) and exposure to health risks as their most pressing concerns. These concerns represent their immediate micro-reality, reflecting the daily risks they face in performing their tasks. The prioritization of PPEs and occupational safety underscores the workers' awareness of the tangible hazards that directly affect their well-being, such as exposure to illness, accidents, and unsafe working conditions. This micro-level perspective highlights the vulnerability of waste workers to health risks and the absence of sufficient employer-provided protections.

These findings confirm Hughes' (1958) and Ashforth and Kreiner's (1999) concept of "dirty work," where stigma is not only symbolic but materially embodied in unsafe and hazardous tasks. The prioritization of PPEs underscores how stigma translates into tangible occupational risks, reinforcing the marginalization of workers. Moreover, economic precarity (i.e., being hired at a temporary position as job order), social invisibility (i.e., the low self-esteem and self-perception as waste workers), technological limitations (i.e., lack of protective equipment and funds for the department), environmental hazards, and weak legal protections (i.e., as job order hires, waste workers lack tenure security or socioeconomic benefits unlike permanent employees) collectively shape the sector. These findings echo Durkheim's (1982) insight that waste management is essential for social stability. Yet the neglect of waste workers undermines this function, creating a paradox where society depends on waste workers for public health and order, but simultaneously devalues and marginalizes them.

The apparent contrast between the waste worker's perception towards their lived experiences and the more institutional forces shaping their realities are highlighted through the PESTEL Framework (Aguilar 1967). To understand the broader issues faced by waste

workers, their lived realities must be situated within wider structural forces. While workers often identify immediate concerns such as inadequate Personal Protective Equipment (PPEs) and health risks, the PESTEL analysis reveals that these micro-level struggles are embedded in macro-level dynamics, including political neglect, economic precarity, social invisibility, technological gaps, environmental hazards, and weak legal protections. Applying this framework allows the study to move beyond individual accounts and highlight how systemic structures perpetuate vulnerability in the waste work sector.

Political

Waste workers are excluded from comprehensive labor protections despite the existence of laws such as the *Ecological Solid Waste Management Act (RA 9003)* and the *Occupational Safety and Health Law (RA 11058)*. While these policies mandate the provision of PPEs and safe working conditions, their coverage often excludes local government employees, leaving waste workers vulnerable. This political neglect reflects weak enforcement and a lack of accountability from government institutions.

Economic

Workers earn a fixed salary of ₱9,500 per month, which is below the minimum wage in Metro Manila. This income is insufficient to cover basic needs such as food, rent, utilities, and education, leaving no room for savings. The absence of hazard pay, despite exposure to risks during pandemics or natural disasters, further entrenches economic precarity. Waste work is perceived as “low-value” labor, reinforcing segmentation between “good” and “bad” jobs and limiting upward mobility.

Social

The sector is marked by internalized oppression and the romanticization of “Filipino resilience.” Workers often normalize exploitation, expressing gratitude for employment despite unsafe conditions and inadequate compensation. Gender division of labor is also evident: women carry the dual burden of productive and reproductive work, while men are expected to lead in community roles. Issues such as domestic violence and paternal negligence further compound social vulnerabilities.

Technological

The lack of adequate Personal Protective Equipment (PPEs) and mechanized support exposes workers to unnecessary risks. Tasks such as creek cleaning and garbage collection are performed with minimal tools, often relying on thin gloves that fail to protect against sharp or contaminated waste. This technological gap reflects the absence of investment in occupational safety innovations.

Environmental

Waste workers operate in hazardous environments, including polluted creeks, damaged roads, and unsafe intersections. They are exposed to chemical waste, sharp debris, and fast-moving vehicles, all of which heighten risks of injury and illness. Their role in maintaining

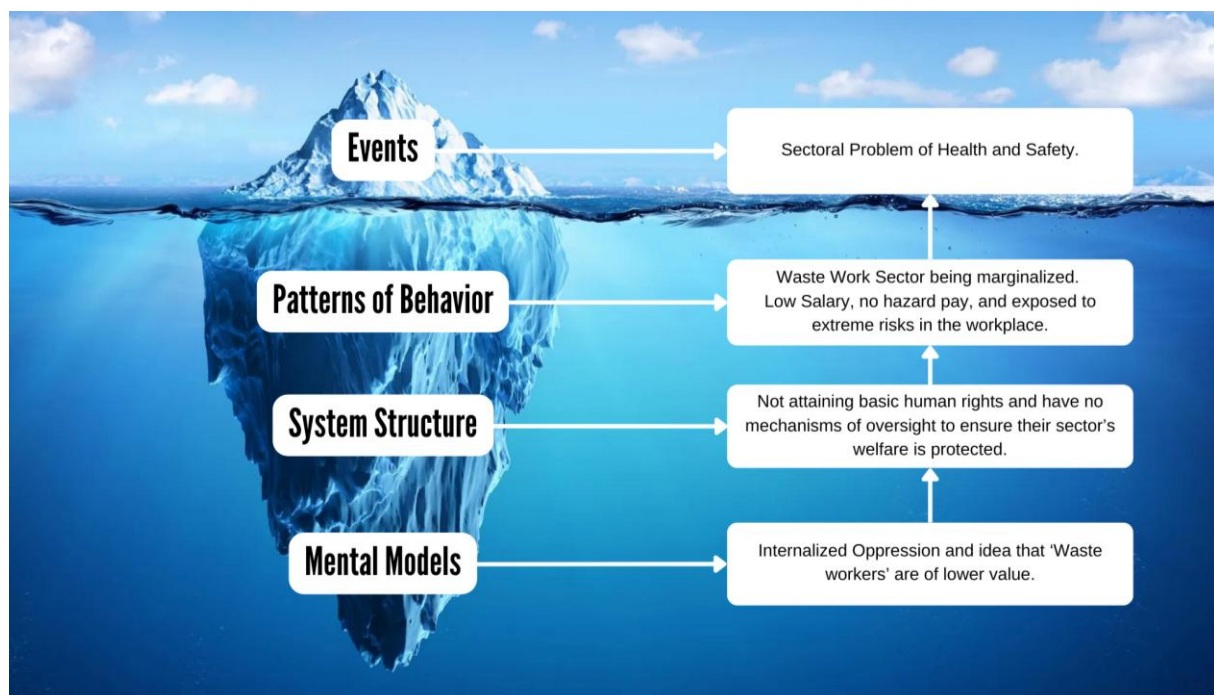
sanitation during disasters underscores their environmental importance, yet their safety remains compromised.

Legal

Despite international conventions such as the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)* and *CEDAW* affirming rights to fair wages, education, and protection against discrimination, waste workers remain deprived of these entitlements. Their lack of awareness of civil rights, combined with socioeconomic constraints, limits their ability to demand accountability. The legal framework thus fails to translate into tangible protections for this marginalized sector.

Overall, this showed that waste workers' immediate concerns, including low wages, lack of PPEs, and health risks, are inseparable from broader structural forces. Their experiences reflect Mills' (1959) concept of personal troubles embedded in public issues, showing how political neglect, economic precarity, social invisibility, technological gaps, environmental hazards, and weak legal protections converge to perpetuate systemic marginalization.

Figure 1. Iceberg Model Analysis of the Lived Experiences of Waste Workers in Brgy. Tandang Sora, Quezon City



Source: www.axenehp.com

Lastly, utilizing the Iceberg Model of Analysis, the most visible issue within the waste work sector is the prevalence of health and safety problems. However, beneath these surface-level concerns lie deeper root causes, including entrenched patterns of behavior, systemic structures that perpetuate vulnerability, and dominant societal mental models that normalize exploitation. Applying this analytical lens to the sector reveals that a prevailing mentality among waste workers is internalized oppression, reinforced by the perception that

their labor is of lower value in society. This mindset contributes to the denial of their basic human rights (United Nations 1948) and the absence of oversight mechanisms to safeguard their welfare. As a result, waste workers remain marginalized, earning wages below the minimum standard and lacking hazard pay despite daily exposure to extreme occupational risks. These conditions collectively manifest in the sectoral health and safety problems that are most apparent to external observers.

Overall, the findings suggest that the challenges faced by waste workers extend beyond what is immediately observable and are embedded in broader structural and cultural dynamics. While the present study does not claim to resolve these systemic issues, it aims to raise awareness of the intersectional vulnerabilities of the sector and to highlight the urgent need for prioritization. By documenting these realities, the research provides a foundation for future studies and policy interventions that can advance the welfare of waste workers and ensure that their contributions to public health and sanitation are recognized and protected.

5. CONCLUSION

This study directly responds to the absence of systematic inquiry into the lived experiences of waste workers in Quezon City, despite the city's scale, complexity, and centrality in the Philippines' urban landscape. Barangay Tandang Sora, as one of Quezon City's largest barangays, provides a critical site for examining how local governance structures, employment arrangements, and everyday working conditions intersect to shape occupational vulnerability. By employing ethnographic immersion and case study analysis, the research generated empirical evidence that foregrounds the voices of waste workers themselves, situating their narratives within broader sociological debates.

The findings revealed workers' immediate struggles such as lack of personal protective equipment (PPEs), exposure to health risks, and low wages, which cannot be understood in isolation. These micro-level realities are inseparable from systemic issues of political neglect, weak legal protections, and labor precarity. The study therefore advances the argument that intersectionality offers a critical lens for analyzing waste work, as overlapping identities and structural forces converge to produce compounded vulnerabilities.

Intersectionality, as articulated by Crenshaw (1989) and expanded by Collins (2015), emphasizes that social categories such as gender, class, and race do not operate independently but intersect to create unique forms of disadvantage. In the case of Barangay Tandang Sora, the predominance of women in waste work illustrates how gender intersects with economic precarity and social stigma. Women workers face not only occupational hazards but also cultural devaluation of their labor, reinforcing their invisibility within both policy frameworks and public discourse.

The ethnographic immersion revealed that waste workers internalize this marginalization, often perceiving their struggles as personal misfortunes rather than systemic injustices. Mills' (1959) concept of the sociological imagination is particularly

relevant here: workers interpret their lack of PPEs or low wages as individual problems, yet these are embedded in larger structures of governance, labor policy, and cultural attitudes. Intersectionality thus provides a framework for connecting these micro-level experiences to macro-level structures, demonstrating how vulnerability is produced at the intersection of gender, class, and institutional neglect.

By situating local evidence within global debates on dirty work, functionalism, and intersectionality, this study contributes empirically to both Philippine labor scholarship and international occupational sociology. Hughes (1958) first conceptualized “dirty work” as stigmatized labor involving tasks deemed unpleasant or degrading. Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) later examined how workers construct positive identities despite stigma, while Simpson et al. (2014) highlighted meaning-making strategies in dirty work occupations. The Quezon City case extends these debates by showing how stigma is compounded by gendered divisions of labor and precarious employment arrangements under local government units.

Durkheim’s (1982) insights into the role of waste management in sustaining social stability also resonate here. Waste is an inevitable byproduct of social and economic activity, and its proper management is essential for public health. Yet the neglect of waste workers undermines this function, revealing a paradox: society depends on waste workers for stability, but simultaneously devalues and marginalizes them. This contradiction underscores the need to reframe waste work not as peripheral or stigmatized labor, but as central to the functioning of urban life.

The evidence demonstrates that waste workers’ marginalization is not simply a matter of inadequate equipment or wages. It is embedded in systemic governance failures and cultural mentalities that normalize exploitation. The PESTEL analysis revealed political neglect in the form of weak enforcement of labor protections, economic precarity due to low wages and insecure employment status, social invisibility reinforced by stigma, technological limitations in waste management systems, environmental hazards from unsafe disposal practices, and weak legal protections despite existing laws.

The Iceberg Model further illuminated how visible problems such as lack of PPEs are underpinned by deeper structures and mental models. Internalized oppression among workers reflects a cultural mentality that their labor is of lower value, contributing to the denial of basic rights. This mindset is reinforced by the absence of oversight mechanisms and the normalization of substandard working conditions. Addressing waste workers’ struggles therefore requires not only material interventions but also cultural shifts that challenge societal devaluation of their labor.

Addressing these challenges requires both immediate interventions to improve occupational safety and broader policy reforms to secure labor rights. The study recommends three (3) key directions:

1. **Community-Based Interventions** – Targeted community development initiatives and wellness programs designed specifically for waste workers can

address immediate needs. These include provision of PPEs, health check-ups, and psychosocial support. Such interventions recognize waste workers as integral members of the community whose well-being directly impacts public health.

2. **Government Accountability Mechanisms** – Strengthening government accountability is essential to ensure compliance with existing labor and safety policies such as the *Ecological Solid Waste Management Act* (Republic Act No. 9003, 2000) and the *Occupational Safety and Health Law* (Republic Act No. 11058, 2018). Enforcement must go beyond formal legislation to include monitoring, sanctions for non-compliance, and participatory mechanisms that involve waste workers in decision-making.
3. **Comparative Academic Research** – For the academic community, conducting comparative research across cities and provinces can capture broader sectoral issues, particularly wage disparities and intersectional forms of discrimination. Such studies would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of waste work in the Philippines, situating local evidence within global debates and advancing occupational sociology. Moreover, future research could move beyond descriptive accounts of neglect and engage critically with the structural forces that shape waste work. Specifically, studies can interrogate how the contractualization, outsourcing, and the erosion of social protection and how these produce precarious labor conditions for waste workers. Likewise, situating waste work within the political economy of waste highlights how capital accumulation, privatization of services, and uneven state responsibility perpetuate systemic inequalities. By embedding lived experiences within these broader frameworks, subsequent scholarship can illuminate both the moral dimensions of injustice but also the mechanisms of power that sustain it.

This study contributes empirically to Philippine labor scholarship by documenting the lived experiences of waste workers in Quezon City, a context previously overlooked. Existing studies in Puerto Princesa (Nicanor et al. 2021), Cardona (Hermocilla 2025), and Baguio City (Estonanto 2024) have highlighted occupational hazards and coping strategies, but their geographic scope is limited. By focusing on Quezon City, this research fills a critical gap and provides evidence that can inform both local policy and national debates on labor rights.

Moreover, the study advances intersectional analyses of marginalized work sectors in the Philippines. By highlighting how gender, class, and socioeconomic status intersect to shape vulnerability, it extends the scope of occupational studies beyond biomedical or functionalist perspectives. This contribution is particularly significant given the growing recognition of intersectionality as a framework for analyzing labor precarity in global contexts.

Beyond the Philippine context, the study contributes to international occupational sociology by extending debates on dirty work and labor precarity. It demonstrates that stigma and marginalization are not universal but are shaped by local governance structures, cultural attitudes, and employment arrangements. The predominance of women in waste work in Quezon City, for instance, challenges assumptions of male dominance in dirty work occupations and highlights the need for gender-sensitive analyses.

The study also underscores the importance of situating occupational hazards within broader systemic contexts. While lack of PPEs and low wages are immediate concerns, they are embedded in governance failures and cultural mentalities that normalize exploitation. This insight contributes to global debates on labor precarity, emphasizing that interventions must address both material conditions and structural inequalities.

In doing so, the study underscores the need to recognize waste workers not only as essential contributors to public health and sanitation, but also as a marginalized sector whose rights and dignity must be protected. Waste workers are indispensable to the functioning of urban life, yet their labor is devalued and their rights are neglected. Recognizing their contributions requires both symbolic and material interventions: symbolic recognition through public discourse and cultural shifts, and material recognition through improved wages, benefits, and protections.

This study addressed the research gap in Quezon City by providing empirical evidence on the lived experiences of waste workers in Barangay Tandang Sora. Through ethnographic immersion and case study analysis, the findings revealed that workers' immediate struggles with PPEs, health risks, and low wages are inseparable from broader systemic issues of political neglect, weak legal protections, and labor precarity. These results support the argument advanced in the introduction: that intersectionality provides a critical lens for understanding how overlapping identities and structural forces shape vulnerability in waste work.

By situating local evidence within global debates on dirty work, functionalism, and intersectionality, the study contributes empirically to both Philippine labor scholarship and international occupational sociology. The evidence demonstrates that waste workers' marginalization is not simply a matter of inadequate equipment or wages, but is embedded in systemic governance failures and cultural mentalities that devalue their labor. Addressing these challenges requires both immediate interventions to improve occupational safety and broader policy reforms to secure labor rights. In doing so, the study underscores the need to recognize waste workers not only as essential contributors to public health and sanitation, but also as a marginalized sector whose rights and dignity must be protected.

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