



AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL, WATERAID AND INTERNATIONAL DALIT SOLIDARITY NETWORK

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South Asia: Authorities must urgently protect sanitation workers risking their lives on the COVID-19 frontlines

As the UN marks World Toilet Day, Amnesty International, WaterAid and the International Dalit Solidarity Network call on authorities in India, Bangladesh, Nepal and Pakistan to take immediate action to protect sanitation workers who are risking their lives on the COVID-19 frontlines.

Across South Asia, workers cleaning toilets and streets, emptying latrine pits and maintaining sewers are faced with acute health and safety risks. They lack adequate personal protective equipment (PPE), training support to cope with risks, job security, social security, health insurance and access to handwashing facilities. The caste dimension of sanitation work in these countries also means that workers are highly stigmatized and discriminated against when accessing services or seeking other occupations.

[New research by WaterAid](#) in India, Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh shows that the COVID-19 pandemic has made the situation worse for the vast majority of these workers. Some have even been redeployed to service COVID-19 quarantine centres with limited training on COVID-19 related risks or how to use PPE. Their financial security has also been affected either due to increased but non-compensated working hours in some cases, and reduced demand for their services in others. Their transportation costs increased due to lockdowns and many had to buy face masks and other equipment that their employers did not regularly provide.

“Sanitation workers are the hidden workforce keeping towns and cities in South Asia functioning throughout the pandemic, but they work in very poor and too often life-threatening conditions and are subject to stigma and discrimination based on caste and religion” said Vanita Suneja, South Asia Regional Advocacy Manager at WaterAid. “COVID-19 and related lockdowns have exacerbated these risks, especially among the many sanitation workers informally employed. Most female sanitation workers are informal workers risking their lives every day. The safety and dignity of these workers have been disproportionately affected.”

The International Dalit Solidarity Network has campaigned to raise the plight of low caste sanitation workers, being lowered into sewers or cleaning dry latrines with no protective

equipment. Many of these workers “inherit” these occupations due to their designated status in the caste system. This status has travelled with them to countries like Bangladesh, where many street sweepers are Dalits and live in segregation in sweepers’ colonies. Workers and human rights defenders in these countries are fighting for their rights but need global solidarity and accelerated action.

“These workers are not asking for a medal. They are asking for their rights and dignity to be respected and that the same concern authorities are showing for the health and safety of other segments of the population is also extended to them,” said Meena Varma, Executive Director of the International Dalit Solidarity Network.

Issues of stigma and discrimination against sanitation workers are reported across South Asia. Amnesty International has [appealed for action](#) in India urging the government to ensure dignity and protection of sanitation workers. For too long, societies have chosen to neglect the rights of sanitation workers and their work conditions. Safety, dignity and protection at the workplace is a right for sanitation workers as much as for any other worker during COVID-19 times and beyond. Estimated 5million sanitation workers, mostly belonging to Dalit communities are forced to work as manual scavengers to clean faecal sludge in sewers, septic tanks etc. Governments must acknowledge the contribution of these essential workers and secure their rights and safety.

“Many of the sanitation workers are Dalits, the so-called lowest caste in South Asia. Because of their descent, they are historically subjected to extreme forms of indignity, oppression, exclusion, and discrimination. Their already marginalised position is even further compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic,” said David Griffiths, Director of the Office of the Secretary General at Amnesty International. “It beggars belief that anyone should be forced into the practice of manually cleaning and carrying human excrement, often simply because of their birth. Governments must take urgent action to protect the rights of these workers and immediately stop anybody from being subject to this illegal, degrading, and inhumane treatment.”

Amnesty International, WaterAid and the International Dalit Solidarity Network call on national governments and local authorities in Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan to urgently:

- Provide immediate support and implement protective measures to help sanitation and waste workers cope with the heightened risks as the pandemic continues, such as the regular supply of PPE, adequate training on COVID-19 related risks, health insurance, social security and financial compensation for hours worked and risks. Ensure subcontracted and informal workers are not left out of these measures.
- Ensure the safety of all workers, especially women workers, from abuse, discrimination and other forms of violence at work.
- Ensure that sanitation workers have access to regular health screening, and accessible and affordable health services. The inability to pay must not be a barrier to accessing health care and treatment.
- In line with their obligations under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, develop policies and regulations to ensure just and favourable

conditions of work for sanitation workers. Set up financing, enforcement and accountability mechanisms including effective labour inspection to ensure adequate implementation.

- Ensure local administration including contractors and sub-contractors are held accountable for non-compliance and non-adherence to safety measures.
- Ensure access to adequate water, sanitation and hygiene to protect sanitation workers from infection in workplaces and communities.
- Take action to address the caste, gender and religious discrimination that reinforces forced and precarious labour conditions and implement legislations to end illegal act of manual scavenging practices and rehabilitate workers.

Documentation:

[Report: Safety and wellbeing of sanitation workers during COVID-19 in South Asia: a rapid assessment from Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Nepal in lockdown](#) (WaterAid, 2020)

<https://amnesty.org.in/abandoned-at-the-frontline-indias-sanitation-workers-seek-immediate-help-from-the-government-amidst-covid-19/> (Amnesty International, 2020)

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