

2025



Brief Report

INFORMAL WASTE COLLECTORS IN CAMBODIA

Living Conditions | Socio-economic Status | Violence | Social Protection

Full Report



Disclaimer:

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BRIEF RESEARCH SUMMARY

WASTE COLLECTORS IN CAMBODIA: LIVING CONDITIONS, SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS, VIOLENCE AND SOCIAL PROTECTION

2024

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01

BACKGROUND

88.3 percent of workers are engaged in informal employment (of these, 87.6 percent are women), and 87.6 percent of establishments are informal.¹ Waste collectors are categorized as self-employed in the informal economy sector among other workers and, therefore, are not yet recognized as workers entitled to formal benefits as those classified as registered workers entitled to the benefits under the Law on Labor and other related laws. The self-employed status under the informal economy sector of the waste collectors has seen them vulnerable and marginalized on many fronts, including social status, harassment, and lack of access to social assistance and protection.

In 2024, the Royal Government of Cambodia, via the National Social Security Fund (NSSF), introduced a health care scheme to workers in the informal economy and later for their family members.

¹ UNDP (2023) UNDERSTANDING THE PATHS TO FORMALIZATION IN CAMBODIA:
An Integrated Vision

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RESEARCH FINDINGS

The research findings were from the survey of 285 waste collectors in Phnom Penh city, 65% were female and 35% male, 7 Focus Group Discussion (FGD) totaling 56 people and a number of representatives from trade unions and Civil Society Organizations (CSO). The research aims to (1) assess waste collectors' living conditions, needs, job-related risks, and existing coping strategies; (2) identify suitable NSSF schemes for waste collectors, their ability to contribute regularly and their preferred contribution levels based on income; examine barriers limiting waste collectors' capacity to contribute to NSSF and obstacles to expanding their coverage and (3) explore experiences of gender-based violence, harassment, and discrimination against women waste collectors in the workplace.

FINDING 1. POOR LIVING CONDITIONS, JOB-RELATED RISKS, DEBTS AND DESPERATE COPING STRATEGIES

The study found that waste collectors live in precarious conditions, with 60% renting, 27% owning homes, and others residing in storehouses or having no regular shelter. Nearly all work seven days a week, often over 10 hours a day, taking breaks only for illness or major holidays, while most earn between \$1.25–\$12.50 daily — insufficient to cover basic needs. Debt is widespread, with 69% owing money to various lenders under flexible but burdensome repayment terms. Food insecurity and poor nutrition are common, and waste collectors regularly face injuries, unsafe work environments, and theft. Health problems affect 59% of respondents, yet few receive formal medical care,

relying instead on pharmacies for basic treatment.

KEY FINDINGS

- 60% rented, 27% owned, 7% lived in waste business storehouses, and 6% had no regular shelter, staying on boats, streets, parks, or carts.
- 96.2% of respondents work seven days a week, often exceeding 10 hours daily. Breaks occur only due to illness, exhaustion, or major national holidays. Many continue working long hours, hoping to collect more waste and increase their earnings.
- Over 99% of respondents reported that their income was insufficient to cover daily expenses. Most earned between R 10,000–20,000 (\$2.50–\$5.00) per day, with overall earnings ranging from R 5,000–50,000 (\$1.25–\$12.50).
- 69% of respondents reported being in debt to banks, microfinance institutions, relatives, waste business owners, and private lenders. Repayment terms varied, with monthly payments for banks and microfinance, and more flexible schedules—daily, weekly, or as affordable—for private lenders.
- A large majority did not have enough food, both amount and nutrition.
- Waste collectors face daily injuries from lack of protective gear. In landfills, accidents often occur due to careless truck drivers or inability to avoid them. Some also experience theft of personal belongings or money due to lack of secured storage.
- 59% reported health issues, though none had regular check-ups. Most relied on nearby pharmacies for quick symptom relief, visiting clinics or hospitals only when necessary or emergency.

FINDING 2. VIOLENCE, HARASSMENT AND DISCRIMINATION

Most believed men and women face the same struggles. Abuse and discrimination were seen as routine — waste collectors felt powerless to resist, resigned to a life society had already written for them. Women waste collectors reported frequent verbal, emotional, and occasional sexual harassment, often judged for their work, appearance, and behavior. Over 30% faced domestic violence, with some cases escalating to severe abuse and divorce. Discrimination also extended to their families and children.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Waste collectors routinely face physical violence from gangsters, often during theft or unprovoked assaults. Conflicts over waste are common, and many women report experiencing domestic violence from their partners.
- 31.6% of female respondents reported experiencing domestic violence committed by their partners/spouses.
- Waste collectors reported frequent verbal and emotional abuse, routinely insulted and looked down on for their work, appearance, and behavior. While some said they had never faced overt mistreatment, most described being blamed for messes around waste sites by residents, authorities, and company staff.
- Several shared experiences of being chased away, accused of theft, and threatened with police reports when simply collecting waste. As one respondent put it, “Sometimes the house owners talked straight to our face, ‘Hey you, the thief, what do you want to steal?’” highlighting the deep-rooted stigma and hostility they endure daily.

- Waste collectors shared mixed experiences with their neighbors — some described kindness, receiving food, medicine, clothing, and help with their children, especially when sick. Others, however, faced daily humiliation, with neighbors using foul language, calling them thieves, and mocking their families. Many spoke of the deep hurt caused by being devalued for their work, with one respondent saying, *“It is hard to accept how they looked down on us. There were times that I was thinking about committing suicide.”* The prejudice extended to their children too, who were cruelly labeled as *“the children of the waste collectors.”* These experiences reflect both rare acts of compassion and persistent, painful social exclusion.

FINDING 3: LACK OF SOCIAL PROTECTION

Almost two-thirds of the respondents did not possess an ID poor card, which give them access to free-of-charge health care service. The National Social Security Fund (NSSF) scheme for the self-employed has been newly introduced. Few waste collectors are aware of its existence, procedures, or benefits. Most respondents could afford only small contributions to NSSF, while some were unsure or unable to pay. Additionally, limited trust in local healthcare services and the high cost and lost income from traveling to larger state hospitals further discouraged participation.

KEY FINDINGS

- 71% of the respondents did not possess an ID Poor card, often due to lack of awareness, insufficient documentation, or refusal by local authorities.
- 91% were unaware of the self-employed scheme.
- Only 2% of the respondents in this study have registered with NSSF.
- The NSSF contribution is unaffordable for most, especially when covering family members.
- Only 12% of respondents could afford the current NSSF self-employed monthly rate of Riel 15,600 (about \$3.90), while 88% reported being unable to pay, and would need help.
- 50% reported being able to pay between R 4000 to 8000 (\$1-\$2), while 25% reported that they could pay R10,000 (\$2.50). 13% reported that they could not pay, while another 13% needed to know what amount they could afford.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Adopt Accessible, Inclusive Communication Strategies:** Use verbal, visual, audio, and community-based outreach to disseminate information about social protection benefits, healthcare services, and workers' rights. Prioritize low-literacy-friendly formats and targeted education campaigns to raise awareness about NSSF benefits, procedures, and entitlements.
- **Simplify Legal Documentation and Service Access:** Decentralize and simplify the issuance of identity and residential documents for rural-urban migrants and informal workers. Allow alternative or provisional IDs to access social protection schemes like NSSF, and introduce mobile NSSF registration teams and temporary service points directly within waste collector communities.
- **Revise Social Protection Coverage and Contribution Policies:** Implement flexible, subsidized NSSF contribution plans tailored to income and debt status, including grace periods and phased payment schemes. Allow breadwinners to enroll family members—especially children, elderly, and people with disabilities—without additional fees.
- **Enhance Social Assistance and Emergency Support:** Establish reliable, continuous social support mechanisms offering food aid, medical assistance, healthcare kits, school supplies, and work tools like waste carts. Ensure timely, on-demand support during crises to reduce daily survival pressures.
- **Recognize Waste Collectors as Workers:** Officially classify waste collection as a legitimate occupation with labor rights and protections. Regulate employer-waste collector partnerships to ensure fair working conditions, equal treatment, and legal protection from exploitation.
- **Expand and Improve Healthcare Access:** Strengthen the quality and reputation of local NSSF-affiliated clinics while reducing reliance on state hospitals. Deploy mobile health clinics and outreach services for immediate, affordable care. Extend healthcare services and NSSF coverage to seniors over 60 and people with disabilities with dedicated, priority services.
- **Protect Against Discrimination, Violence, and Exploitation:** Launch nationwide anti-discrimination campaigns and awareness initiatives to reduce stigma against waste collectors. Establish accessible complaint and support mechanisms, particularly for

women and children facing abuse or harassment in public, domestic, and workplace settings.

- **Support Women and Vulnerable Family Members:** Introduce gender-sensitive interventions prioritizing women's safety in public and private spaces. Offer psychosocial services, promote gender equity in service delivery and employment, and provide free childcare, nutritional, and educational support for waste collectors' children. Prioritize women's safety in public and private spaces, offer psychosocial support services, and promote gender equity in service delivery and employment programs via Gender-Sensitive Interventions.

- **Promote Livelihood Diversification and Skills Development:** Provide vocational training, literacy programs, and micro-business start-up support tailored to waste collectors' needs, enabling them to transition to safer, higher-paying, and more stable employment opportunities.

- **Strengthen Community Healthcare Trust and Services:** Build partnerships with local clinics, improving service quality, affordability, and community trust. Promote their use to reduce overcrowding in state hospitals and dependence on unregulated pharmacies.

- **Enhance and Digitalize Social Protection Systems:** Digitalize ID Poor cards for easier verification and ensure clear, transparent communication about the linkages and distinctions between NSSF and ID Poor benefits. Improve coordination between schemes to ensure waste collectors can seamlessly access services without bureaucratic barriers.

03

CONCLUSION

The study highlights that waste collectors are a marginalized and vulnerable group with low education levels and precarious livelihoods. Most respondents had only primary school education, limiting their access to information about social protection schemes like the National Social Security Fund (NSSF). Waste collectors often face barriers to formal healthcare, relying on self-medication due to affordability and accessibility issues, and are further constrained by their low incomes and high debt. Suggestions for improvement include grace periods for NSSF services, maintaining benefits during lapses, and increasing community outreach to raise awareness.

Waste collectors also experience significant demographic and economic challenges. Many have large families, placing additional strain on household finances, particularly due to the NSSF family coverage scheme. Accessing healthcare services, especially at state hospitals, remains out of reach due to costs and long travel times. Current contribution schemes are inflexible, and waste collectors, being informal workers, face difficulties in participating in social security programs. Recommendations include subsidies, family coverage without extra costs, and extending benefits to elders and dependents.

In addition to financial hardship, waste collectors endure daily abuse and discrimination, particularly women who face heightened vulnerability to violence and exploitation. Many waste collectors feel marginalized by society, facing verbal, emotional, and physical abuse from residents and authorities. The study also points to a lack of social support systems, with children being exposed to unsafe environments and denied access to education. There is a clear demand for waste collectors to be formally recognized as workers with the right to social security, legal protections, and access to identity documents. Gender inequalities further exacerbate their struggles, with women bearing the brunt of unpaid care work and domestic violence. The study calls for an inclusive, flexible social protection system to address these vulnerabilities.

CASE STUDY

Srey Leak's Story

A Waste Collector's Life of Struggle, Strength, and Hope

A Young Mother's Journey

Srey Leak, a 27-year-old mother, moved from Siem Reap province eight years ago and lives in Phnom Penh with her seven-year-old son, who is in grade two at a Primary School in the capital city. Currently two months pregnant with her second child, Srey Leak continues to face daily challenges while holding onto her hope for a better future for her children.

A Life of Waste Collection

For the past eight years, Srey Leak has worked as a waste collector, a job she initially took up with her late mother-in-law. She begins her day at 6:00 or 6:30 AM, commuting thirty minutes from her rented home in Sangkat Boeng Salang to a market area called Orussey Market, near where her son attends school. This arrangement allows her to stay near her son while she works.



Srey Leak's rented home is shared with one other family, totaling six people. She lives with her sister-in-law, who also works as a waste collector. They split the monthly rent of USD 70, with each contributing USD 35. Most days, Srey Leak picks waste from the streets; occasionally, if she has a little extra money, she buys recyclables while collecting. She owns two waste carts, one belonging to her late mother-in-law and worth about USD 150, a given as a donation to her late mother.

Surviving on Meager Earnings

After her son finishes school each evening, they return home to sort and sell the day's

collection. After dinner, they head out again to collect waste until late at night. Her young son often accompanies her and helps her to pick up waste, resting on the cart when he grows tired.

On average, Srey Leak earns about R20,000 (approximately USD 5) daily — barely enough to cover rent, food, and basic needs. Meals are simple and sparse: R3,000 (USD 0.75) per serving, consisting mostly of white rice with a small portion of food. Srey Leak eats whatever is left after her son gets filled up. If he eats everything, she waits for the next mealtime or searches for discarded, edible food from the streets.

During religious events or weddings, waste collectors like Srey Leak rely on leftover food from gatherings. These occasions allow them to eat their fill and sometimes save food for the following day. Srey Leak would volunteer to help clean up after such events, hoping for food or a small token of appreciation from the hosts.

Struggles with the Son's Education Costs

Despite her difficult circumstances, Srey Leak prioritizes her son's education. If she has money, she gives him R1000–2000 (USD 0.25–0.50) for school. However, many days, she has nothing to spare and must explain this to her son before convincing him to go to school. On several occasions, he skipped school out of embarrassment, ashamed when classmates discovered he had no pocket money because his mother is a waste collector.

Additional school expenses are another burden. An extra class requires a monthly payment of R40,000 (USD 10.00). Unable to pay this regularly, Srey Leak noticed that when she did pay, her son received homework, but he brought nothing home for the months she couldn't pay. Each monthly exam paper also has an R2000 (USD 0.50) fee. Desperate, she once asked the teacher to exempt her son from these costs, explaining her job as a waste collector and her inability to pay. The teacher said exemptions were possible only with an ID Poor card, which she lacks.

The Battle for Basic Services

Electricity and water cost Srey Leak between R20,000 and R30,000 (USD 5.00–7.50) per month. When short on cash, she borrows from housemates and repays with small amounts of interest. She has repeatedly requested an ID Poor card from local authorities but has consistently been denied, despite witnessing families with steady incomes and businesses receive the benefits she desperately needs.

Losing her original ID card added another barrier, preventing her from registering for

the National Social Security Fund (NSSF). She cannot access healthcare support or register for maternity benefits without this.

Stigma, Discrimination, and Social Isolation

Srey Leak and her son frequently face stigma and discrimination. Neighbors warn their children not to play with Srey Leak's son because he is the child of a waste collector. She often notices people covering their noses when passing by, treating them as dirty. Traffic congestion brings blame from passersby, as though waste collectors are responsible for clogged streets.

Her son, painfully aware of this, has told his mother he wants to quit school to escape the bullying and judgment. He once revealed that the teacher told him to remind his mother to pay if she wanted him to receive homework.

The Loss of a Loved One

In early 2025, tragedy struck Srey Leak's family when her mother-in-law, who was also a waste collector and who introduced her to this job, passed away during a charity giveaway event before the Chinese New Year. While waiting in a crowded line for a donation from an Oknha, her mother-in-law collapsed and died, and her son got injured on his legs. Following this incident, Srey Leak's family received donations from the various charity, other generous individuals and support from IDEA as a member, for which she received very little of the share. At the same time, the majority went to the son of her mother-in-law.

A Mother's Deepest Concerns



Srey Leak's most significant worry is her son's education and future. From the first day of school until now, her son has worn the same white shirt. She washes it nightly so he can wear it again the next day. The shirt now has a hole at the collar, a visible sign of their hardship.

She dreams of enrolling her son in English classes, costing USD 10 per month, but can never afford it. Her second pregnancy also brings constant anxiety. Without an ID Poor card, she cannot pay for routine check-ups and worries about affording delivery costs. She hopes to register for the NSSF, which would require a monthly contribution of USD 3.90 — an amount she is unsure she can consistently pay but is willing to try if it ensures safe childbirth.

During her first check-up for the current pregnancy, she spent about R50,000 (USD 12.5) but now fears she won't manage another check-up. Srey Leak confessed that even with her pregnancy, she sometimes skips meals or refrains from buying drinking water due to lack of money. She rarely has R100,000 (USD 25) in her hand, and the thought of managing delivery expenses always terrifies her.

Coping with Illness

When ill, Srey Leak takes only Paracetamol. She visits a pharmacy only when her condition prevents her from walking. Still, she prioritizes her son's school fees over her health. Often, when she cannot give her son money for school, kind neighbors discreetly hand him small amounts so he can attend.

Disbelief and Injustice

What frustrates Srey Leak the most is the unfair distribution of aid. She has seen noodle shop owners and motorbike dealers around the areas where she works — people with stable incomes — receive ID Poor cards while people like her, visibly struggling every day, are left out. The injustice is brutal for her to comprehend.

Support from IDEA

Through her membership with IDEA, a local association supporting waste collectors and informal economy workers, Srey Leak has gained valuable knowledge about her rights as a citizen — rights to dignity, freedom, and access to basic social protections. She has learned about the assistance and services she is entitled to, including the benefits of the ID Poor card and the National Social Security Fund (NSSF) card, even though she has yet to obtain either.

Despite being part of IDEA, Srey Leak struggles to participate fully in its activities. The financial burden of daily survival leaves her unable to afford the transportation fare to attend meetings and workshops at the IDEA office. While the organization offers crucial support and information, her poverty continues to limit her access to these resources.

A Resilient Spirit

Despite these overwhelming hardships, Srey Leak remains committed to her son's future and refuses to give up hope. Her story is one of quiet resilience, love, and a determination to provide a better life for her children against all odds.

"Even in the hardest life, I must carry hope in my heart for my children." Srey Leak said.