



## Editorial

*Richard C. Carter*

Tuesday is a special day in our household. Every Tuesday our five-year-old grandson wakes up excited by the fact that today the bin lorry will come to take away our household waste – one week it's the recycling, the alternate week it's the landfill waste, and every week the kitchen waste is taken away for composting. Together we enjoy watching for and waving to the workers as they take our solid waste away, and we are immensely grateful for their toil.

I live in a small town, and our town council employs a man who walks the streets and lanes of our community, pushing a small cart, picking up litter. He is always cheerful, and we regularly exchange a friendly 'good morning' when we see each other. Like the 'bin men (and sometimes women)' he is hard to miss in his high-visibility protective clothing and gloves.

On the edge of town we have a local authority-run facility where households can take things we no longer need, from used electronic items, to broken furniture, to used engine oil, and much besides. Most of these items are recycled. Half a dozen workers keep the site functioning smoothly and safely.

A couple of kilometres from my town there is a small wastewater treatment works, where the workers also undertake the crucial task of keeping the sewage flowing, making it safe, and releasing safely treated effluent to the neighbouring watercourse.

These workers – in a rural part of the UK – make an important contribution to the environmental sanitation of our community. They are far from being the highest earners in our society, but they are well-protected by health and safety laws and regulations. However little status they have in our society (and it is a sad fact that their status is not higher), they are performing critical tasks which are essential to the health and well-being of our environment and our public health.

In many low-income countries the services which I've outlined either do not exist, or they perform very poorly. Nevertheless some tasks still have to be done, and people still fulfil low status roles, with little recompense, simply to make ends meet. The work of informal waste workers who collect, sort and recycle various kinds of solid waste is part of this picture, but the services provided by sanitation workers arguably represent some of the most unpleasant, most hazardous and least valued services globally. Their situation is highlighted in an important recent report jointly produced by the World Bank, the World Health Organization, the International Labour Organization and WaterAid (World Bank et al., 2019):

Sanitation workers are the people:

Responsible for cleaning, maintaining, operating, or emptying a sanitation technology at any step of the sanitation chain. This includes toilet cleaners and caretakers in domestic, public, and institutional settings; those who empty pits and septic tanks once full and other faecal sludge handlers; those who clean sewers and manholes; and those who work at sewage and faecal waste treatment and disposal sites.

The report undertakes a systematic and geographically extensive (nine-country) survey of the plight of sanitation workers, and it is an important eye-opener and a shocking indictment of the world we share. This is a world in which sanitation workers often operate in daily direct physical contact with human excreta, emptying pit latrines and unblocking sewers without the benefit of protective clothing or the equipment needed to do this job safely. It is a world in which sanitation workers rarely have legal protection. There is no financial security and even less status attached to the role. The health and even the lives of such workers are daily put at risk.

To quote again from the report,

Low income, financial stress, informality and the social stigma attached to handling faeces can form a multigenerational poverty trap for many low-grade sanitation workers. These factors manifest in implicit or explicit discrimination, which hinders workers' social inclusion, their opportunities to shift careers, and social mobility. Furthermore, alcoholism and drug addiction to evade the working conditions are common among some sanitation workers. To protect their families' safety and well-being, several of the case examples found reports of sanitation workers maintaining a low profile and hiding their occupation from their communities.

The report calls for action in regard to policy, legislation and regulation; the establishment of operational guidelines to reduce risks to workers; advocacy on their behalf; and further building of the evidence base on the topic. It concludes with a summary of the commitments to action made by each of the four organizations responsible for the study.

This is a short, accessible report. It highlights an important dimension of the 'leave no one behind' imperative. In that sense it is reminiscent of work which began 25 years or more ago highlighting the importance of WASH services to people with HIV/AIDS; the focus on menstrual hygiene management in the last 15 years; and other work on vulnerable people who, like sanitation workers, do indeed risk getting left behind even while services for some are getting better.

*Richard C. Carter*

## Reference

World Bank, ILO, WaterAid, and WHO (2019) *Health, Safety and Dignity of Sanitation Workers: An Initial Assessment* [pdf], Washington, DC: World Bank <<https://washmatters.wateraid.org/health-safety-dignity-sanitation-workers>> [accessed 11 December 2019].