

**Opinion Article***Copyright © All rights are reserved by Md Mahmudul Hasan*

# Understanding Occupational Health and Safety for Sanitation Workers in Order to Achieve SDGs

**Md Mahmudul Hasan\****Department of Research, Education and Training, Al Noor Eye Hospital, Bangladesh*

**\*Corresponding author:** Md Mahmudul Hasan, Department of Research, Education and Training, Al Noor Eye Hospital, Bangladesh.

**Received Date:** April 26, 2023

**Published Date:** May 18, 2023

## Introduction

Like 193 countries, Bangladesh is a signatory country for achieving 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. Of these, 4 goals namely, end poverty in all its forms everywhere (SDG 1), ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages (SDG 3), ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all (SDG 6); and focus on decent work (SDG 8) [1] are directly related to the quality of life and occupation of any workers.

Although, quality of life and occupation represent two dimensions of a person's life, the term "Occupational Health and Safety (OHS)" unites these two dimensions towards a sustainable life. In one hand, OHS promotes and maintains job holders' physical, mental, and social well-being as well as to restraint the occurrence of any detrimental event upon them from workplace. On the other hand, worker gets health risk protection from employer through protective equipment, training, orientation and adaptive workplace [2]. This OHS term applies to all categories of workers working in different arrangements of work as formal, informal, skilled, unskilled, salaried, and apprentice.

Employed or otherwise – workers who are responsible for cleaning, maintaining, operating or emptying sanitation technology at any time along the sanitation chain are called sanitation workers [3]. A more detailed understanding of - who the sanitation workers are and their nature of job- is available in an article published by WHO. This includes the workers who clean toilets, pits and septic tanks, clean sewers and manholes, and work at sewage and fecal waste treatment and disposal sites. General people only realize

their importance while they confront with stuck toilet with fecal or domestic waste or drowsy waterlogging into the road because of jammed sewage line or manholes. Every person, society or government or non-governmental organization at some point in their life has to access sanitation workers' valuable services.

In Bangladesh, there is no reliable data on the total number of workers involved in the sanitation chain except for some regionally based data. For example, a Bengali newspaper stated that there are 9,000 sanitation workers in the North and South City Corporation of Dhaka [4]. It is reported that about 92.7% of the Bangladeshi population relies on on-site sanitation, such as pit latrines [5] which require servicing on a regular basis by sanitation workers. They also clean innumerable public septic tanks, sewers, manholes and drains across the country timely by hand or with basic tools.

Due to their nature of job and less or lack of personal protective equipment, they are easily exposed to biological and chemical factors, hazardous gases and often experience accidental injury or communicable or non-communicable disease and even death takes place. In July 2018 in Tongi, Bangladesh, three pit-emptiers died inside a septic tank due to noxious gases [6]. On the other hand, a survey conducted on sanitation workers of Dhaka City Corporation who were receiving free treatment from a private hospital showed that nearly 60% of them were suffering from some sort of respiratory problems [7]. Besides, moderate to severe skin diseases like scabies, itching is very common among them. These skin diseases, especially those that are contagious, also pose health risks to their family members due to their habitat.

Sanitation workers' living quarters in Bangladesh are not clean or hygienic while they are the main person responsible for cleaning the city and its homes. It is reported that sanitation workers of two corporations in Dhaka city live with their families in 12 small colonies where 20 people share one bathroom and kitchen [8]. In order to solve such problems of cleaning workers, the local government department has taken a project of establishing 3,040 flats in a 6-storey building in 66 municipal areas of the country [9]. Until then the current residence is their only hope as they cannot afford to provide minimum standard housing with the wages they receive.

In addition to health care and safety risk in the workplace as well as unhealthy accommodation, sanitation workers face huge financial insecurity due to earning a meager 5000 BDTK (58.17\$) per month [10]. These concerns are doubled when a worker refrains from working to seek health care as they hardly have insurance coverage or access to health services [11]. Further, sanitation workers in Bangladesh are deprived of social rights because mainstream society considers them outcast. However, there are provisions for ensuring sanitation workers' occupational and social rights in Bangladesh. But because of the ineffectiveness of these laws, they often face discrimination in getting wages in proportion to work, compensation, safety measures in the workplace and medical services. Without an appreciation of the importance of sanitation employees' occupational health and safety, the overall SDGs would be difficult to achieve in Bangladesh by 2030. Provisions related to occupational health and safety of sanitation workers need to be implemented through reform, legislation and regulatory measures. A lack of data may impede the application of health and safety measures to the targeted population, therefore, both formal and informal sanitation workers as well as their employers' numbers need to be registered in the national data. Such national-based data can be used to provide free or subsidized health-related services to sanitation workers and their families. Employers should recognize their workers' OHS through articulating protection mechanisms such as legislation and standard operating procedures, which cover

measures such as personal protective equipment (PPE), training, regular health checks, insurance, and treatment for workers to mitigate occupational risks throughout the sanitation chain [3]. Although the local government of Bangladesh has taken initiatives to reduce the housing problem of sanitation workers by setting up dormitories, it is insufficient compared to the requirement. The year 2030 is knocking at our door, so if proper steps are not taken now to promote "Occupational Health and Safety" of sanitation workers, achieving SDG may remain elusive for Bangladesh.

### Acknowledgment

None.

### Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest.

### References

1. The United Nations (2022) The 17 goals.
2. Introduction to Occupational health And Safety.
3. Health, Safety and Dignity of Sanitation Workers.
4. Matin Abdullah (2019) Negligent cleaning staff.
5. Zaqout M, Cawood S, Evans B E, Barrington D J (2021) Sustainable sanitation jobs: prospects for enhancing the livelihoods of pit-emptiers in Bangladesh. *Third World Quarterly* 42(2); 329-347.
6. Mariam Zaqout, Sally Cawood, Barbara E Evans & Dani J Barrington (2021) Sustainable sanitation jobs: prospects for enhancing the livelihoods of pit-emptiers in Bangladesh. Taylor and Francis Online: 42(2).
7. Tabibur Rahman (2020) Cleaning workers are more prone to suffer from respiratory diseases.
8. (2017) Inhuman life of cleaning workers in unhygienic environment.
9. (2021) Flats are being constructed for cleaning workers.
10. The Daily Star (2020) Impact of COVID-19 on waste and sanitation workers.
11. WaterAid (2020) Risk and vulnerability of sanitation and waste workers during COVID-19 pandemic.