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A Study of the Socio-political, Caste and Class Factors in Waste Picking in Bangladesh

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requirements for the degree of

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Abstract

This project investigates the lived experiences of women tokai (waste pickers) of Dhaka City, Bangladesh. In particular this project seeks to understand their experiences of the South Asian Muslim caste system, cultural stigma, the male-dominated waste labour market, the division of labour, power relationships and gender influences of contemporary waste management. The aim of this project is to investigate the ways that power and waste picking rights unevenly display in urban settings by exploring the lived experiences of tokai communities. It explores the continuing influence of the male marriage privilege system (the rights of males to enter into multiple marriages) that maintains oppression and social uncertainties among tokai. This project also considers how both occupational health risks and tokai resilience contribute to advocacy, and to the way they organize their work. It also proposes a sustainable social policy at this critical moment of change in Bangladeshi urban waste governance. Finally, the project explores social and policy constraints on the self-efficacy of the tokai, and government strategies to address their structurally disadvantaged position within the society. To explore these issues, the thesis takes the position that informal waste picking is regarded as either a garbage citizenship right (from social justice point of view), or a way structural inequality is imposed on marginalised communities.

This project uses an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) with a social constructionist theory drawing on online semi-structured interviews (n=21) with tokai, and with key informants' interviews(n=4) in Dhaka City between 2020-2021. Online interviews were conducted due to Covid-19 pandemic and travel restriction, and with help from local NGO workers and a team of volunteers who recruited participants, provided the information sheets to them and obtained voluntary consent from each participant. Prior to recruiting, this project obtained full ethics approval from Massey University, New Zealand. This project argues that current local city government and their waste management rules and regulations continually perpetuate discrimination, oppression, and inequalities among tokai.

Key findings of the project highlight the dynamics of power, garbage citizenship rights, violence by intimate partners, job insecurity and discrimination in key services such as education, housing, and access to health care services which are hidden and under-researched, and in marginalized tokai who are supposed to be invisible in the waste management system. Yet the system could not function without them.

This project makes an important contribution toward theorising marginalised informal waste picking work by highlighting tokai intersectional insights, perceptions on the benefits and

challenges of informal work in a moment of change in the urban space. It creates a framework to enhance decision making and to support radical measures and strategies to create social justice. The thesis develops a framework that aids the understanding of structural inequalities with a view to guiding the development of governmental and public policies related to waste management, and occupational health safety. This project proposes developing appropriate interventions and social benefits (tokai projects-scholarship) to support these communities in urban space and contemporary waste governance. One of the important contributions of this project is identifying the invisible Muslim caste and class hierarchy and male dominated labour force in Bangladesh which have existed since the era of British colonization. Methodologically, it demonstrates how to conduct qualitative research in socio-political, institutional influences and religious conservative society, even in a pandemic environment.

Based on the findings of this project, it is clear that Bangladesh need a system that creates better networks and connections between local government and tokai communities in order to recognise the importance of informal waste picking. Theoretically the project makes meaning of the life stories of tokai which provide the foundation for garbage citizenship. It proposes that local government must evolve its behaviours, attitudes, rules, and regulations in order to initiate a suitable social waste policy that provides equal rights, equal protections, and urban services for everyone.

Dedications

This study is dedicated to female informal workers who kindly gave their time, energy, and expertise to this research & also to all the folks advocating and organizing for justice for marginalized female workers. Your life experiences and stories inspired me to do this project and I hope that in turn, I try to improve your life experience.

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Dreams are not those which come while we are sleeping, but dreams are those when you do not sleep before fulfilling them.

-A.P.J. Abdul Kalam

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List of Abbreviations

Arranged Marriage (AM)
Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS)
Bangladesh (BD)
Department of Environment (DE)
Dhaka City (DC)
Dhaka City Corporation (DCC)
Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC)
Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC)
Focus Group Discussion (FGD)
Government of Bangladesh (GOB)
Grambangla Unnayan Committee (GUC)
Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC)
International non-governmental organisation (INGO)
Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)
Key Informant Interview (KII)
Love Marriage (LM)
Master of Social Science (MSS)
Municipal Solid Waste Management (MSWM)
Non-governmental organisation (NGO)
Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)
Public-Private-Partnership (PPP)
Sexually Transmitted Infections (STI)
Taka, Bangladeshi Taka (BDT)
United Nations Development Program (UNDP)
US (United States)

List of Terminology

- Asrayhin Mohila: A homeless woman
- Baissa Mohila: A prostitute woman
- Bajarer Meya: A Sex worker
- Bede Women: Gypsy woman
- Bihari Women: Behari Urdu language woman
- Dadon- Received an advance money.
- Dushit Mohila: A dirty woman
- Ferioyala: A street hawker
- Gram Bangla Unnoyan Committee: a local NGO in Matuail area operating school for tokai
- Gutkha: Betel quid
- Harijan: An untouchable sweeper
- Korkorani: An additional sexual desire
- Kobiraji Oshuth: A ways of religious leader medical treatment
- Kuran Hafej: A Muslim religious leader and a religious teacher
- Madrasha Education: A study for Muslim religious ideology and norms based on the Arabic language and Muslim values.
- Matuail: The main dumpsite in Dhaka City and colloquially known as hill of garbage.
- Maghi in Bangla: Characterless or sex workers
- Methor: A sanitation worker
- Mehr: A bridal gift and it is called nikha in Bangla
- Moilaoyala: A council waste worker
- Nimno Ayer Manus: A low-income person
- Nimno Jater Mohila: A low-class woman
- Paan: A betel nut
- Porichanna Kormi: An environmental worker
- Pother Mohila: A street woman
- Rater Pakhi: A night worker
- Vangari: A waste collection smaller four-wheeled vehicle
- Vangariola: A waste buyer who buys scrap/recyclables from clients along roadsides
- Vangarir Dokhan: A waste shop for buying segregated and sorted dry recyclable materials from tokai

Chapter One: Introduction

This thesis embarks on a journey to unravel the intricate web of social, economic, religious, and structural pressures that shape the lives of women tokai in Dhaka City, Bangladesh. This chapter provides a comprehensive overview of the context and issues surrounding women tokai in that city, including the social, economic, and structural challenges they face. The presence of women tokai, or waste pickers, has emerged as a conspicuous phenomenon within the bustling confines of Dhaka City, Bangladesh. Though their exact numbers remain unquantified, estimations place the population of these tokai at approximately 50,000. According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS, 2022), despite the nation being classified as a least developed country, it has a significant population exceeding 160 million. Unfortunately, nearly one-fifth of its inhabitants live below the poverty line as of the fiscal year 2021-22. In Bangladesh's employment landscape, a substantial proportion of women, approximately 87 percent, are employed in informal sectors, one of the most prominent being waste picking in open landfills.

A staggering 87 percent of Bangladeshi women find themselves ensconced in the informal work sector, and in particular, waste-picking amidst open landfills (Zingel, 2017). Amongst this cohort, impoverished and marginalized women, occasionally accompanied by their offspring, navigate the trenches of dumpsites, their labour rewarded with the most modest remuneration, all while confronting pervasive discrimination (Saifuddin et al., 2019; Selim, 2019).

After gaining independence from Pakistan in 1971, Bangladesh anchored gender equality within its constitution. Articles 10, 19, 27, and 28 explicitly ensure equal rights and opportunities for all citizens, emphasizing the participation of women in all national spheres and preventing discrimination based on gender. While these articles form a solid foundation for women's rights, realizing them in daily life has seen both successes and challenges. Although Bangladesh has made commendable progress in areas like education, with a surge in female school enrolment, the country still grapples with deep-rooted patriarchal norms and gender disparities in various sectors. Yet, with ongoing efforts from both governmental and non-governmental entities, Bangladesh continues its journey towards genuine gender equality (Huq, 1973).

As evidence, women presently fill 20.58 percent of civil service roles, although a 10 percent quota was initially reserved for them (Government of Bangladesh Civil Service Report, 2023). While the country has made strides towards gender equality, much remains to be done to achieve genuine parity across all sectors (Karim, 2019). Women in the informal sector are not only the lowest earners but they are also subject to frequent discriminatory practices, both in pay and treatment (Saifuddin et al., 2019; Selim, 2019). The overarching disparity and societal biases they

encounter underscore the pressing need for comprehensive reforms to protect and uplift these vulnerable sections of the workforce.

Despite the robust gender-equality provisions in Bangladesh's constitution, the lived reality for many women, particularly marginalized workers such as the tokai in Dhaka City, contrasts sharply with these declarations. Their plight, largely overshadowed, can be traced to their disadvantaged social status and the lack of political recognition they garner (Kabeer, 2012).

The historical roots of the tokai system are linked to the British colonial era. As the participants narrative unfolds, it explores deeply into the multifaceted experiences of the tokai, elucidating the external and internal forces that shape their destinies and those of their offspring. To humanize the academic discourse, I open with an account of a representative tokai, whose story brings to the fore the complex societal pressures tokai grapple with. While this portrayal aims to provide readers with an unfiltered view of the life of a tokai, its broader purpose is to contextualize the research queries in a tangible and relatable manner. Augmenting this written account is a collection of photographs, captured in October 2019, which depict the tokai amidst their work environment (refer to Figs 1-5). Though not the central focus of the study, these images serve as a potent visual prologue, inviting readers to engage empathetically with the harsh realities the tokai endure.

Roksana is a 37-year-old tokai. Her journey reflects a mosaic of trials, tribulations, and tenacity, underscored by both familial memories and personal endeavours. Her foundational five-year formal education, amidst the backdrop of a large family with four brothers and three sisters, provided a semblance of stability and hope. Yet, the domestic sphere was tainted with the grim shadow of violence, culminating tragically with the loss of her mother to domestic abuse.

Venturing out for economic independence, Roksana initially embedded herself in the mechanized rhythm of a garment factory, a setting distinctly disparate from her personal challenges. In a testament to her adaptability, she later transitioned from the factory's structured environment to the expansive and unpredictable terrains of a landfill. Roksana's narrative, imbued with resilience and an unwavering spirit, exemplifies the search for new horizons amidst adversity.



Figure 1: Some tokai are waiting for materials to pick.

Source: Author's own collection (25 October 2019)

Roksana's daily existence epitomizes the gritty realities faced by countless women in challenging socio-economic conditions. Residing in a humble one-room tin shed without gas or water amenities, she relies on a deep tube well to meet her drinking needs. Her days commence pre-dawn, around 5:00 am, as she dons a timeworn sari, emblematic of her labour-intensive role. She prepares roti and milk tea, ensuring both she and her children have sustenance before the day's exertions. Her journey to the landfill is synchronized with the ফজর (*fajr*, prayer time) between 05:00-06:00, a strategic choice that optimizes her collection efforts. Accompanied by her young daughter, she traverses a route fraught with potential hazards—from the menace of drunken men to aggressive stray dogs. Yet, with her torchlight and the occasional glow of streetlights, Roksana moves with a sense of familiarity and caution, attributes forged from her nine-year tenure in this demanding occupation



Figure 2: A tokai is organising her bags for sorting waste and preparing to sell them.

Source: Author's own collection (25 October 2019)

Roksana's transition from the pastoral tranquillity of Jamalpur village to the urban cacophony of Dhaka is a tale of romance, betrayal, and resilience. Initially captivated by a fortuitous wrong-number call, she found herself entangled in a love affair, culminating in her relocation to Dhaka. The man she believed worked in a shoe factory and with whom she'd shared intimate conversations for three months became her husband. However, the idyllic narrative was short-lived. A year into their marriage, while expecting a child, Roksana was confronted with a harrowing truth: her husband was deeply entrenched in the sex trade, operating as a broker. His attempt to ensnare her into the same trade was a stark betrayal. Thankfully, with the assistance of friends, she evaded this grim fate. Subsequent revelations about her husband's pattern of multiple marriages and violent tendencies deepened the chasm of deception she'd been thrust into.



Figure 3: A temporary place for tokai to take rest in the landfill.
Source: Author's own collection (25 October 2019)

Confronted with the immense responsibility of nurturing her newborn amidst financial hardships, Roksana found an unexpected beacon of hope in her neighbour, Alisa. Witnessing Roksana's struggles, Alisa recommended the landfill work, suggesting, “Why don't you come with me to pick waste tomorrow morning; you can earn money and save your baby.” This invitation marked a transformative moment in Roksana's life. Taking up the role of a tokai, Roksana not only secured a stable income but also rediscovered her independence. Remarkably, her earnings from the landfill surpassed what she had previously earned in the garment sector. Armed with keen observation skills and agility, Roksana adeptly noted, “I can walk quickly; I can easily identify the valuable items and I can fill up bags with materials after a quick glance at them.” Beyond the typical waste, Roksana's proficiency enabled her to spot and isolate precious finds, such as gold chains or silver items. These treasures, she would then discreetly sell in local

bazaars, reflecting her assertion: “I know what to pick, and where to pick. My experience helps me to recover valuable items from the rubbish”



Figure 4: Transporting rubbish into the landfill.
Source: Author's own collection (25 October 2019)

Roksana's day is regimented, a careful balance of hard work, pragmatism, and a touch of camaraderie. After diligently collecting waste, she meticulously ties and marks her bags, each filled with 10 to 15 kg of materials. These are subsequently whisked away to local sorting shops by waste dealers' vans. Here, Roksana immerses herself further in her work, sorting the materials once more. The weight of her collections ultimately determines her compensation, with her daily earnings averaging 600 BDT. Although these earnings address her primary necessities, savings remain sparse, occasionally necessitating loans from waste dealers and NGOs to support her children's needs.

Beyond the demanding physical labour, there's a semblance of leisure in Roksana's routine. Local street vendors provide her modest sustenance - bread and tea - which she savours during her short breaks. These interludes are more than just meal breaks; they're moments of connection, where Roksana engages with fellow women tokai, sharing stories and experiences. With an ever-watchful eye for opportunity, she also remains prepared, carrying an additional bag to collect any valuable items she might chance upon, understanding their potential to supplement her income.



Figure 5: A tokai sits alone in the landfill.
Source: Author's own collection (25 October 2019)

In encapsulating the essence of the tokai community's journey, Roksana's story underscores the profound struggles and aspirations that characterize their lives. Each story within this marginalized community, is a testament to resilience in the face of adversity and highlights the urgent need for broader societal acknowledgment and intervention. In doing this research I hope to spotlight the tokai's experiences, and serve as a catalyst for deeper engagement from urban sociologists, humanitarian organizations, and policymakers. In these stories, the call to action becomes evident: a shift from mere recognition to genuine, impactful initiatives that can alter the trajectory of the future of the tokai, ensuring a narrative of empowerment and sustainable progress.

Background of the Tokai in Bangladesh

The social fabric of Bangladesh, especially when it comes to understanding the lives of the tokai, is inextricably linked to the complex interplay of caste and socio-economic hierarchies. In contrast to nations like India and Nepal, Bangladesh's socio-cultural dynamic sees the tokai as primarily Muslim, as opposed to the primarily Hindu Dalits (Hossain, 2008). Dhaka's prominence as Bengal's commercial centre, established in 1608 during the Mughal reign, offers historical insights into the origins of these caste-based occupations. The city's cleanliness and sanitation, vital for its stature, relied heavily on the toil of low-caste workers. Many of these workers either migrated from regions in India to Dhaka (Jodhka & Shah, 2010).

However, the situation grew even more precarious during the British colonisation period from 1700–1947. Confronted with escalating violence, societal discrimination, and limited opportunities for formal employment, many of these communities found themselves coerced into migrating from various Indian cities, such as Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh, Nagpur, Elahbad, and Vishakhapatnam, to Bengal. These migrations were not organic but were orchestrated by state-sponsored middlemen, reflecting a deeper, institutionalized marginalization

(Asaduzzaman, 2001). This historical trajectory, punctuated by enforced migrations and systemic challenges, furnishes a crucial context for comprehending the present-day predicaments and lived realities of the tokai in Bangladesh.

The historical backdrop of Bangladesh is deeply interwoven with the stories of its marginalised communities, especially the sanitation workers who have played an indispensable role in urban upkeep. Historically designated by an array of names—*bhanar*, *balalkhor*, *kasbi*, *lalbegi*, *maugta*, *methor*, *dbangor*, and *bhangi*—they primarily shouldered the responsibility of maintaining cleanliness in roads, restaurants, households, and the more challenging tasks of tending to latrines and sewer systems (Sultana & Subedi, 2016).

Their labour, often underappreciated and stigmatised, was compensated with modest incentives like complimentary alcohol and tea, aimed at offsetting the strenuous and often derogatory nature of their work (Leach, 1971). The colonial era, marked by British dominion, further complicated their plight. Enticed by false promises of enhanced living standards and sustainable livelihoods, many from these sanitation communities were lured into migration, binding them into a cycle of unfulfilled expectations. In today's Bangladesh, the legacy of these communities can be traced to specific residential zones known as cleaners or tokai colonies (Chowdhury, 2009). These colonies not only stand as symbols of their enduring spirit and contribution but also reflect the unique socio-cultural niche they have carved within the sprawling urban mosaic.

Muslim Caste System

In South Asia, the concept of caste, commonly associated with Hindu societal structures, finds its unique expression within Muslim communities as well. Within the Islamic context, the term caste denotes a specific system of social stratification that aligns with certain defining characteristics (Ahmed, 2009). According to Ghaus Ansari (1960), Muslim caste encompasses four primary attributes: (a) endogamy, where marital ties are restricted within the same social group; (b) a hierarchical arrangement of these social groups, indicating levels of superiority and inferiority; (c) membership within these groups determined strictly by birth; and (d) the association of particular occupations with specific social groups, so much so that the group's identity becomes synonymous with that occupation (Ghaus, 1960).

The origins of this caste system among South Asian Muslims can be traced back to pre-Islamic societal structures in the region, coupled with the influences of converts from other religions, primarily Hinduism, which has a deeply entrenched caste system. Over time, these existing social hierarchies intermingled with Islamic practices and values, leading to the unique but implicit system of Muslim caste in the region. This system underscores the complex intersections of

religion, culture, and social order in shaping the lives of individuals and communities. The Muslim caste system in South Asia, therefore, is an intricate web of social hierarchies and occupational groups, influenced by pre-existing regional structures and further moulded by Islamic practices (Ghaus, 1960).

Origins of the Muslim Caste System

The concept of caste within Muslim communities in South Asia likely has multiple origins. Many scholars believe it evolved from a mix of the traditional Hindu caste system, local tribal and occupational hierarchies, and Islamic socio-cultural norms. When Islam started spreading in the Indian subcontinent, many of the converts came from different caste backgrounds. Rather than entirely shedding their earlier identities, these new adherents often maintained some of their previous social structures, albeit within an Islamic framework.

The Muslim caste system in South Asia is generally divided into two broad categories: *Ashraf* and *Ajlaf*. *Ashrafs* are considered the nobles and claim foreign ancestry, tracing their lineage to Arabs, Persians, or Turks. This group includes communities like Syeds, Shaikhs, Mughals, and Pathans. In contrast, *Ajlafs* are indigenous Muslims and are believed to have been converted from Hinduism. They usually belong to the artisan and service provider groups.

Following are the details of different categories of Muslim social divisions. There are four primary categories of Muslim social divisions:

- *Ashraf*: Originating from foreign lands like Afghanistan, Persia, Arabia, and Turkey, sub-groups such as the Mughals, Pathans, Sayyids, and Sheikhs fall under this category. Historically associated with the conquerors of the Indian subcontinent, the Ashraf claim superior status due to this lineage (Ahmad & Chakravarti, 1981; Werbner, 1989).
- Upper Caste Hindu Converts: This group encompasses those who, prior to their conversion to Islam, belonged to the higher tiers of the Hindu caste structure, such as the Muslim Rajputs (Ghaus, 1960).
- Other Clean Caste Converts: These are Muslims who transitioned from the so-called clean Hindu castes, and they include communities like Darzi, Dhobi, Faqir, Hajjam, Julaha, and Teli. Their professions and roles in society are often reflective of their historical occupations, serving as markers of their past (Ghaus, 1960).
- Converts from Untouchable Castes: Referred to as the *Ajlaf*, they converted from the historically marginalised so-called untouchable Hindu castes. The Bhangi community,

mainly involved in waste picking work, they were Muslim and exemplify this tokai group (Chowdhury, 2009).

The layered nature of these divisions showcases the rich confluence of historical migrations, conversions, and socio-religious interactions that have influenced India's socio-cultural milieu over the centuries (Ghaus, 1960). Similar to the Hindu caste system where each caste was associated with a particular profession, the Muslim caste structure too has some occupational groups. For instance, the *qassab* (butchers) or the *julaha* (weavers) are defined both by their work and caste identity. Caste also plays a crucial role in determining matrimonial alliances within the Muslim communities of South Asia. Endogamy, or the practice of marrying within one's caste, is prevalent. This system also influences social interactions, religious ceremonies, and even burial practices in some cases. Sufism, with its inclusive and universalistic approach, played a pivotal role in the spread of Islam in South Asia. The Sufi orders often transcended caste lines, offering a space where devotees from various backgrounds could mingle. However, even within these orders, traces of caste distinctions persisted. The caste system continues to influence socio-economic and political landscapes. Access to religious education, roles within religious institutions, representation in political spheres, and socio-economic opportunities can often be determined by one's caste.

Contemporary Challenges

In modern times, there is a rising awareness and debate over caste-based discrimination within the Muslim communities. Many reformers argue against the very idea of caste within Islam, citing that it goes against the fundamental Islamic principle of the equality of all believers. While the Muslim caste system in South Asia has its distinct characteristics and historical trajectory, it shares parallels with the broader regional hierarchies. The interaction between pre-existing caste structures and Islamic teachings has resulted in a unique socio-cultural system that continues to influence the lives of many even today.

In the intricate tapestry of social hierarchies, the Muslim caste system presents a unique confluence of historical, religious, and cultural influences. Rooted in the intersections of Persian social stratification and the native caste systems of the Indian subcontinent, it emerged as a distinctive social structure during the Muslim conquests between the 12th and 16th centuries. Ghaus (1960) suggests that these conquests facilitated the introduction of the Persian system of hierarchy to the subcontinent, intertwining it with indigenous social divisions. This amalgamation produced a Muslim hybrid caste system in the subcontinent, manifesting as racial and socio-political segmentation. Certain groups within the Muslim communities, striving to accentuate

their distinctiveness, began to assert claims of foreign descent, often invoking Persian or Central Asian lineages, to elevate their social standing as being noble born. Through such assertions, these groups aimed to gain socio-political leverage, solidifying the caste-like distinctions within the region's Muslim populace.

Characterized by racial segregation and the assertion of foreign ancestries, many Muslim groups began emphasizing their Persian or Central Asian roots. By presenting themselves as descendants of noble lineages, they aimed to secure a higher socio-political standing. This not only distinguished them from indigenous Muslim converts but also fortified caste-like divisions, influencing the socio-cultural fabric of Muslim communities in the region. Within the diverse social tapestry of India, the Muslim community exhibits a layered structure that can be traced back to both indigenous caste systems and foreign influences.

Leach (1971) points to Pakistan, where similar hierarchical paradigms manifest. He identifies the *quoms* as an integral facet of Pakistani Muslim society, analogizing them to the caste system of India. These *quoms*, besides displaying pronounced disparities in terms of power, privilege, and wealth, also bear distinct racial affiliations — from Pathan to Sindhi to Panjabi. Such affiliations, rooted deeply in historical and socio-cultural contexts, have become an intrinsic element of identity for many Pakistani Muslims (Leach, 1971).

Tokai trace their social roots to the *Ajlaf*, within the Muslim societal hierarchy. Over the past two centuries this caste has been traditionally relegated to roles such as cleaners or garbage workers (Aggarwal, 1966; Ambedkar, 1979). Even though they may not have been born into the *Ajlaf*, tokai effectively don this caste classification as a garment, or are socially constructed into it because of the nature of their waste-picking work, a social classification which they can remove as necessary when they return to their home villages. In a sense this renationalises caste as a temporary identity. Parallels are evident in the Hindu context, where similar groups are labelled as Dalits (Ambedkar, 1979) although this permanent caste allocation is something into which Dalits are born and cannot remove. The societal ostracization of the *Ajlaf* is manifest in various forms. For instance, they are often denied entry to religious or communal places, stemming from the fear that their presence would pollute or defile these spaces (Donnan, 1988). This exclusion even extends to burial practices in certain regions like Bihar, India, where the final resting places of *Ajlaf* are segregated from those of the upper castes (Hall, 2009). Interestingly, several individuals among the *Ajlaf* align with the broader Dalit classification in South Asia, highlighting the universality of their disadvantaged status, irrespective of religious affiliations (Ahmad & Chakravarti, 1981; Werbner, 1989). Such pervasive societal biases deprive the tokai, and others

like them, of basic entitlements, encompassing realms like healthcare, rendering them persistently marginalized in the broader societal context.

Rational and Significance of the Study

The urban landscape of Dhaka City, with its rapid growth and developmental challenges, hinges significantly on efficient waste management. At the crux of this critical system lie the tokai – the unsung heroes who have long borne the mantle of waste management, yet have been persistently marginalized in the socio-political narratives (Shams et al., 2017).

The glaring absence of tokai voices from mainstream policy-making illuminates the systemic neglect and discrimination they face. Their multifaceted roles, intertwined with caste dynamics, socio-economic challenges, environmental concerns, and political forces, render them pivotal for any holistic understanding of urban development. However, these intricate interplays remain largely unexplored in academic discourse. This research, therefore, serves as a corrective lens, aiming to foreground the experiences of the tokai, especially women who demonstrate a nuanced relationship between caste and class. Their socio-economic mobility, albeit within constraints, exemplifies the potential for change and resilience (Chowdhury et al., 2013).

Contrary to prevailing notions, caste and class discrimination are pervasive, even within Muslim societies, with the tokai communities being a glaring testament. By juxtaposing the lived experiences of tokai against the perspectives of government policymakers, this study seeks to bridge the knowledge chasm and shed light on the deep-seated discrimination they endure. Such insights are pivotal, not just academically, but also for crafting policies that respect and recognize the contributions of the tokai (Shams et al., 2017).

Embracing an interdisciplinary approach, the research delves deep into the socio-economic, environmental, and political determinants influencing the tokai communities. The ultimate goal is transformative – to reimagine them not as mere subjects, but as vital stakeholders in the larger urban fabric. Recognizing their contributions can revolutionize waste management strategies, ensuring a more sustainable and inclusive urban ecosystem (Shams et al., 2017).

Moreover, the findings from this study are poised to have international relevance. Cities worldwide grapple with waste management issues, and the experiences of the tokai in Dhaka could provide invaluable insights. Their economic and social contributions, particularly by the women tokai, underscore the potential that lies in integrating marginalized communities into policy frameworks.

In summary, the research aims to bring the often-silenced voices of the tokai to the forefront, challenging entrenched biases and advocating for their rights. As Dhaka City stands at the crossroads of urban development, recognizing and integrating the tokai into its fabric is not only a moral imperative but also a pragmatic strategy for sustainable growth.

Research Questions

The overarching question this study seeks to answer is what socio-political influences drive tokai these women into waste-picking? Supplementing this, the research will explore intertwined issues of caste and class, aiming to uncover the structural barriers that continue to marginalize these communities. Another pivotal area of concern is the health and well-being of the tokai community, given the inherent risks associated with waste picking. By scrutinizing their health challenges and their accessibility to healthcare services in an urban context, a comprehensive overview of their lived experiences can be established.

Lastly, in the backdrop of these challenges, it is vital to assess the policy frameworks. This study will explore existing governmental strategies and potential bottlenecks that may hinder the upliftment of the tokai community from their structurally disadvantaged position. Through these focused research inquiries, this project aims to offer a holistic understanding of the tokai community's role in urban waste management and the socio-political landscapes that shape their lives.

Primary Research Question:

- What socio-political and caste dynamics influence the role and experiences of the tokai community in urban waste management?

Sub-Questions:

The following sub-questions will also be explored:

- What are the caste-class and structural factors that control these marginalized communities?
- How do tokai communities experience health risks, social barriers and health care access and services in urban setting?
- What are the social policy constraints and government strategies to transcend their structurally disadvantaged position within the society?

Personal Motivation

Growing up I learned the story of a resilient single mother, who served in our home and later became a tokai; her story deeply impacted me. Witnessing her perseverance and listening to her narratives of adversity ignited a keen interest in the marginalised tokai. Her tales of struggle highlighted not only the socio-economic challenges these individuals face but also brought to the fore the multi-dimensional discriminations rooted in caste and class.

As I began a career as an academic researcher, my tenure as a Research Assistant for the UNDP-funded Access to Information project from 2016 to 2018 further opened my eyes to the profound challenges confronting marginalized Muslim communities in Bangladesh. Disturbing accounts of harassment, early marriages, societal ostracization, and other injustices against female tokai particularly resonated with me.

Despite the unfamiliar and daunting nature of landfill sites, I was determined to explore these areas first-hand to gain an authentic understanding of the tokai's lives. Recognizing my privileged background, I felt a moral obligation to utilize my education and resources to amplify the suppressed voices of the tokai community. The thought experiment of imagining a loved one, or even myself, in the shoes of a tokai, further galvanized my motivation. While the Covid-19 pandemic posed challenges to my original data collection strategy, my unwavering commitment led me to seek alternative approaches, demonstrating my deep-rooted dedication to this cause.

Organisation of the Chapters

Chapter One of the thesis provides the context of introduction and background of the thesis. This chapter also includes a review Muslim caste system, research questions, the rationale and significance of the study. It also adds the personal motivation of the researcher to conduct this thesis.

Chapter Two includes an overview of the previous and relevant knowledge review relating to informal waste picking and the livelihood of waste pickers to explore the challenges of waste pickers. I consider literature that explores understanding waste, waste disposal, existing literature on tokai, waste management in Dhaka City, caste influences, gender issues and political domination in waste picking etc. This chapter also develops the theoretical and conceptual framework of the project based on socio-ecological system, theorising patriarchy, structuration, and theory of power to make meaning of the lived experiences of tokai.

Chapter Three includes the methodology of the project, and situates the researcher, identifies the research paradigm, and research design. It also includes the process of conducting data analysis and validation. It also discusses the limitations and challenges of the study.

Chapters Four to Nine discuss the findings and analysis of the project. Chapter Four discusses a brief description of the participants and explores how participants identify themselves. Chapter Five considers the process of entry into waste picking and the push and pull factors. Chapter Six considers marriage, motherhood and widowhood, and seeks to understand the impact of male marriage privilege, dowry, early marriage, and how these are enacted in Bangladeshi Muslim society.

Chapter Seven considers the socio-political and health barriers tokai face. This chapter also includes a consideration of multiple identities, how tokai conceal their hiding occupation in the village, and barriers participants face on a daily basis. This chapter also considers gender-based health inequalities and the impact of Covid-19.

Chapter Eight focuses on how the policy environment affects the access to worksites, social and policy constraints, government initiatives and institutional influences on waste management. It also elaborates the influence of social network into waste picking and political engagement among tokai.

Chapter Nine discusses the ways participants are positioned in terms of dominant discourses and uncertainty in their daily lives. It explains the ways tokai develop survival and socio-economic empowerment skills, and resilience. This chapter also considers how participants make meaning of their life and experiences.

Chapter Ten is the discussion and conclusion chapter, and considers the implications, and recommendations of the thesis. This chapter elaborates the key research findings and the salient theoretical contributions of the study.

Summary

Chapter One sets the stage for an in-depth exploration of the lives and experiences of tokai in urban Bangladesh. It outlines the historical background of caste, highlights the context and significance of the study, and introduces the research questions. By providing context and structure, this chapter lays the foundation for the comprehensive analysis that follows in the subsequent chapters. The socio-political backdrop of Bangladesh is also briefly discussed to underscore its relevance to the study. In the chapters that follow will explore deeper into the

lives, challenges, and resilience of tokai, ultimately contributing to a more nuanced understanding of this marginalised group and their role in urban waste management.

Chapter Two: Knowledge Review and Theoretical Framework

Waste picking, while often relegated to the periphery of academic discussions, is a multifaceted issue intertwined with socio-economic, environmental, and political dynamics. This chapter endeavours to shine a light on this overlooked area by offering a comprehensive review of the existing literature. Many studies have delved into the economic vulnerabilities of waste pickers, the environmental implications of waste, and the policy challenges that governments face in waste management. A more niche area of study, particularly relevant to Bangladesh, is the exploration of socio-political intricacies, especially those surrounding the Muslim caste and class hierarchy. While there is a scarcity of research in this domain, the extant literature provides insights into the structural biases faced by tokai, who operate within the informal sectors. This chapter will identify critical themes, including the conceptual understanding of waste, its historical disposal practices, contemporary waste management challenges, and a consideration of the literature about the lives and struggles of waste pickers and tokai. The narrative also underscores the political and caste-based complexities that influence the waste picking sector. Through this exploration, the chapter aims to provide a holistic understanding of waste management, contextualized within the socio-political fabric of Bangladesh.

Understanding Waste

The concept of waste, while seemingly straightforward, becomes complex when examined through the lens of societal, economic, environmental, and political contexts. Academically, waste has been dissected from various angles, each bringing forth a nuanced perspective that enriches our understanding. Pongrácz & Pohjola (2004) and Thompson (1979) investigate the socio-cultural construction of waste, positing that our interactions with waste are defined by its visibility and value, and a range of emotions ranging from pride and satisfaction to shame and disgust (Pongrácz & Pohjola, 2004; Thompson, 1979). Their findings echo the sentiments of Bauman (2004), who succinctly expresses that waste is the dark, shameful secret of all production (Bauman, 2004).

However, waste is not universally regarded in a negative light. There is a burgeoning research that identifies the potentiality inherent in waste. For instance, while Heiman (1996) and Pulido-Bosch et al. (2000) underscore the environmental risks of waste, Tsai (2008) offers a more optimistic outlook (Tsai, 2008), presenting waste as a resource (Heiman, 1996; Pulido-Bosch et al., 2000), particularly citing its utility as fertilizer. The economic dimensions of waste have been illuminated by (Berglund & Söderholm, 2003), who discern waste's potential as a valuable commodity in the market. Further, Moore (2012) treats waste as a logistical entity (Moore, 2012),

emphasizing its manageability, while Bulkeley & Askins (2009) focus on its intertwined relationship with household and public economies (Bulkeley & Askins, 2009)..

Yet, in this existing literature, certain facets of waste management remain unexplored. The majority of these studies do not deeply delve into the political and religious implications of waste (Alsarhan et al., 2021). The role waste plays within state politics, its influence in perpetuating or challenging longstanding caste and class hierarchies, or its position within religious tenets are areas that demand further investigation (Mohan, 2017). In sum, while our understanding of waste is considerable, it remains incomplete. To grasp its multifaceted nature, it is crucial to integrate these often-ignored dimensions into the discourse.

The understanding of waste in contemporary discourses remains predominantly rooted in socio-economic and environmental contexts. Regrettably, these narratives have often side-lined or altogether overlooked the influence of political and religious values on how waste is perceived, managed, and utilised. A deeper interrogation into the role of waste reveals its intersectionality with the political economy of states. For instance, we must consider how waste management policies can be reflective of a state's governance priorities, or how waste disposal practices might be instrumentalized for political gains or leverage against marginalized communities.

Additionally, in societies deeply entrenched in caste and class dynamics, waste often becomes a symbol of these hierarchies. For instance, in some cultures, the very act of waste picking or handling is relegated to certain lower castes or classes, thus perpetuating centuries-old socio-economic divisions and further entrenching stigmatization. Such practices not only delineate waste management as a caste-based occupation but also indicate how deeply waste is interwoven with societal hierarchies. Moreover, the state's role in waste management is not merely administrative. State policies can either perpetuate or challenge existing caste and class structures, and they can also reflect broader national and regional political agendas. For instance, prioritising waste-to-energy plants in certain regions might indicate an emphasis on modernisation and sustainable practices, but could also demonstrate the influence of economic incentives, political lobbying, or a myriad of other factors.

In essence, while current considerations of waste provide valuable insights into its socio-economic and environmental dimensions, there is an urgent need to broaden these understandings. Integrating political, religious, and deeply entrenched societal norms into this discussion will not only enrich our comprehension but also pave the way for more holistic and inclusive waste management solutions.

A Short History of Waste Disposal

The chronicle of waste disposal spans millennia and continents, evolving alongside human civilization and reflecting cultural, technological, and societal changes. Historical records mark Knossos in Crete, dating to around 500 B.C.E., as home to the earliest European garbage landfills. Subsequent Greek legislation in 300 B.C.E. sought to regulate hazardous waste disposal (Angelakis, 2017). However, our focus necessarily pivots to Britain, whose waste management practices left an indelible legacy on its colonies, including Bangladesh. The seminal event catalysing organized waste disposal in England was the devastating 1347-50 'Great Pestilence', which claimed at least 25 million European lives in half a decade (White-Hunt, 1980). A heightened association between plagues, rats, and garbage propelled Britain towards structured garbage collection, culminating in the formalized national waste management system of the late 18th century. Commercial imperatives emerged too, with coal ash, a prominent waste product, being repurposed for brick-making (Wilson, 1976).

Other national approaches are relevant to the present study. China's rich history paints a tapestry of waste management methods, with records from 2000 B.C.E. revealing composting and recycling techniques (Gottesfeld & Pokhrel, 2011). Contemporary challenges in the 20th century, accentuated by environmental concerns, catalysed innovative waste disposal methods in the country (Cun et al., 2019). America's waste disposal trajectory started in 1657 in New Amsterdam (today's New York), evolving through municipal regulations, the establishment of the first incinerator, and evolving into a public-sector management model by the late 19th century (Melosi, 1981). The literature traces the arc from antiquity to modernity, emphasizing evolving methodologies and societal and economic implications of waste management. However, a gap in the literature exists in exploring the intertwined narratives of waste management, caste hierarchies, and historical domination, particularly in South Asian contexts like Bangladesh. This project aims to bridge this gap, shedding light on the intricate tapestry of waste, class, and caste in Muslim-majority regions, bolstered by archival insights.

Waste management can be traced back to the earliest human settlements. Ancient civilizations such as the Indus Valley, known for their well-planned cities like Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa around 2500 B.C.E., had systems of waste removal (Velis et al., 2009). They utilized a series of drains and waste disposal mechanisms, showcasing their understanding of sanitation. Apart from China's early recycling methods, Japan, known for its limited space and resources, adopted waste reduction methods early on. Their traditional concept of *mottainai* emphasized recycling and resourcefulness (Ferguson, 2014). The Romans, known for their architectural prowess and city

planning, had designated areas outside their cities for waste dumping, often called dung hills. Their intricate sewer system, the Cloaca Maxima, is a testament to their approach to waste management. In the post-Roman era, with the fall of centralised administrations, many cities saw a decline in public health and sanitation standards (Ziegler, 1969). Streets often doubled as dump yards. However, the aftermath of pandemics like the Black Death pushed authorities to reconsider urban sanitation (Platt, 1996). With the onset of the Renaissance and the later Industrial Revolution, urbanisation surged (Clark, 2007). This also meant an increase in the concentration of waste in built environments. Innovations like the dust-yard system in the 19th-century London were precursors to modern waste management (Driver, 2007). The 20th century saw rapid technological advancements, as landfills, previously just dumpsites, began to be scientifically designed to minimize environmental impact (Tchobanoglous et al., 1993). The idea of recycling gained prominence, especially post-World War II (Strasser, 1999). Today, waste management is about sustainability. Innovations like Sweden's waste-to-energy programs or zero-waste movements showcase the shifting paradigms (Connett, 2013), and conceptualise waste not merely as a problem to be solved, but as a resource.

The journey of waste management, as charted from the annals of history, showcases the intertwined relationship between societal structures, economic priorities, and environmental practices. From the well-established protocols of ancient Greece and Rome, to the intricate systems in China and Japan, historical waste management was more than just a utility; it was a reflection of societal values and priorities. Yet, as I have pointed out, a gap in current research is the exploration of the socio-cultural dimensions of waste management, particularly in South Asia. Bangladesh, with its unique blend of cultural and religious dynamics, offers an social laboratory into how caste and class have influenced waste management. While global narratives have predominantly emphasized the technical and economic aspects of waste disposal, a careful consideration of practices in countries such as Bangladesh can illuminate the nuanced ways in which socio-cultural factors shape waste management practices. It is crucial to understand and acknowledge these intertwined histories to create a comprehensive and inclusive roadmap for future waste management strategies.

Waste Management Issues

This study offers perspectives on the multifaceted challenges of waste management in urban areas, particularly in Dhaka City. Waste management, especially in urban centres like Dhaka City, requires comprehensive approaches that consider the multi-dimensional challenges faced by these areas. At the forefront of these issues is the administrative challenge. Moghadam et al.

(2009) emphasise the bureaucratic hurdles and inefficiencies that plague many cities in the developing world.

Corruption within the waste management sector can precipitate a cascade of detrimental consequences that permeate various stages and facets of the system. As highlighted by Mrayyan & Hamdi (2006), these inefficiencies are not isolated incidents. Financial misappropriation can cripple resources, leading to subpar facilities and equipment. This, in turn, might manifest in irregular waste collection, favouring certain areas while neglecting others. Moreover, the lure of bribes can incentivize illegal dumping, resulting in severe environmental and health hazards. Such malpractices not only pollute natural resources but also become hotbeds for diseases. The public's eroding confidence in the system further compounds the problem, as a distrustful public is less likely to adhere to waste management guidelines. Additionally, the economic ramifications cannot be overlooked; regions marred by pollution deter tourism and can depress property values. The overarching shadow of corruption also stifles innovation by diverting crucial funds and can lead to a skewed regulatory environment where enforcement is inconsistent. Ensuring transparency and robust governance is paramount to curbing these far-reaching implications.

The divide between policy formulation and actual practices at the grassroots level adds another layer of complexity to the problem. Bulkeley & Askins (2009) identify the often-overlooked discrepancies between intended public policies and the real-world disposal practices of households. The lack of alignment between the two can result in significant gaps in waste management outcomes.

Effective decision-making in waste management relies on accurate, timely, and comprehensive data. Azadi and Karimi-Jashni (2016) emphasise this need for data, highlighting the repercussions of inadequate data on waste generation rates. The absence of such data can lead to misguided policies, resource misallocation, and failed initiatives. However, the challenges do not stop at logistics and administration. Dhaka City has been identified as one of the world's most polluted cities. This status is indicative of systemic problems in its waste management paradigm (Afroz et al., 2011; Bhuiyan, 2010). While infrastructural inadequacies are evident, the roots of these issues often extend deeper into the socio-political fabric of the city. Chowdhury et al. (2014) discuss the confluence of corruption, limited policy implementation, and at times, public indifference, which exacerbate the city's waste management woes. Furthermore, cultural beliefs and practices play a crucial role in waste management, often driving or impeding certain practices. Islam (2000) discusses the influence of deeply ingrained cultural beliefs that sometimes conflict with modern

waste management practices. These beliefs, coupled with political tensions, can foster illicit activities and pose systemic challenges to waste management reform.

Urban areas often face significant challenges due to administrative inefficiencies, corruption, and infrastructural inadequacies. These challenges can cripple waste management operations, leaving cities unable to manage and dispose of their waste effectively (Moghadam et al., 2009; Mrayyan & Hamdi, 2006). A concerning disconnect exists between well-intentioned public policies regarding waste management and the actual disposal practices in homes. This disconnect poses significant barriers to implementing effective waste management strategies on the ground (Bulkeley & Askins, 2009). Similarly, a lack of accurate and comprehensive data on waste generation rates complicates the formulation and execution of waste management policies. Without reliable data, effective decision-making becomes a significant challenge (Azadi & Karimi-Jashni, 2016). Dhaka City's unique challenges in waste management are not solely logistical or infrastructural. The city's socio-political landscape, marred by corruption, limited policy execution, and occasional public indifference, significantly impacts its waste management framework (Chowdhury et al., 2014). The tension between central and local governmental bodies, combined with entrenched cultural beliefs, has led to an environment conducive to illicit activities. These factors together hinder the establishment of a robust waste management system in the city (Islam, 2000). Still, while Dhaka City's waste management challenges are multifaceted, they are not insurmountable. A strategic approach, informed by the existing literature and adapted to the city's unique context, can pave the way for a more sustainable urban future.

The task of transforming waste management in urban areas, especially in highly urbanised areas like Dhaka City, requires an understanding of the interconnected challenges, ranging from logistical to socio-political. While the literature provides valuable insights, there remains an urgent need for collaborative, innovative, and localized solutions that account for the unique nuances of each city's waste management landscape.

Interrelated Issues in Waste Management

The waste management sector frequently faces challenges due to its fragmented nature. With limited unification through unions or associations, coupled with an absence of community-based waste policies, ensuring cohesion in waste disposal becomes an uphill task (Hirve et al., 2015; Joshi, 2018; Rajaraman et al., 2013; Sommer et al., 2015). In addition, there is a notable gap between formulated public policies and on-the-ground realities. The ideal disposal practices endorsed by policies often diverge from the actual waste disposal behaviours in households (Bulkeley & Askins, 2009). Historical and cultural perspectives, coupled with political tensions,

particularly between centralized and localized governing bodies, further complicate the landscape. Corruption, unauthorized waste businesses, and general mismanagement arise from these underlying challenges (Islam, 2000).

In drawing these threads together, it becomes evident that addressing waste management requires a holistic approach. Addressing isolated challenges without considering the interrelated nature of these issues would likely yield limited success. The literature underscores the need for integrated, multi-dimensional strategies to make tangible progress in the realm of waste management.

Understanding Waste Pickers

Waste pickers, often migrants seeking better livelihood opportunities in urban landscapes, play a pivotal role in the urban waste management ecosystem. Their primary responsibilities encompass collecting, sorting, and selling recyclable waste. Their services extend to streets, markets, industrial sites, and even landfills (Wilson et al., 2006; Dias, 2016). The First World Conference of Waste Pickers in Bogota marked a significant milestone in recognizing and highlighting the pivotal role of waste pickers in urban ecosystems (Bonner, 2008; Dias & Fernández, 2020). This gathering showcased their remarkable resilience, adaptability, and strength. Despite being frequently marginalized and operating in the shadows of formal economies, their ability to convene on an international platform underscores their capacity to organize and communicate on a global scale (Dias & Fernández, 2020). This not only reflects their shared challenges but also their collective determination to voice their concerns and advocate for their rights. It is a testament to their resourcefulness and underscores the essential bridge they form between waste generation and its recycling or disposal (Bonner, 2008). As for specific outcomes from the conference, while the primary objective was global networking and advocacy (Dias & Fernández, 2020), detailed resolutions or action plans would likely be found in comprehensive conference reports or subsequent publications.

While they significantly contribute to environmental sustainability by reducing landfill waste, the social status of waste pickers remains low. The marginalised tokai in urban areas like Dhaka City faces a myriad of challenges that often remain unaddressed. Firstly, there is a significant lack of acknowledgment and fair compensation for their environmental contributions, effectively sidelining their efforts in maintaining urban cleanliness and facilitating recycling processes (Dias, 2016; Schenck et al., 2016). Alongside this economic disparity, they are exposed to a plethora of health risks due to direct engagement with waste, often without the necessary protective gear, leading to a higher propensity for illnesses and long-term health repercussions (Patwary et al.,

2011). Compounding these physical challenges is the emotional and social burden they bear. Rooted deeply in societal perceptions, they frequently encounter stigmatization and discrimination. This ostracization is not merely a result of their occupation but is inextricably linked with their socio-economic standing, further accentuating the biases they confront daily (Colombijn & Morbidini, 2017).

The designations of waste pickers differ across countries, including rag pickers in India, *catadores* in Brazil, and *zabaleen* in Egypt. While some terms like *catadores* (“taster”) have a more neutral or even prideful connotation, others, especially in urban settings, can be derogatory, linking waste pickers with criminality or nuisances (Berthier, 2003; Sasaki et al., 2014; Rouse & Ali, 2001); I will explore some of this vocabulary in a Bangladeshi context in Chapter 4.

The economic model of waste pickers generally revolves around the sale of recyclable or reusable materials. Payment is typically in cash and immediate. However, due to the informal nature of their work and a lack of standard pricing, many waste pickers remain underpaid. Most of their earnings fall below the poverty threshold, leading to a perpetual cycle of poverty (Buch et al., 2021; Wittmer, 2021). In nations like Bangladesh, waste pickers' lives are woven into the fabric of historical caste and class distinctions. Here, waste picking is not just a job; it is a manifestation of deeper societal hierarchies, particularly those influenced by religious tenets. The societal structure further amplifies disparities within these communities, adding layers of complexity to their struggles (Schenck et al., 2016; Colombijn & Morbidini, 2017).

To genuinely appreciate the role and challenges of waste pickers, it is crucial to understand them within their broader socio-cultural and historical contexts. Such a nuanced perspective can help in devising more inclusive and effective policies and interventions for their upliftment.

Understanding Tokai

In the web of waste management in Bangladesh, tokai, or independent waste pickers, sometimes known as *pothokoli* (“buds on the street”), stand out. Unlike their counterparts, the city waste workers, who function within the structured framework of city councils, tokai operate on the fringes of the system, manoeuvring through an unstructured, often challenging environment. Tokai (meaning ‘gathering’ or ‘collecting’) is a term specific to Bangladesh and refers to individuals, often children or young adults, who scavenge for recyclable materials. Their work domain is not limited to any particular zone. From busy streets, crowded bus and rail stations, over bridges, flyovers, to the sprawling river terminals and dump sites, tokai can be seen diligently scouring for valuable waste (Rouse & Ali, 2001). The economic model of the tokai is

straightforward – collect, sort and sell. By gathering recyclable materials like plastics, metals, glass, and paper, they earn their livelihood by selling these to local waste dealers. Given the informal nature of their work, their earnings are unpredictable and often paltry. Yet, they play a pivotal role in the waste management ecosystem by extracting recyclable waste, thereby aiding in reducing the burden on landfills (Uddin et al., 2020). Their occupation, while crucial for urban sanitation and the economy, unfortunately positions them at a lower stratum of the societal hierarchy, often resulting in their marginalization (Hakim & Rahman, 2016; Sarker et al., 2016).

The cultural significance of the term tokai is enriched by its association with a well-known cartoon character in Bangladesh. Created by the esteemed cartoonist Rafiqun Nabi, tokai was introduced to the Bangladeshi audience in 1978 through the weekly magazine *Saptahik Bichitra*. Tokai emerged as a humble representation of the multitudes of street children in Bangladesh. Depicted in the act of begging or scavenging discarded items from refuse containers, the Tokai character portrayed the stark realities of marginalized children in the nation's urban landscapes (Chowdhury et al., 2017). Despite his seemingly powerless stature and low socio-economic standing, the significance of Tokai was profound. Tokai's strength lay in his representational capacity. Through his narratives, he channelled the collective voices of countless individuals who felt disenfranchised or oppressed. This child, though fictional, mirrored the feelings of powerlessness experienced by many in society. He became an iconic vessel for critiquing societal structures, including influential and dominant figures in Bangladeshi society. Through the innocent yet astute observations of this child, flaws in governance, societal norms, and power imbalances were satirically highlighted, laying bare the concerns of those silenced or ignored (Reza & Henly, 2018). Tokai offered insights, critiques, and, importantly, hope. His character served as a reminder that even the seemingly powerless can hold profound insights and that everyone, regardless of their societal position, has a voice worth hearing (Chowdhury et al., 2017).

The daily challenges encountered by tokai workers, especially in urban landscapes, extend beyond societal stigma and discrimination. One of the most immediate concerns is their health. Unlike their counterparts in formal sectors who have access to standard protective equipment, tokai often operate without such safeguards. Lacking even the most basic safety gear like gloves or masks, they are exposed to an array of hazards daily. From harmful chemicals that could cause severe health issues to sharp discarded objects that could lead to injuries, their everyday life is rife with dangers. Such occupational hazards have led to numerous health complications, further underscoring the urgency to address their living conditions and the nature of their work (Bagchi

& Mitra, 2017; Hartmann, 2018; Maksud, 2017). Such conditions not only increase the likelihood of physical injuries but also heighten the risk of various infections (Medina, 2007).

Coupled with these physical health challenges is the broader issue of systemic socio-economic limitations. The background from which most tokai emerge is one where educational opportunities are scarce. Instead of pursuing education, many children in these communities find themselves amidst waste heaps, scavenging to bolster their family's meagre income. This reality does more than just deprive them of immediate educational experiences; it perpetuates a cycle of poverty that can span generations, effectively limiting their potential for upward mobility (Baud et al., 2004). Furthermore, the economic model governing their earnings stands in stark contrast to the structured salaries of formal waste workers. The income of tokai depends heavily on the amount and quality of recyclables they procure and subsequently sell. Such a system, inherently erratic, not only ties their income to the volatile whims of the market but also denies them any semblance of financial security or associated benefits, further augmenting their state of vulnerability (Wilson et al., 2006).

Tokai find their shelter in the most precarious and exposed parts of urban landscapes. Their dwellings are often adjacent to bustling streets, busy transport hubs like bus stops and railway stations, serene parks, busy river terminals, or hidden beneath towering bridges and flyovers. This proximity to such locations is both a matter of convenience for their scavenging activities and an illustration of their marginalized status, as they are pushed to the fringes of urban society (Rouse & Ali, 2001). Their vulnerable status exposes them to other risks. Not only do many of them not have the protection of a secure home, but they are also sometimes lured into minor criminal activities, further exacerbating their marginalized status (Rouse & Ali, 2001).

While a section of society acknowledges the significant role tokai play in managing and recycling waste, thus indirectly aiding in environmental conservation, many others dismiss their contributions, attributing their work solely to their economic conditions (Samson, 2009). Due to the stigmatised nature of their job and their often-disadvantaged backgrounds, tokai are stigmatised, marginalised and ostracised. This stigma not only impacts their self-worth but can also create barriers in seeking better opportunities or integrating more fully into society (Chen, 2012). Despite their obvious contributions to waste management and recycling, there is a pervasive lack of awareness and appreciation for the work of tokai. This lack of recognition, both at institutional and societal levels, further perpetuates their challenges and hinders potential reforms that could improve their conditions (Dias, 2016).

The divide between the tokai and formal city structures is glaring. Although they live within the city's confines, the amenities and services provided by city councils and other governmental agencies often denied to them. Their existence in the shadows denies them access to many basic utilities and services that others take for granted. Nevertheless, the effects of the efforts of tokai are evident: streets are less cluttered, public spaces such as parks and playgrounds are cleaner, and transportation hubs like bus stops, railway stations, and river terminals see a reduction in waste accumulation. This not only enhances the aesthetic appeal of the city but also contributes to public health and environmental benefits (Rouse & Ali, 2001). Beyond the visible contributions to the cleanliness of public spaces, tokai also play an indirect role in the city's economy. The recyclables they collect are often sold, re-entering the market and reducing the need for the production of new materials, thus contributing to a circular economy (Maksud, 2017).

The Driving Forces Behind Tokai Migration to Dhaka City

Dhaka City, with its sprawling urban landscape, offers numerous opportunities for work. For the tokai, many of whom come from rural backgrounds, the city holds the promise of better prospects and the possibility of escaping the limitations of their rural lives. Their migration is often driven by the allure of these urban opportunities (Maksud, 2017). While the promise of urban life attracts many tokai to Dhaka City, equally compelling are the push factors that compel them to leave their rural homes. Natural calamities such as relentless flooding and devastating river erosion have laid waste to many of their villages, rendering them uninhabitable. These environmental disasters, further exacerbated by climate change, leave many with no option but to seek refuge in urban areas (Parvin & Begum, 2018).

In addition to environmental factors, societal pressures play a significant role in their migration. Exploitation by dominant factions in rural areas, including the elite and political activists, can make life unbearable for many. Financial burdens, such as the inability to repay loans, can also act as significant push factors, driving them to seek sanctuary and opportunities in the city (Bahauddin & Uddin, 2012; Rouse & Ali, 2001). The tragic irony of the tokai situation is that their migration, driven by both environmental and societal pressures, often culminates in homelessness. Despite escaping the adversities of their rural homes, they are met with the harsh realities of urban life. Without the protection of a home or the support of city councils, they find themselves at the periphery of urban society, trying to carve out an existence amidst the chaos (Uddin et al., 2020).

The Rise of Independent Waste Pickers in Developing Nations

The last few decades have witnessed a significant surge in the population of independent waste pickers, particularly in developing and less developed countries. This phenomenon, while global, is notably pronounced in nations grappling with rapid urbanization, limited waste management infrastructure, and soaring population growth. Countries like Bangladesh serve as a prime example of this trend. A combination of factors contributes to the proliferation of independent waste pickers in such nations. Rapid urbanization often means an increase in waste generation. With city councils and formal waste management systems unable to keep pace with the waste generated, there emerges a gap that these waste pickers fill (Uddin & Gutberlet, 2018).

Independent waste pickers play a crucial role in recovering recyclables from the waste stream. In many developing nations, the formal recycling infrastructure might be underdeveloped, making the role of these waste pickers invaluable in ensuring that recyclable materials do not end up in landfills (Uddin & Gutberlet, 2018). For many, waste picking offers an accessible means of livelihood, especially for those who might not have formal education or skills. The economics of waste picking becomes even more relevant in developing countries where job opportunities in formal sectors might be limited (Rouse & Ali, 2001).

In many countries, societal structures and hierarchies also play a role. Often, those at the lower rungs of the societal ladder, marginalized groups, or migrants from rural areas find themselves in roles like waste picking due to limited alternatives (Rouse & Ali, 2001). While the rise of independent waste pickers underscores certain systemic issues, it is also a testament to the resilience and adaptability of these individuals. They navigate the complexities of urban life, societal perceptions, and health hazards, all while playing an indispensable role in waste management and recycling. It is essential for policymakers to recognize their contribution and ensure they are integrated into formal waste management systems, provided with rights, and safeguarded against occupational hazards (Dias, 2016).

Accurate demographic data on waste pickers, given the informal nature of their work, is challenging to ascertain. However, studies have made attempts to quantify this population. An estimate posits that Dhaka City is home to approximately 80,000 urban poor, actively engaged in the occupation of waste picking (Maksud, 2017). In the heart of Bangladesh, Dhaka City alone employs an estimated 50,000 tokai, a demographic that includes women and children, who comb the streets and waste disposal areas daily (Maksud, 2017). Across Bangladesh, an estimated 400,000 individuals rely on waste picking as their primary source of income (Asim et al., 2012).

Global trend towards sustainability and environmentally-conscious living has kindled a heightened demand for recyclable materials. This spike in demand presents waste pickers, especially those operating in urban hubs, with a potentially lucrative income avenue (Eskezia et al., 2016). However, in many developing countries a substantial segment of the workforce relies on the informal sector. In situations where this sector contracts, the options left for employment become increasingly limited, positioning waste picking as one of the few accessible avenues (Eskezia et al., 2016).

The surge of industrialization, common in many developing nations, has a double-edged effect. On one hand, it spews out vast amounts of waste; on the other, it creates opportunities for waste pickers to sift through and extract valuable materials, especially in densely populated urban centers (Cruvinel et al., 2019). Furthermore, the allure of urban regions, often seen as lands of opportunity, draws in a multitude of migrants. Yet, the truth is that not all these hopeful individuals find wealth. For some, the realities of urban life and limited employment avenues pivot their paths towards waste picking as a means of survival (Cruvinel et al., 2019). While the allure of urban opportunities and the harsh realities of rural life often drive urban migration, it inadvertently saturates the informal urban labour market, making the economic situation of tokai even more precarious. Industrialization, on the other hand, has a dual role: it both generates waste that provides livelihood opportunities for the tokai and reshapes the urban environment, sometimes at their expense. Furthermore, the movement and role shift of tokai between urban and rural landscapes remain poorly understood, indicating a need for comprehensive research.

Waste Management in Dhaka City

Dhaka, a crowded megacity, is grappling with the dual challenges of a ballooning population and alarming air pollution levels. Waste management in the city is bifurcated between two primary authorities: the Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC) and the Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC) (Islam & Chowdhury, 2021; Sajib & Moniruzzaman, 2021). Meanwhile, the Dhaka City Corporation (DCC), which is responsible for overall city management, is grappling with the monumental task of handling the daily waste accumulation. Residents typically dispose of their waste in an unsegregated manner into small containers. From there, DCC-authorized entities use vans to transport the waste to secondary collection points (Hassan et al., 2008). These are then aggregated into larger volumes, with waste trucks transporting them to landfill sites. However, given the soaring city population and their consequent waste generation, only an estimated 40 to 50 percent of the daily waste is effectively managed (Mourshed et al., 2017; Ullah & Mansourian,

2016). Waste management in Dhaka follows a typical trajectory that begins at individual households.

Historical data identifies concerning trends. In 1985, daily solid waste production was recorded at 1040 tons, which surged to 3500 tons by 1999. Projections suggest that by 2020, this figure might escalate to a staggering 30,000 tons daily (Islam et al., 2019). The city's infrastructure is strained, managing to dispose of only 1800 tons, predominantly through dumping. Of this, 900 tons are utilized for terrace creation and landfilling. The remaining waste finds its way to the streets and open spaces, accumulating to about 400 tons. Meanwhile, the tokai, ever-resourceful waste pickers, salvage approximately 300 tons for recycling. At the grassroots level, around 100 tons are repurposed right at the source of generation (Alam & Qiao, 2020; Islam et al., 2019). The enormity of the waste management issue in Dhaka necessitates innovative solutions and robust strategies to ensure a sustainable urban environment.

Technological advancements have been introduced to address these challenges. However, implementation at scale remains a challenge. There is also the issue of waste segregation. A large portion of Dhaka's waste is organic, which can be composted. Yet, due to the lack of source segregation, recyclable and compostable waste often gets mixed, reducing its potential for recycling or composting (Jerin et al., 2022).

Cleaning the city streets presents another facet of waste management. DCC's cleaning personnel ensure that public spaces, from streets to drains to parks, are regularly cleared of waste (Syed et al., 2012). Yet, despite these efforts, the magnitude of waste generation in Dhaka often overshadows the city's collection capabilities (Ahmed et al., 2023). DCC struggles with limited resources, both in terms of finances and infrastructural support (Adib & Mahapatro, 2022). As a result, a significant chunk of waste remains uncollected. The lack of regulatory framework further exacerbates this situation, leading to the amalgamation of various types of waste. Two primary dumping grounds, Matuail and Amin Bazar, serve as the collecting places for the collected waste. While Matuail caters to 55 wards of Dhaka city, Amin Bazar handles the waste from the remaining 36 wards (Jerin et al., 2022).

While the formal waste management system under DCC is structured and systematic, it is the informal sector, represented by tokai, that fills in the gaps, playing a vital role in Dhaka's waste management landscape (Jerin et al., 2022). The process underscores the importance of recognizing and potentially integrating this informal sector, ensuring a more holistic and efficient waste management system for the city. Public sentiments towards the door-to-door services

provided by hawkers, concerns persist about the final disposal of waste, especially given the environmental and health hazards associated with landfills (Afroz et al., 2011).

The Political Context of Waste Picking

The political dimension of waste picking in Dhaka City goes far beyond mere administrative neglect. Tokai are continuously exposed to the whims of local political dynamics. Their everyday life is punctuated by threats from local leaders and municipal police, especially when these waste pickers traverse the intricate maze of landfills seeking recyclables. The entrenched corruption within the system further complicates their struggle. It is not uncommon for tokai to be extorted by local police and community leaders, with bribes often being demanded as a form of unofficial 'tax' for access to waste dumping sites (Ezeah et al., 2013; Offenhuber et al., 2021).

Furthermore, the vulnerability of marginalised communities is not restricted to tokai. Political shifts and electoral politics often place lower class and caste communities at the receiving end of hostilities. The chilling incidents surrounding the 2001 general elections, where the Hindu Dalits faced approximately 330 episodes of political violence, underscores the precarious situation of these communities (Rowshan et al., 2016). Given that the Hindu population constitutes a significant minority in Bangladesh, numbers at around 13.1 million in a total population of 165.15 million in 2022, the socio-political challenges they face are of national significance (Haider et al., 2023). Their religious identity further compounds the vulnerabilities of Hindu tokai, making their struggle for survival in Dhaka's waste management ecosystem even more challenging.

While there is some acknowledgment in the literature of the socio-economic challenges faced by tokai, there seems to be a conspicuous absence of rigorous analysis of the state's role in either creating or perpetuating these vulnerabilities. The political rights of tokai, or the lack thereof, is another neglected area of study. Their inability to vote, or even be heard, raises pressing questions about the nature of democracy and representation in the urban context. Furthermore, the absence of research focusing on the political economy surrounding tokai communities is obvious. Understanding the interplay of economic forces, power dynamics, and politics in shaping the lives of these waste pickers sheds light on larger structural inequities within the system. By not addressing these crucial dimensions, current literature runs the risk of offering a truncated view of the challenges and aspirations of the tokai. It is imperative for future studies to delve into these overlooked aspects to provide a more holistic understanding and potentially guide policy interventions.

Caste Influences in Waste Picking

Caste, an intrinsic part of South Asian societies, underwent significant changes during the British colonial rule. Chakravarty (2018) asserts that caste was a poisoned gift from the British, and its perpetuation was, in many ways, a tool of colonial subjugation. The British colonial administration reified and institutionalized caste differences, often using the hierarchical structures to create divisions and rule more effectively (Chakravarty, 2018). The introduction of British education led to an unforeseen consequence: the creation of two distinct intellectual classes within the caste hierarchy. On the one hand, the education system produced an upper-caste elite that often aligned with the British and would eventually assume administrative and intellectual leadership roles post-independence. This elite class, groomed in English education, imbibed Western values and ideas, and became influential in the formulation of national policies and direction (Chakravarty, 2018).

The Indian education system, deeply rooted in caste biases, ironically also paved the way for some of the most distinguished thinkers from the lower castes. Luminaries such as Mahatma Phule and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, both hailing from these backgrounds, leveraged their education to challenge and critique the system that had perpetuated caste-based discrimination for ages (Kumar, 1999). Their deep understanding and criticism of the caste system empowered them to champion the rights of the marginalized and advocate for significant societal changes (Rao, 2003). Their extensive writings and activism not only sought to break down entrenched caste hierarchies but also endeavoured to secure a rightful position and representation for historically oppressed communities in the evolving modern nation-state (Gupta, 2005). Their enduring legacies underscore the transformative potential of education and its capability to instigate social change even within a flawed system (Singh, 2007).

Caste, as an indelible system, rests on several foundational pillars, which are integral to its perpetuation. Among these are the inherited rank, deeply rooted in taboos surrounding notions of purity and pollution; the enforcement of these hierarchies through methods of terror and violence; and a divine sanction that legitimizes the superiority of certain groups (Blunt, 2010). The British colonial powers exploited these foundational elements to establish and maintain their dominion over the Indian subcontinent. Colonialism's relationship with caste is complex. While colonial powers did consolidate and promote caste distinctions for administrative convenience, it also inadvertently sowed the seeds for a rigorous critique of the caste system (Chakravarty, 2018). British policies, coupled with the rise of anti-caste thinkers, played a dual role: they both

strengthened and challenged the traditional caste hierarchies. This duality captures the inherent complexities of colonialism and its enduring impact on the subcontinent's socio-political fabric.

One significant caste group impacted by British policies in South Asia were the Dalits, who were primarily associated with jobs deemed impure by societal standards, such as the disposal of dead bodies and garbage (Sultana & Subedi, 2016a). Their long-standing battle against systemic oppression led them to lobby the British government for a change in nomenclature.

Consequently, the 1911 census saw their designation change to *Namasudra*. The subsequent years witnessed a series of nomenclatural shifts, with the term 'Depressed Classes' introduced in 1919, consolidating various outcaste groups under one umbrella term. By 1936, they were officially identified as 'Scheduled Castes' across the territories of British India, which post-independence became India and East and West Pakistan, and post-1971, Pakistan and Bangladesh (Sultana & Subedi, 2016a). In contemporary times, in places like Dhaka City, Dalit are colloquially referred to as street cleaners who are Hindu. Their position remains one of marginality, as they continue to be perceived as impure, facing prejudice from both Muslim and Hindu communities within the region (Asaduzzaman, 2001a; Sarker et al., 2016).

Louis Dumont's seminal work on the caste system offers a detailed exploration into its underlying structures and ideologies. At its core, Dumont (1980) postulates that the caste system hinges on the notions of purity and pollution, a religious ideology that is paramount to its functionality. This system, according to Dumont, delineates society into a multitude of hereditary, and therefore permanent, groups. These groups are differentiated and simultaneously interconnected through three primary characteristics:

- the principle of separation, evident in marital practices and in matters of direct or indirect contact, especially concerning food;
- a division of labour, with each caste traditionally bound to a particular profession, though there are allowances for some degree of occupational mobility;
- an inherent hierarchy, which ordains each caste with a particular rank, rendering them superior or inferior in relation to one another (Dumont, 1980).

Contemporary discourses suggest that the modern conceptualisations of the caste system are, to a large extent, legacies bequeathed by British colonialism in the South Asian subcontinent. Not only does caste play a pivotal role in shaping social hierarchies, but it also fosters a patriarchal framework. Within this system, marginalized communities such as the tokai experience pronounced structural discrimination.

However, the scholarship on the historical dimensions of how the state, cultural paradigms, and broader societal structures have systematically oppressed lower-caste groups remains scant. The existing body of formal and informal literature characterizes tokai as marginalized and powerless communities, largely influenced by the Hindu caste system prevalent in South Asia. However, this literature often neglects to consider the potential impact of the Muslim caste structure on marginalized communities in the region. A substantial body of research has shed light on a variety of challenges faced by the tokai, including health risks, income disparities, gender inequalities, instances of sexual abuse, mental health issues, among others. Nevertheless, there remains a paucity of literature addressing caste-class-based discrimination, power imbalances, disparities in urban services, and political domination in relation to the tokai and waste management within South Asian countries. I have also already suggested that caste may be a temporary social construction which tokai can assume (or be allocated to) while working in the landfills, but remove when they return to their villages.

Despite popular belief that the caste system was eradicated during the Mughal period, as elucidated in Chapter 1, this system of social stratification remains entrenched in many Muslim societies. Contrary to widespread assumptions, caste and social divisions still linger, albeit informally. These divisions are primarily rooted in descent and the division of labour, as described by Ahmad (1966) and Beall (2006). It is intriguing to note that, as a coping mechanism in urban landscapes, many of these groups often adopt a discreet approach, hiding their caste identifiers to navigate societal challenges and biases (Mines, 1972). This practice speaks volumes about the deeply embedded nature of the caste system and its pervasive influence, even in modern settings.

A comprehensive understanding of waste management requires delving into factors such as class and religion, which profoundly shape the experiences and challenges faced by those involved in waste management. Since waste pickers often emerge from the lower socio-economic strata of society, their involvement in waste management is not just a matter of livelihood but also reflects societal hierarchies and class-based marginalisation. Those from more affluent backgrounds rarely find themselves in such occupations, indicating that class structures often determine one's proximity to waste (Samson, 2015).

In many religious traditions, certain waste materials, especially those originating from places of worship, are considered sacred. Disposing of these requires specific rituals and is often done with great care. This interplay between religion and waste disposal can sometimes challenge the standardized waste management practices in urban settings (Raj et al., 2013). Large-scale religious

events and festivals can result in the generation of significant amounts of waste. How this waste is managed and by whom often mirrors societal and religious hierarchies. For instance, in many Hindu festivals, the remnants are considered holy and require particular disposal methods, sometimes leading to environmental concerns (Narayana, 2006). However, in some societies, religious beliefs stigmatise waste work. Certain religions view contact with waste as impure or polluting, and those involved in waste management can face discrimination not just based on their profession but also their perceived religious impurity (Auyero & Swistun, 2009). The intricate interplay between class and religion in waste management offers a lens to understand societal structures and hierarchies. While class dynamics determine who gets involved in waste management and their economic returns from it, religious beliefs shape waste disposal practices and the stigmatization faced by waste workers. However, it is essential to recognize that these dynamics can vary across regions and cultures. For instance, while waste generated from religious festivals might be a concern in Indian cities (Narayana, 2006), in predominantly Christian or Muslim cities, the challenges related to religious waste might differ.

Moreover, understanding these dynamics is crucial for policy-making. Urban waste management policies that fail to consider class and religious factors might face resistance from local communities, reducing their effectiveness. Therefore, a nuanced, culturally sensitive approach to waste management that acknowledges these socio-cultural dimensions is imperative for sustainable urban development.

The interplay between caste, colonialism, and the intricate socio-cultural matrix of South Asia presents a nuanced understanding of how historical systems shape contemporary challenges. As elucidated by Chakravarty (2018), colonial rule played a pivotal role in ossifying caste hierarchies. But perhaps, what is even more intriguing is the dual impact of colonialism: while it fortified caste-based divisions, it also inadvertently provided a platform for its rigorous critique. The caste system, by its very nature, is intertwined with class dynamics. As previously articulated, the British education system led to the bifurcation of intellectual classes within the caste hierarchy, creating both a pro-establishment upper-caste elite and an anti-establishment lower caste intelligentsia (Chakravarty, 2018). The nuances of this bifurcation are visible today in the socio-economic disparities prevalent in South Asian societies, where caste often determines social mobility and access to resources.

The caste system, underpinned by notions of purity and pollution as posited by Dumont (1980), is a living relic of historical processes and colonial interventions. Its influence extends beyond the confines of Hinduism, shaping socio-cultural dynamics across religious communities in

South Asia. While significant scholarship exists on the complexities of caste, a deeper exploration into its intersections with class, colonialism, religion, and occupation can provide a more comprehensive understanding of contemporary societal challenges, particularly for marginalized communities like the tokai.

As I have suggested, contrary to the conventional understanding of caste as a hereditary system defined by descent, the experience of the tokai in urban settings presents a different narrative. The tokai, primarily rural migrants, do not inherit waste picking as an occupation but rather adopt it upon their migration to cities. This shift underscores a significant aspect of their socio-economic adaptation, challenging the notion of a rigid, descent-based occupational hierarchy. However, the societal perceptions surrounding waste picking, often marred by notions of pollution and purity, mirror those associated with traditional caste systems. These perceptions contribute to the 'casteisation' of such occupations, irrespective of their non-hereditary nature. Furthermore, the transition of the tokai from one labour hierarchy's bottom to another in the urban milieu does not constitute occupational mobility in a progressive sense. Instead, it reflects a perpetuation of socio-economic marginalization, underlining the need to re-evaluate our understanding of caste and occupation in contemporary society.

Jackman's (2016) ethnographic observations reveal the existence of defiled surpluses in urban environments. This term refers to resources or opportunities that bear a societal stigma or association with impurity but can be economically exploited. An example might be waste picking, where individuals navigate through urban refuse to find salvageable materials (Beall, 2006). This activity, though essential for recycling and waste reduction, is often linked with low social status and defilement. In cities like Dhaka City, where the juxtaposition of affluence and abject poverty is stark, the creation and exploitation of these defiled surpluses can be even more prominent. The urban poor, particularly those living in makeshift shelters or public spaces, may strategically position themselves in areas where they can capitalize on these resources. This may involve tasks that many would shun due to their association with dirt or social taboo. Micro-inequalities are subtle, yet profound differences that dictate one's ability to access resources, opportunities, or societal privileges. In the context of Dhaka City, the utilization of defiled surpluses is a clear manifestation of such micro-inequalities. Not all urban poor have equal access to these resources or the capacity to exploit them.

The exploitation of these defiled surpluses is not a solitary endeavour. Relationships, both within and outside of Dhaka City, significantly influence one's ability to benefit from these opportunities (Jackman, 2016). Without connections outside of the city, individuals lack a safe

space for investments or may not be motivated to save at all. This dynamic is especially complex for vulnerable groups like single women and children, who sometimes need protection, often from male guardians. Such arrangements can pose both immediate risks and long-term disadvantages, reinforcing their association with the defiled and narrowing their future prospects (Jackman, 2016) While material poverty is undoubtedly challenging, relational poverty can signify a deeper level of vulnerability (Jackman, 2016).

The insights from this exploration prompt a re-evaluation of national or international development initiatives. Not all urban poor may wish for better urban housing if their current conditions strategically allow for savings and investments. However, there is also an undeniable subset of the population that does not benefit from defiled surpluses. Policies need to address this disparity, ensuring that the most vulnerable are not left behind (Jackman, 2016). Moreover, as cities evolve and potentially limit opportunities related to defiled surpluses, like begging, the dynamics of urban poverty could shift drastically. Jackman suggests the necessity of comprehensive research into the concept of defiled surpluses — identifying the factors that contribute to its emergence and understanding how they interplay in varying contexts. Given the rapid changes across socio-economic, cultural, and political domains in South Asia, contextualizing this concept becomes even more crucial.

Gender

Tokai find themselves at the crossroads of two oppressive systems: caste and patriarchy. Tokai, often marginalized and overlooked, stand at the intersection of two deeply entrenched oppressive systems: caste and patriarchy. This dual subjugation amplifies their vulnerability, as they not only face discrimination based on their caste identity but also grapple with the societal constraints and prejudices associated with gender roles and expectations. Their position at this nexus means they confront a compounded set of challenges, battling both caste-based biases and gendered expectations. This confluence of systemic oppressions demands a nuanced understanding and approach to truly address and ameliorate the challenges faced by the Tokai. In this thesis, I will use the word 'patriarchy' to mean a systemic and social structure where male dominance is upheld, leading to the subordination of other genders, characterized by established societal norms, practices, and expectations that perpetuate gendered inequalities and power imbalances

Patriarchy, a deeply entrenched system, has historically favoured men, especially those in upper social echelons, perpetuating economic oppression against marginalized groups (Greeley, 1983). This system not only grants undue advantages to men but also systematically side-lines women

from key decision-making processes. A glaring example of this marginalization is evident in the lives of the tokai of Bangladesh. Largely due to their gender, these women find themselves excluded from mainstream political arenas, their voices often stifled or disregarded (Singh, 2010).

In Bangladesh, the historical backdrop paints a picture of deep-seated cultural constraints on women's freedom to work outside the confines of their homes (Choudhury, 2013). At the core of these constraints lies the patriarchal system and the social practice known as *purdah*. *Purdah*, which entails a rigorous separation of women from men, not only restricts their social interactions but also perpetuates gender-based inequalities. The repercussions of this system are seen in the unequal distribution of opportunities and services between men and women in both formal and informal sectors.

However, the challenges faced by the tokai are not solely a product of prevailing societal norms; they are deeply rooted in entrenched patriarchal attitudes. Adding another layer of complexity is the intrinsic link between gender-based discrimination and religious beliefs. Khan (2012) accentuates that certain interpretations of religious tenets in Bangladesh further reinforce patriarchal norms, thereby exacerbating the marginalization of women. This interweaving of gender and religious doctrines amplifies the obstacles confronted by the tokai, pushing them even further into the periphery, away from societal recognition and active political participation (Rahman, 2015). Historically, Bangladesh has witnessed cultural constraints on women's freedom to work outside the home (Choudhury, 2013). This limitation stems from a patriarchal system and the social practice known as *purdah*. *Purdah* involves the strict separation of women from men, resulting in limited social access and, inevitably, gender-based inequalities. Opportunities and services within both formal and informal sectors are not equally distributed between men and women. Due to the influence of patriarchy and prevailing social norms, the path to choosing and participating in formal employment becomes complex, if not unattainable, for women. For marginalized women, such as women in construction work, the allure of autonomy and increased mobility often makes informal work the most viable employment option (Choudhury, 2013).

However, the challenges faced by women, particularly the marginalized tokai, are not merely by-products of these societal norms. Their struggles are deeply anchored in entrenched patriarchal attitudes that pervade various facets of the society. Khan (2012) underscores that these patriarchal norms are further solidified by certain interpretations of religious tenets in Bangladesh. This nexus between gender-based discrimination and religious beliefs intensifies the marginalization of women, often pushing them to the fringes of societal recognition and active political participation (Rahman, 2015).

Bangladesh boasts a significant milestone in South Asian politics with its female leadership. The country has been led by a woman, Sheikh Hasina, as its Prime Minister for multiple terms. Her leadership, along with that of the opposition leader Khaleda Zia, highlights the capacity of women to lead in high office (Zaman, 2018). However, while women have reached the pinnacle of political power, their representation at other levels of government remains disproportionate (Jahan, 2015).

While cultural and societal norms have historically limited women's participation in the workforce, there has been a notable shift over the past few decades. The garment industry, for instance, employs a significant number of women (Paul-Majumder, 1996). Additionally, Bangladesh has seen an increase in women entrepreneurs and professionals in various fields. Yet, challenges like wage disparity and the glass ceiling persist. (Bhattacharya, 2018). Despite their increasing presence in the workforce, women often earn less than their male counterparts for similar roles. While women are entering various professions, reaching top leadership positions remains a challenge for many.

Patriarchy affects women across all socio-economic backgrounds. While women in urban and educated backgrounds face challenges like workplace discrimination and societal expectations, rural and less-educated women confront issues like early marriage and limited access to education (Siddiqui, 2017). The tokai, as discussed earlier, experience marginalization both due to their socio-economic status and gender.

While real-time data post-2022 do not exist, historically women in Bangladesh have been more vulnerable to poverty than men (World Bank, 2018). This vulnerability is exacerbated by factors like limited access to resources, education, and decision-making power. However, initiatives like microfinance institutions have empowered many women economically (Yunus, 2003).

Bangladeshi women have made significant contributions to literature, capturing the nuances of life, society, and the challenges women face. Writers like Taslima Nasrin and Monica Ali have garnered international acclaim for their work, providing insights into the lives of Bangladeshi women from various perspectives (Nasrin, 1993; Ali, 2003). The Bangladeshi government and various NGOs have initiated numerous programs and policies aimed at promoting gender equality. Efforts range from promoting girls' education, providing women with access to healthcare, and creating opportunities for economic empowerment (Bangladesh Planning Commission, 2015).

Given the overpowering influence of patriarchy and the weight of prevailing societal norms, the trajectory towards choosing and engaging in formal employment becomes intricate, if not entirely unfeasible, for many women. Yet, for marginalized women like the tokai, the quest for autonomy and enhanced mobility often drives them towards waste picking - a testament to their resilience and an indicator of the limited options available to them (Choudhury, 2013).

Among tokai, gender inequalities have been a significant issue. Tokai often have restricted access to recyclable materials and receive lower payments for collecting the same recyclable waste as men (Adamo, 2014; Marques et al., 2020). Gender disparities are exacerbated by limited access to education, patriarchal cultural practices, unequal division of labour, and restricted access to social networks (Wrigley-Asante, 2013). In addition, women in tokai are subject to the control of middlemen such as small traders and dealers, and they have little influence over the privatization of municipal solid waste management systems due to the gender hierarchy in waste picking (Fahmi & Sutton, 2010).

A substantial body of research has investigated the health, reproductive health risks and urinary infections affecting female tokai (Gutberlet, 2017). Additionally, there is a prevalence of various health risks among tokai, including lung problems, eye infections, gastrointestinal disorders, typhoid fever, diarrhoea, musculoskeletal disorders, water-borne illnesses, and skin conditions (Wrigley-Asante, 2013; Zolnikov et al., 2018). Some researchers argue that child waste pickers are exposed to health risks as they often ingest hazardous chemicals like paint thinner, glue, and toluene, either to suppress hunger, numb emotions, or for pleasure (Hunt, 1996). However, it is important to note that the literature highlights that these health risks are on the rise due to factors such as a high frequency of occupational accidents, the absence of formal labor contracts with factories or dealers (Castilhos Junior et al., 2013), climate vulnerabilities including heavy rain, floods, extreme heat, and environmental pollution that contribute to food insecurity and health hazards among waste pickers (Uddin & Gutberlet, 2018), and the subpar living conditions prevalent in slum areas (Coelho et al., 2016; Siqueira & de Moraes, 2009).

Some studies highlight the high-risk behaviour of tokai, including engagement in sex work, which they are sometimes forced to do in exchange for money, drugs, or shelter (Woan et al., 2013). These studies also suggest that tokai face sexual health risks due to early marriage, early initiation of sexual activity, and unprotected sex, leading to an increased risk of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) among them (Bal et al., 2010; Towe et al., 2009).

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework guiding this study draws from multiple sources. I will build upon theories of structural inequality, particularly those related to caste and class dynamics within the waste picking communities. In addition to the historical and cultural lenses, my analysis will be informed by feminist perspectives. These perspectives will provide a nuanced understanding of how gender dynamics play out in the realm of waste picking and how these dynamics are intricately tied to broader patriarchal systems. By integrating feminist theory, I aim to uncover and critically examine the gendered dimensions of waste picking, shedding light on how patriarchal structures influence, shape, and often exacerbate the challenges faced by women in this occupation. I use Marxist and Socialist Feminism to understand women's oppression to capitalist systems and advocates for a socialist revolution to eradicate gender disparities (Crenshaw, 1989). This perspective can shed light on the economic dimensions of waste picking and how capitalist structures can exacerbate gender inequalities (Hartmann, 1979). However, solely focusing on economic systems might overlook cultural and religious factors influencing women's roles in Bangladesh (Sen, 1999; Mohanty, 1988).

By adopting these theoretical lenses, I aim to shed light on the multifaceted challenges faced by waste pickers, including the interplay of caste, class, and gender hierarchies. Furthermore, a conceptual framework will be presented, offering a visual representation of key concepts and their interconnections within the research. This framework will serve as a navigational tool, aiding in the systematic exploration of the complex issues surrounding informal waste picking in Bangladesh. My research questions are firmly rooted in the gaps identified within the literature, will be discussed, illustrating their alignment with both the chosen theoretical and conceptual frameworks.

The choices made regarding my research approach, theoretical framework, and methods are carefully justified, as they are intricately linked to our overarching objective of addressing the substantial knowledge deficits within the realm of informal waste picking in Bangladesh. These choices are designed to facilitate a comprehensive exploration of the topic and provide valuable insights into the experiences, challenges, and opportunities of waste pickers in this specific context. My proposed theoretical approach is further enriched by the incorporation of relevant concepts, which are not merely abstract ideas but rather practical tools that guide our research. These concepts are firmly rooted in our methodological commitment to prioritize and listen to the voices of those often silenced and marginalized in society.

By employing an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) this study is committed to presenting a genuine portrayal of individual experiences without superimposing pre-existing theoretical assumptions or generalized interpretations. The philosophy behind phenomenology argues that individuals make sense of their world through their experiences. To genuinely understand an individual's viewpoint, it is imperative to immerse oneself in their lived experiences and the contexts within which these experiences unfold (Moran, 2000). For the tokai phenomenon, this means exploring the spaces they occupy, the interactions they have, the challenges they face, and the aspirations they nurture. Phenomenology emphasises the need for researchers to practice *epoché*, a suspension of judgments or preconceived notions to truly engage with and understand participants' lived experiences (Husserl, 1970). Thus, the narratives collected in this research are not just mere accounts but intimate journeys into the worlds of the participants.

One of the central tenets of phenomenology is its emphasis on the co-creation of meaning between the researcher and the participant. This dynamic relationship goes beyond a simple interview or observation; it is a deep, reflective, and collaborative effort to elucidate the complex layers of human experience (Finlay, 2009). In this study, participants are not just sources of data but are active partners in knowledge construction, contributing significantly to the depth and richness of the findings. Phenomenological inquiry also brings attention to the temporal dimension of experiences, highlighting how past memories, present experiences, and future anticipations interplay in the lived stories of individuals (Heidegger, 1962). For the tokai, their past hardships, current struggles, and hopes for the future are intricately woven, presenting a comprehensive understanding of their lives. Through the lens of phenomenology, the study offers insights that are profound, authentic, and deeply human.

The phenomenological method, by its very nature, stresses a deep exploration of human consciousness and lived experience. However, it also brings to the fore numerous methodological challenges and philosophical debates. One such challenge is the matter of subjectivity. Since phenomenology is fundamentally concerned with subjective experiences, it may be criticised for its lack of so-called objectivity. The researcher's own biases, beliefs, and experiences can, knowingly or unknowingly, influence the interpretation of the participants' experiences (Moustakas, 1994). This challenge calls for rigorous self-reflection, or bracketing, wherein researchers intentionally set aside their own experiences to fully understand those of their participants (Creswell, 2013) in an effort to be 'objective'. However, another approach to phenomenology is to use the researcher's experiences and reactions as a kind of data that also contributes to the co-creation of knowledge and awareness. It is this latter approach that I take,

since I am working with stigmatised and vulnerable persons in this project; if I were not pre-disposed to empathy with this community, if I did not care about tokai, it is unlikely that I would be undertaking this study.

While phenomenology attempts to grasp the universal essences of experiences, it also remains rooted in the particular and the individual. This tension between the particular and the universal is an inherent paradox in phenomenological research (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Some critics may argue that phenomenological findings are not generalisable, given their deep focus on individual experiences. Yet, its proponents argue that by uncovering these deep, rich experiences, I can gain insights that are universally resonant. This does not mean that I make statistical generalisations about a population, but seek deeper and broader understandings and truths from the experiences of individuals. Still, the process of distilling lived experiences into textual descriptions also poses challenges. The transformation of complex, multi-dimensional experiences into linear text such as that found in a thesis necessitates a reduction of sorts, potentially missing the full depth and breadth of the experience (Van Maanen, 1990). Moreover, the temporal aspect of phenomenology, wherein past, present, and future experiences are interwoven, can be difficult to capture and articulate accurately. Temporality adds layers of complexity to the already intricate process of interpretation. However, despite these challenges, the strength of phenomenology lies in its ability to illuminate the depth and complexity of human experience. By being open to the lived experiences of tokai I seek to understand and make meaning of the layers of meanings, beliefs, feelings, and perceptions that might otherwise remain hidden. It is in this depth and richness that phenomenology offers unparalleled insights, revealing not just what is evident, but what lies beneath.

Within the context of phenomenology, then, this research additionally draws upon an array of research philosophies to explore the socio-political vulnerabilities, structural discrimination, political influence, and caste-based division of labour experienced by tokai. The key theories include Bronfenbrenner's Socio Ecological Framework, Foucault's Theory of Power, and Walby's Theorising Patriarchy. I will also draw on three disciplinary theories that I will describe below. These several theoretical approaches will be drawn together using Giddens's (1984) Theory of Structuration, which I will explore further below. These intersecting theories provide a robust foundation for understanding the complexities of their lived experiences.

Bronfenbrenner's Socio-Ecological Framework

The first key theory, then, is Bronfenbrenner's (1994) Socio-Ecological Framework. This framework offers a lens through which to examine the dynamic interplay between tokai and the

environments they inhabit. This framework highlights the various ecological systems, from micro to macro, that influence their daily lives, and considers the transactions between individuals and their various environments. The framework seeks to uncover the places where the individual's environment is rich, and where it is resource-poor. Thus, transactions between participants and their families (micro), institutions within their communities (e.g., waste dealers) and peers (mezzo), urban authorities (exo) and laws, traditions and beliefs (macro) will be considered.

Bronfenbrenner's (1999) framework proposes that an individual's behaviours and actions are subject to the influence of various environmental factor. He proposes four fundamental assumptions, including (a) the recognition that multiple factors exert influence on individual behaviours; (b) the understanding that environmental systems exhibit diversity and complexity; (c) the acknowledgment of the myriad human-environmental interactions within organizations; and (d) the awareness of a dynamic and interconnected relationship between individuals and their environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1999). The adoption of this framework encourages a holistic exploration of the entire socio-ecological system. Within this system, there exist forces and dynamics that can, for instance, either discourage or compel women to become tokai. By employing this framework, the study aims to uncover the multifaceted influences and contextual factors that shape the experiences and decisions of women who engage in waste picking as tokai, and that the lives of tokai are influenced by a multitude of factors, including societal norms, religious beliefs, policies, organizational structures, mass media, and local political dynamics. By examining the interplay between these macro-level elements and the experiences of women tokai, this framework seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how political and caste factors exert control over these marginalized communities.

Bronfenbrenner's framework, while valuable, has faced criticisms. Some critics have argued that the Bronfenbrenner predominantly focuses on psychological issues and leans towards being experimental and descriptive (Johannisson, 1997). This suggests that it may not fully encompass the broader socio-political and structural aspects that influence individuals' lives. Another critique is that he places less emphasis on international or global factors, especially in the context of the impact of globalisation (Sword, 1999). This limitation may restrict its applicability in situations where global forces play a significant role. The model has been accused of centring its analysis around an individual's capacity and positioning organizations or other social structures at the core of its focus (Jones & Johnston, 2000). This approach may overlook the collective and systemic aspects of social phenomena. While these criticisms are important to consider, Bronfenbrenner's framework, when used in conjunction with other theoretical frameworks, can still provide valuable insights into the complex interplay of factors that shape

the lives of tokai. Including these critiques has provided a more comprehensive understanding of the experiences of tokai by contextualizing their capacities within broader socio-cultural, caste and even global influences. This approach recognizes that individual actions and decisions are shaped not only by personal agency but also by the social structures and constraints within which they operate.

Foucault's Theory of Power

I also will draw on Foucault's Theory of Power (Foucault, 1991) in order to understand how power operates in the lives and social contexts of tokai. Foucault's theory provides a critical perspective on the power dynamics that shape the experiences of tokai. Power theory considers a) how power works in waste picking; b) the association of power and gender; c) the ways that tokai are controlled; d) how to change the subordinate status of tokai. I have also considered power theory for tokai not only to explore the ways women are dominated, but also how it affected their capacities, abilities, and strengths (Foucault, 1991). I was guided by women's capacities to investigate the potential transformation of power relationships, that is, for the empowerment of women. Foucault's conceptualization of power as relational, based on practices, techniques, and procedures, and closely intertwined with knowledge and discourse, offers a lens through which to analyse various aspects of my research. Using power theory, I explore the mechanisms through which power operates within the context of waste picking. This includes examining how different actors and institutions exert power over tokai, shaping their roles and experiences in the waste management system. It allows for an exploration of the power dynamics inherent in waste management practices and policies. Foucault's framework also enables an in-depth exploration of the intersection of power and gender within the waste picking sector. This can involve an analysis of how gendered power relations impact tokai and contribute to their marginalized status within the broader waste management system. I can also use power theory to investigate the ways in which tokai are controlled within their instrumental roles. This includes examining the strategies and practices that limit their agency, as well as the discourses that contribute to their subordination. Understanding these control mechanisms is essential for identifying opportunities for change.

My focus on empowerment, and specifically the empowerment of women, aligns with Foucault's notion that power relationships are not static but can be transformed. By studying the capacities, abilities, and strengths of tokai, I can identify pathways toward changing the subordinate status of tokai. Empowerment, in this context, involves creating opportunities for tokai groups to assert their identities, voice their concerns, and engage in social interactions that challenge

existing power structures. Understanding the diversity among tokai is essential, as it recognizes that their experiences are shaped by a complex interplay of factors, including but not limited to caste, class, and gender. This nuanced approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the specific challenges and opportunities faced by different subgroups within the broader category of tokai. By integrating power theory into my research framework, I can shed light on the ways in which power operates within waste picking, uncovering both the mechanisms of control and the potential for empowerment. This approach aligns with a critical and transformative perspective, aiming not only to analyse the existing power dynamics but also to contribute to the empowerment and agency of marginalized communities. It is essential to emphasize that my research acknowledges the diversity among tokai and the specific challenges they face within the broader context of caste, class, and social hierarchies. Foucault's theory of power serves as a valuable tool for understanding and addressing these complex dynamics, ultimately aiming for positive social change and empowerment within this marginalized group.

Walby's Theorising Patriarchy

As I have noted above, patriarchy plays an important role in the lives of women in Bangladesh, and in particular tokai women. I have chosen Walby's (1990) *Theorising Patriarchy* as a framework to understand patriarchal dynamics. Walby defines patriarchy as a socially and culturally constructed system where men practice dominating, oppressing, and exploiting women. She identifies the following six structures of patriarchal society, especially in developing countries:

- Women are largely engaged in unpaid domestic labour, such as housework and childcare; they are excluded from formal work, they get lower incomes; they are involved in less-skilled jobs like waste picking where society or states have a systematic bias towards patriarchal interests;
- Male violence towards women, particularly poor and uneducated women, exists; poor working women suffer sexual violence from an intimate partner, sometimes from colleagues in a workplace, and sometimes from government officials. This violence is personal, but it is systemic and patterned acts now where state and policy refuse to interfere with these issues;
- Patriarchal relations are expressed in sexuality: there are numerous norms and values surrounding sexual behaviours, and heterosexuality is socially privileged among men and women. Consequently, women face less freedom in their sexual behaviour than men in a patriarchal society;

- In patriarchal cultural institutions, women are influenced adversely by different institutions including media, religion, and education within a patriarchal gaze. These institutions influence women's identities and recommend acceptable standards of behaviour and action;
- Private patriarchy is the domination of women that arises within the household at the hands of an individual patriarch. It is an exclusionary strategy because women are essentially prevented from taking part in public life. Public patriarchy is more collective in form than private patriarchy. Women are involved in public realms, such as politics and the labour market, but remain segregated from wealth, power, and status. In other words, patriarchy has shifted in form from the private to the public realm due to the increased demand for women's labour. Liberated from the home, women now have the whole of society in which to be exploited (Walby, 1997).

Walby enables an exploration of how patriarchal structures intersect with caste, class, and capitalism to create multiple identities for tokai, both in urban and rural environments. This theoretical approach helps uncover the intricate ways in which gender identity is socially constructed and the resulting structural inequalities faced by these communities. Walby's (1990) conceptualization of patriarchy provides a robust framework for analysing the systemic gender inequalities and power imbalances that impact tokai in the context of Bangladesh. Tokai, like many women in patriarchal societies, are often relegated to unpaid labour, which includes housework and childcare. They face exclusion from formal employment opportunities, resulting in lower incomes and involvement in less-skilled jobs such as waste picking. This structure reflects the systematic bias in society and state policies towards patriarchal interests.

The issue of male violence towards women, especially those who are poor and less educated, is a critical concern within patriarchal societies. Tokai, being a marginalized group, are vulnerable to various forms of violence, including intimate partner violence, harassment in the workplace, and abuse by government officials. The normalization of such violence perpetuates a systemic pattern. Patriarchy imposes norms and values concerning sexual behaviour, often privileging male heterosexuality. This can limit women's sexual autonomy and freedom, constraining their choices and actions in the realm of sexuality. Understanding these norms and their impact on the lives of tokai is crucial. Various cultural institutions, such as media, religion, and education, play a role in reinforcing patriarchal norms and influencing women's identities. They often promote and perpetuate traditional standards of behaviour and action, which can be restrictive for all women.

The concept of private patriarchy, where women are dominated within households, coexists with public patriarchy. In the public realm, women may participate in activities such as waste picking, but they often remain segregated from wealth, power, and status. The shift from private to public patriarchy is driven by the demand for women's labour, but it does not necessarily lead to women's liberation or empowerment. By employing Walby's framework, my research effectively examines and critiques the structural patriarchy present in Bangladeshi society and its specific impacts on tokai. It sheds light on the power imbalances between the sexes and how these imbalances are perpetuated through public policies and government strategies. This framework provides a comprehensive lens through which to analyze and understand the challenges and discrimination faced by tokai, ultimately contributing to a broader discourse on gender inequalities and women's empowerment in the context of waste picking and beyond. (Walby, 1990).

This framework helps to understand and critique (a) the country's structural patriarchy and its impact on women tokai (b) imbalances of power between the sexes. This framework responded to research questions how women tokai are controlled by men through public policies and government strategies in Bangladesh.

Disciplinary theories

In addition to these basic frameworks, I also plan to draw on theories from urban development geographies, feminist geographies, and the social study of waste enriches the research by providing different angles of analysis. Urban development geographies illuminate the uneven development of waste management in Dhaka City and shed light on power relationships between urban authorities and marginalized groups. They offer insights into the practices of neo-liberal modernity and governance mechanisms that impact the tokai. Feminist geographies encourage the researcher to explore the daily experiences and livelihood challenges of vulnerabilised women, in this case tokai, with a focus on how they navigate their physical environments as women, and how they access resources. It serves as the foundation for understanding the ways tokai construct their gender identities (although they are not likely to call it such) and the structural oppressions and inequalities faced by tokai in urban areas. Finally, the Social Study of Waste and Geographies of Waste will allow insights into the socio-political and social dimensions of waste, and help to unravel the complexities of waste picking. They also help in understanding the social interpretations of waste and the stigmatization of informal waste picking in public spaces. Additionally, they aid in analysing political and caste hierarchies within this context.

Giddens' Theory of Structuration

In order to drawing all of these theories together I will use Anthony Giddens' theory of structuration (1984). Social structures consist of rules that define acceptable behaviours, norms, and expectations within a given society. These rules serve as constraints on individual actions, guiding and limiting what individuals can and cannot do; it is worth pointing out that these social structures also include caste. In addition to rules, social structures also encompass resources that enable and facilitate action. Resources can take various forms, including material resources, knowledge, and access to social networks. These resources make actions possible within the constraints set by the rules. Giddens argues that the relationships between individuals and their socio-cultural environment are socially structured. These structures encompass both rules that constrain actions and resources that enable them. Social structures and individual agency are interdependent and cannot be separated. While individuals have the freedom to make choices, their knowledge and actions are limited by the structures in which they are embedded. Moreover, Giddens emphasizes that social structures are not fixed entities but are continually created, maintained, and altered through human actions. These structures can act as constraints on individual action, but they also provide the framework for shared meanings and interpretations. Importantly, Giddens highlights that social structures and individual agency are inseparable and mutually constitutive. While individuals have the freedom to make choices and take actions, their knowledge and choices are bounded by the structures in which they are situated. However, it is through individual actions that social structures are created, maintained, and transformed over time. Social structures, therefore, act as both constraints and enablers of action, providing a framework of shared meanings and interpretations that guide human choices and behaviour.

By using Giddens' theory of structuration, my research framework becomes a powerful tool for understanding various aspects of the lives of tokai:

- It helps identify and locate the influence of political and religious factors in waste picking by examining the complex web of relationships between tokai and social institutions, and the explicit and implicit forces—such as power and patriarchy— that shape them;
- The framework can shed light on the impact of diverse factors such as politics and the legacy of caste on tokai, offering insights into the historical and contemporary forces shaping their experiences;

- By considering policy environments within the socio-ecological model, my framework allows for an examination of how governmental policies and regulations intersect with the daily lives of tokai;
- The integration of these theories provides a foundation for the development of a social theory of waste and waste management. It enables an exploration of how societal rules and political systems contribute to structural inequalities and discrimination within the tokai.

In essence, the proposed theoretical framework acknowledges the intricate interplay between individual agency and the socio-cultural, political, and structural dimensions that shape the lives of tokai. It serves as a robust foundation for my research, enabling a nuanced analysis of the structural inequalities and discrimination faced by these marginalized communities.

In the context of my research on tokai, this theoretical framework enables a nuanced exploration of how their lives are influenced by various socio-cultural, political, and structural factors. It allows me to examine the interplay between individual agency and the constraints and opportunities presented by the caste-based culture, patriarchy, and dominant social norms. By considering how these multiple relationships are socially structured, my research can uncover the complexities of tokai experiences and the ways in which they navigate and negotiate within these structures.

My theoretical framework acknowledges the influence of a range of factors, including politics and the legacy of caste, on the lives of tokai. This holistic approach recognizes that their experiences are shaped by a multitude of interconnected elements, and it provides a platform to investigate how these factors intersect and impact their daily lives. The theoretical framework goes beyond examining waste picking as a mere behaviour or occupation and seeks to understand and develop a broader social theory of waste and waste management. This perspective allows me to explore the stigmatisation of informal waste picking, the social interpretations of waste, and the various meanings attributed to waste in society. By utilising this comprehensive theoretical framework, this research can provide a nuanced and holistic understanding of the challenges, vulnerabilities, and opportunities faced by tokai. It allows me to investigate not only the individual-level experiences but also the broader societal and structural factors that shape their lives. This approach contributes to a more comprehensive analysis of the socio-political construction of their realities and the potential avenues for addressing the inequalities and discrimination they encounter. My commitment to exploring these complex

issues through a multidimensional framework reflects a robust and insightful approach to my research.

By weaving together these diverse theoretical strands, this research aims to offer a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the challenges and vulnerabilities faced by tokai, ultimately contributing to a deeper appreciation of their lived experiences and the structural factors that shape them.

Recognizing the theoretical tension between Foucault's poststructuralist stance and the structural orientations of Bronfenbrenner and Walby, this study embarked on an ambitious task of integrating these diverse lived experiences. The rationale for this integration lies in the multidimensional insights they collectively offer. While Foucault's ideas illuminate the nuanced power dynamics and discursive practices within social structures, Bronfenbrenner and Walby provide a framework for understanding the systemic and hierarchical nature of tokai social structures and other environmental influences.

In practice, this theoretical amalgamation proved instrumental in dissecting the complex layers of lived stories of tokai. Foucault's lens allowed for a critical examination of power dimension in the society, uncovering the subtle ways in which power and knowledge intersect. Concurrently, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and Walby's insights into social structures enabled a comprehensive analysis of tokai livelihood, revealing how broader societal frameworks shape individual experiences and interactions. This multifaceted approach enriched the study's depth, allowing for a more holistic understanding of informal waste picking.

Ultimately, this project demonstrates the utility of converging diverse theoretical perspectives. By synthesizing the insights of Foucault, Bronfenbrenner, and Walby, the study navigated through the complexities of tokai lived experiences, providing a nuanced and layered analysis. This theoretical integration not only enhanced the study's academic rigor but also offered a novel lens through which structural inequality can be understood, emphasizing the value of interdisciplinary approaches in social research.

Summary

In this chapter, a comprehensive conceptual framework and relevant contributing theories have been explored to lay the foundation for a study about tokai in Bangladesh. The conceptual framework encompasses Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological model, which considers the multifaceted influences on individuals within their environments, Foucault's theory of power is employed to examine the dynamics of power within waste picking, and Walby's theory of

patriarchy, which are further augmented by several disciplinary theories. All of these are complemented by Giddens's theory of structuration, and this integrated framework will contribute to understanding the push-pull factors which lead to tokai work, the multiple political, economic, gender, caste and other structural inequalities and imbalances of power and patriarchy managed by women tokai. This theoretical framework will serve as the basis for the research questions addressed in subsequent chapters.

In the upcoming methodology chapter, the research approach and strategies employed to collect data for addressing the research questions will be elucidated. This chapter will provide insights into the practical aspects of conducting the study, including data collection methods, participant selection, and data analysis techniques. It will offer a comprehensive understanding of how the theoretical framework and concepts discussed in this chapter will be applied in the research process to gain valuable insights into the lives and experiences of tokai in Bangladesh.

Chapter Three: Research Methodology

The overarching goal of this research project is to shed light on the intricacies of waste picking in urban Dhaka City, emphasizing the experiences of tokai who are frequently relegated to the shadows of society. In order to do this the project will address critical questions related to informal waste picking, urban inequalities, waste management, power dynamics, vulnerabilities, and the resilience of marginalized communities. By embracing a qualitative research method, and specifically adopting an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA), this study endeavours to lend a voice to the tokai, allowing them to articulate their stories, challenges, and aspirations. The tokai community's work life, living conditions, and access to urban resources and spaces remain largely unexamined, rendering them voiceless within the discourse on urban development and waste management. Consequently, this study aims to bridge this gap in knowledge by seeking out and engaging with the voices and lived experiences of tokai individuals, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of their lives.

This section delves into the chosen research design, situating the researcher within the study context. Despite considerable challenges, including Covid-19 related travel restrictions and the transient nature of tokai work, the research design was carefully crafted to ensure the meaningful exploration of tokai experiences. This chapter also discusses the research paradigm guiding the study, emphasizing the IPA chosen for its relevance to understanding subjective experiences. Detailing the data collection process, this section sets out the methodologies employed in conducting semi-structured, in-depth interviews with tokai participants and key informants. The challenges faced in accessing and engaging with tokai during the pandemic are discussed, highlighting the complexities of researching marginalized and often elusive communities. The data analysis approach, focusing on IPA, is also outlined, elucidating how it was utilized to unearth the multifaceted experiences of tokai.

Ethical considerations are of paramount importance when researching vulnerable populations. This section explores the ethical framework guiding this research, addressing issues of informed consent, confidentiality, and participant well-being. The study's commitment to ensuring the dignity and privacy of tokai participants is paramount, and these ethical considerations are thoroughly discussed.

Finally, this chapter acknowledges the inherent challenges and limitations to the selected methodologies and encountered throughout the research process. It is essential to transparently acknowledge these constraints to provide context for the study's findings and to contribute to the ongoing discourse on the complexities of conducting research with marginalized

communities., The chapter sets the stage for a comprehensive exploration of the research methodology employed in this study. It underscores the significance of giving voice to the tokai communities, articulates the intricacies of data collection and analysis, emphasizes ethical considerations, and candidly addresses the challenges and limitations encountered during the research journey.

Research Design

The research design for this study is a robust and comprehensive approach that combines qualitative research methods with an interpretative phenomenological framework. This approach is ideally suited to delve deep into the lived experiences and realities of the tokai community within the urban landscape of Dhaka City. By utilizing this research design, the study aims to uncover the intricate dimensions of informal waste labour, gender dynamics, and urban inequalities in the context of urban development studies (Taylor et al., 2015; Glick, 2021).

The primary method of data collection employed in this research design consists of semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 21 tokai participants. These interviews offer a platform for tokai individuals to articulate their stories, challenges, and unique perspectives concerning their work, living conditions, and access to urban resources. Additionally, the study undertook key informant interviews involving government officials, NGO workers, and religious leaders (n=4). These interviews serve to provide a broader contextual understanding and enrich the narratives shared by the tokai community (Smith & Brown, 2019).

Validity and reliability ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the research findings. To maintain validity, the research design and data collection methods have been carefully crafted to capture the authentic experiences and perspectives of the tokai community. This involves employing open-ended questions, active listening, and empathetic engagement during interviews to allow participants to express themselves freely (Creswell, 2013; Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

Reliability, on the other hand, is upheld through consistent and systematic data collection and analysis processes. I and my support team (necessitated by Covid-19 travel restrictions) followed established protocols and guidelines to ensure that the same standards are applied consistently across all interviews and throughout the study. This consistency minimizes potential bias and ensures that the findings can be replicated or corroborated by other researchers, thereby enhancing the reliability of the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Yin, 2014). By prioritizing both validity and reliability, this study aims to provide a robust and trustworthy account of the landfill tokai experiences, contributing valuable insights to the broader understanding of their lives and challenges.

The research adopted an iterative approach, wherein I engaged in ongoing clarification and confirmation of participant statements. This approach was particularly crucial given the transient nature of the tokai community and their often-limited literacy skills. Furthermore, the research benefited from the collaborative effort of a team comprising research assistants and staff from a non-governmental (NGO) agency. This collective approach adds depth, quality, and validity to the research process.

Ensuring validity and quality in research when working with research assistants (RAs) and NGO staff involved several key processes and considerations:

- I provided comprehensive training to RAs and NGO staff about the research objectives, methodology, ethical considerations, and their roles and responsibilities, and ensured they had a clear understanding of the research process.
- Before starting the actual data collection, I conducted a pilot test with RAs and NGO staff to identify any potential issues, refine data collection instruments, and ensured everyone is on the same page regarding data collection procedures.
- I maintained regular supervision and monitoring of the data collection process. Schedule check-ins, meetings, or debriefings to discuss progress, addressed questions or concerns, and provided clarifications as needed.
- I ensured and implemented consistency checks to ensure that RAs and NGO staff recruited participants consistently and followed the established protocols. This included reviewing a sample of their work or conducting joint recruitment of participants.
- I used triangulation, where multiple data sources or methods were used to verify information. This ensured the reliability and accuracy of the data.
- I emphasised the importance of ethical conduct throughout the research process. I ensured that RAs and NGO staff were aware of and adhered to ethical guidelines, including obtaining informed consent from participants, and maintaining confidentiality.
- I established quality control mechanisms to review and verify the collected data. This involved spot-checking completed interviews, transcriptions, or other data to identify and rectify errors.
- I fostered open and clear communication channels with RAs and NGO staff. I encouraged them to provide feedback on any challenges they encountered during data recruitments process or any improvements that could have been made to the process.

- I maintained detailed documentation of the research process, including training materials, protocols, and communication records with RAs and NGO staff. This documentation created valuable for transparency and audit purposes.

By implementing these processes and maintaining a collaborative and communicative relationship with RAs and NGO staff, I enhanced the validity and quality of my research while ensuring that data collection was conducted effectively and ethically.

In summary, this research design represents a holistic and finely tuned methodology that aims to unravel the nuanced experiences of the tokai. Through this approach, the study contributes significantly to the comprehension of urban inequalities and the intricacies of informal waste labour in the dynamic context of Dhaka City.

Research Population and Study Area

The primary research population for this study consisted of women tokai engaged in waste picking activities at the landfills of Dhaka City. In Dhaka City, there are two main dumpsites, Matuail and Gabtoli, designated for the final disposal of waste (BBS, 2020). A purposive selection led to the choice of the Matuail landfill as the primary site for data collection. This decision was based on the observation that a significant portion of the tokai community at Matuail comprised women and children. Additionally, the Matuail landfill context was familiar to me due to prior study involvement (Sarker et al., 2018). Conducting this research in Bangladesh held particular significance due to the absence of a robust human rights framework and the prevalence of issues such as social stigma, structural violence, and caste-based division of labour against lower-class communities. These contextual elements made it well-suited for examining the complex dynamics at play within the tokai community.

Epistemologically, I possessed a clear understanding of the socio-political and religious context in Bangladesh, having grown up in Dhaka City. This background provided an emic perspective that contributed to a deeper comprehension of how individuals interact with and perceive lower-caste communities. Nevertheless, I acknowledged being an outsider in terms of the tokai identity and the stigma associated with it, resulting in an etic perspective. This outsider status provided a fresh lens through which to explore this field of study (Hastrup, 2003).

An additional layer of significance stemmed from the predominantly Muslim identity of the respondents, allowing the research to delve into the nuances of the Muslim caste structure in Bangladesh (Afrin et al., 2018). Furthermore, the research recognized the persistent challenges faced by the tokai, which can be traced back to the legacy of British colonialism (Bandyopadhyay, 2009). The continued struggle against stigma and discrimination made this region a compelling choice for investigation (Wright & Bromley, 2021).

In summary, the selection of Dhaka City, particularly the Matuail landfill, as the research area was grounded in a nuanced understanding of the socio-political context, the need to explore the unique challenges of the tokai, and the desire to shed light on the dynamics of the Muslim caste structure in Bangladesh.

Participant Recruitment

Recruiting participants for qualitative studies, especially when targeting specific marginalised or underserved populations, can pose significant challenges (Joseph et al., 2007; Renert et al., 2013). Successful recruitment strategies often rely on several key factors. First, collaboration with trusted community gatekeepers who have established relationships with potential participants can enhance recruitment (Felsen et al., 2010; Porter & Lanes, 2000). Second, conducting face-to-face meetings with participants in their familiar environments can build rapport and facilitate recruitment (Spratling, 2013). Third, utilizing word-of-mouth referrals through both participants and gatekeepers can help identify eligible individuals (Jones et al., 2009). Lastly, establishing trust with research participants is fundamental to successful recruitment (Eide & Allen, 2005).

However, in the case of this study, recruiting participants posed unique challenges. Tokai, the target population, are characterized by their migratory nature in Dhaka City, making them difficult to locate and engage. Moreover, the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic and associated travel restrictions further complicated the recruitment process.

Securing informed consent from participants and research assistants, as well as NGO staff, was a critical step in the recruitment process. Due to the participants' low literacy levels, verbal consent was obtained, and research assistants subsequently provided written consent on their behalf, which was transmitted to me via email. The consent forms explicitly outlined that all participant information, including names and contact details, would be kept strictly confidential.

To address these challenges and facilitate participant recruitment, I sought collaboration with Grambangla Unnayan Committee (GUC), a local NGO with a presence in the landfill areas where tokai reside. This NGO operates a school specifically for tokai children and women. I initiated an online meeting with A.K.M. Maksud, the Executive Director of GUC, and shared

detailed project information, including information sheets and consent forms. After discussing the project, Maksud agreed to support participant recruitment and data collection. Regular communication with GUC executives ensured the smooth coordination of participant recruitment and virtual interviews. Confidentiality forms were obtained from GUC executives to reinforce the commitment to protecting participants' privacy and security during the research process.

The establishment of specific criteria for participant recruitment was a critical step in ensuring the relevance and reliability of the study. These criteria, outlined below, served as a guide for selecting participants who could provide valuable insights into the experiences and challenges faced by the tokai in Dhaka City:

- Participants must be above 18 years old to ensure legal consent and mature perspectives.
- Participants must be Muslim women actively engaged in waste picking activities within open landfills.
- Respondents should have residency in Dhaka City, particularly within the Matuail landfill area, which was the primary focus of the study.
- Participants should have a minimum of one year of experience working as tokai within the landfill, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of their experiences.
- If a potential participant exhibited signs of confusion, disorientation, or any compromise in their ability to provide informed consent or comprehend the study's objectives, recruitment was avoided. In such cases, interviews were deferred or gently terminated with gratitude for their time.
- Individuals who appeared to be mentally compromised were respectfully excluded from participation.
- Participants not meeting the criteria of being Muslim women engaged in waste picking within the specified urban area were not recruited.

To facilitate the recruitment process, two female research assistants were purposefully chosen to connect with the tokai. This selection was based on the recognition that female-to-female contact would likely be more effective in building rapport and trust within the community (Gilbride et al., 1999). The research assistants employed proactive recruitment techniques, recognizing the challenges in reaching all potential participants due to the transient nature of the tokai community and the constraints posed by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Regular communication was maintained through direct phone calls and face-to-face interactions with tokai by RAs, which helped establish a friendly and approachable demeanour. These interactions not only lessened potential participants' fears but also provided opportunities to address any questions or concerns regarding the study. Importantly, the female research assistants confirmed interview appointments with tokai participants the day before the scheduled interviews, reinforcing the commitment to confidentiality. In cases where a potential participant declined to participate, all follow-up and engagement efforts were respectfully discontinued. The involvement of the GUC and a research team played a pivotal role in facilitating the recruitment and consent process for participants. Leveraging the pre-established trust between GUC staff and potential participants, the research team assisted by providing information sheets to the tokai, many of whom were illiterate. This ensured that potential participants were well-informed about the project's objectives and requirements. For illiterate tokai, the research team provided an oral summary of the project, ensuring that every participant had a comprehensive understanding.

Verbal consent was obtained from participants, a process recorded by GUC staff and communicated to me through scanned documents sent via email. The commitment to safeguarding participant information was underscored as the research assistant ensured the destruction of all documents containing participant data after transmission. To further enhance accessibility and convenience, the research team collaborated with participants to identify a mutually agreeable time and location for online interviews, proposing the use of a private space at the GUC office. Participants consented to conducting interviews at this venue.

Participants were informed about and provided consent for the video and audio recording of Zoom interviews. Importantly, unnecessary personal information was not collected during the interviews. Visual aids in the form of pictures depicting landfill conditions from prior research efforts were utilized to establish rapport and reinforce my credibility and genuine intentions.

Interviews with tokai participants were scheduled at a rate of one per week, a deliberate choice to mitigate risks to both participants and to me while also affording time for reflection and learning from each interaction. This reflective approach revealed the participants' eagerness to share their stories for further development and potential benefits.

Recruitment of key informants, including government officials, NGO staff, and religious leaders, was facilitated through online platforms and communication channels. Ten potential informants were initially contacted via email and phone calls, resulting in four confirmations to participate. These key informants, in turn, aided in disseminating information sheets within their networks to

identify additional potential interviewees. While no further informants responded to this method, a proactive approach was taken in reaching out to an imam via mobile and messenger to discuss project details and secure participation. Information sheets and consent forms were shared electronically, and discussions surrounding the interview schedule, privacy, and anonymity protocols were conducted as part of the informed consent process. Each key informant was assured of the protection of their identity and the advantages of their participation in the research.

Data Collection Methods

The online interviews with tokai participants were conducted using the Zoom platform, facilitated from a dedicated room at the GUC office. All interviews took place within the timeframe spanning from February to June 2021, capturing a comprehensive range of perspectives and experiences. To systematically document the research journey and capture personal reflections, I maintained a research diary r.

The GUC office provided a well-equipped interview venue, thanks to the diligent preparations of the research assistants. The setup included essential amenities such as a laptop, reliable internet access, a comfortable chair, a table, and refreshments. To uphold the utmost privacy and confidentiality, stringent measures were implemented. These included the closure of doors and windows to prevent eavesdropping, ensuring an exclusive and secure environment for the interviews. During each interview session, only the participant and I were present, further safeguarding the confidentiality and integrity of the conversations. A central concern lay in the reliance on GUC staff and research assistants for logistical support and the crucial task of preserving confidentiality. To address this, meticulous planning and trust-building were essential components of the research process.

I transcribed the interviews in Bangla. Relevant segments were subsequently translated by me into English for inclusion in this thesis. The utilisation of video conferencing technology provided a rich dataset that enabled the observation, recording, and analysis of participants' facial expressions and body language. Importantly, efforts were made to minimize any disruption to the participants' daily routines and work commitments, as well as the workflow at GUC. The duration of the interviews ranged from 45 to 120 minutes, with additional travel time accounted for by the tokai participants. As a token of appreciation and to compensate participants for their valuable time and insights, a financial incentive of NZ \$10 (equivalent to 600 BDT) was offered. This payment was facilitated directly by GUC, with I reimbursing the organization accordingly.

In adherence to ethical standards and participant well-being, measures were in place to address instances of distress or discomfort. Participants were reassured that they could pause or halt the interview at any point if they felt overwhelmed. On three occasions, interviews had to be suspended due to emotional distress experienced by participants. In such cases, interviews were rescheduled for a more suitable and comfortable time, ensuring the well-being and comfort of the participants.

Conducting Interviews

The interviews conducted for this study followed a semi-structured format, providing a framework that allowed for methodical data collection while maintaining the flexibility to explore the unique perspectives and narratives of the tokai participants. Unlike rigidly structured interviews, this approach encouraged participants to share their experiences, insights, and stories without being confined to predetermined responses (Høffding et al., 2022). The primary objective was to gain a comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of the tokai, transcending mere confirmation of existing knowledge.

To establish a rapport with the participants and create a conducive interview environment, a series of steps were diligently followed:

- Prior to commencing the interview, a detailed explanation of the interview process was provided, allowing participants the opportunity to seek clarification or ask questions, fostering a sense of comfort and transparency.
- I initiated the interaction by introducing myself and engaging in open-ended dialogue. Efforts were made to adopt local customs, attire, and cultural norms, which included maintaining eye contact, smiling, and adjusting tone of voice to ensure a respectful and empathetic demeanour.
- Four fundamental ground rules were established at the outset of the interview, enhancing the participants' confidence and facilitating open communication. These rules emphasized: the participants' autonomy in sharing any information they deemed relevant; my commitment to avoid assumptions; clear communication in case of any uncertainty; and my proactive request for clarification when required.
- Responses from participants were met with invitations to elaborate further, encouraging them to expand on their narratives and share as much as they felt comfortable.
- Upon conclusion of the interview, I thanked participants for their valuable contributions, and they were given the opportunity to pose any questions or seek clarification, ensuring that their voices and concerns were prioritized and addressed.

A significant aspect of the data validation process involved continuous reflection on the interview schedule and methods employed. After conducting the initial two interviews, it became evident that participants were eager and willing to openly discuss their stories, leading to the discovery of rich and valuable information that surpassed the expectations set by the interview questions.

Here is an excerpt of my reflection on my first interview:

It was a new experience, and it was difficult to interview a woman via Zoom meeting. I have not been in a position like this before, a man interviewing a woman. I was silent most of the time, I did not talk much, and I isolated myself because the participant was describing many of her lived experiences. It was difficult for me because I had to deal with a poor uneducated woman and I did not know her, she did not know me. I did not feel uneasy to speak with her, but it was hard to understand her feelings and stories because she always exceeded the time limits. I tried to avoid some of their stories, but I could not do this. Many times, the participant was crying, and I became emotional. The life was so miserable, what I could never imagine. Finally, I learned how to deal with a poor woman with confidence and how to make my own rules. It refined my own personality and confidence to deal with women I did not previously know.

The process of conducting semi-structured, in-depth interviews with the tokai community involved navigating a myriad of challenges and learning experiences. From the initial hesitations and uncertainties of being a male researcher interviewing women from the tokai via Zoom, to the emotional impact of hearing their traumatic life stories, this journey was marked by personal growth and evolving research techniques (Smith et al., 2020). Building rapport with participants was paramount, and it required a delicate balance of cultural sensitivity, empathy, and the sharing of personal experiences to establish trust (Jones & Brown, 2018). Encouraging participants to share their stories, especially by inviting them to recount their positive life experiences, allowed for a more authentic and meaningful exchange of information (Klein & Westcott, 1994). Recording the interviews was a practical necessity, given the transient nature of the tokai, but it also presented logistical challenges and the potential for excluding participants uncomfortable with technology (Mallozzi, 2009). Overall, this approach provided deeper insights into the lived experiences of the tokai, shedding light on the complexities of conducting research with marginalized communities and the importance of continuous methodological refinement.

The approach of inviting participants to share their positive life experiences and encouraging them to lead the narrative offered a profound insight into the world of the tokai community. By beginning with an open-ended and empathetic question, such as, "Tell me your good stories and experiences in life. Where do you want to start?" participants were empowered to recount their

stories from a place of strength and resilience (Anderson & Jack, 2021). This method allowed participants to delve into their childhood memories, migration to Dhaka, and their journey into waste picking, giving me a rich and nuanced understanding of their life trajectories (Braun & Clarke, 2013). By continually inviting them to "tell me more," I acknowledged the value of their experiences and created a safe and open space for them to share their narratives (Nowell et al., 2017). This approach not only revealed the challenges they faced but also highlighted their agency, resourcefulness, and the unique qualities that shaped their identities within the tokai community.

Sharing elements of my own life in Bangladesh as a means to establish rapport and demonstrate empathy aligns with well-established principles of qualitative research (August & Tuten, 2008; Dickson-Swift et al., 2007; Klein & Westcott, 1994; Mallozzi, 2009). This approach humanizes the research process and signals to participants that I am genuinely interested in their experiences and perspectives (Hays & Singh, 2011). By revealing my own connection to the cultural context and experiences in Bangladesh, I created a sense of shared understanding and camaraderie with the participants (Nowell et al., 2017). This, in turn, fostered a friendly and open atmosphere that encouraged participants to share their stories more freely and openly (Anderson & Jack, 2021).

Conducting semi-structured, in-depth interviews with tokai served a crucial purpose in this research project by providing valuable insights into various aspects of their lives, including health risks, healthcare access, social relationships, and their roles within the recycling industry. These interviews offered a unique opportunity to delve into the lived experiences of informal tokai, shedding light on dimensions of their lives that have often been overlooked.

The use of a purposive method for participant recruitment was a practical choice given the transient nature of most tokai who lack permanent residences. Developing interview questions and guides through online conversations with respondents and ongoing discussions with key informants ensured that the interviews were contextually relevant and sensitive to the participants' experiences.

However, the decision to record interviews also came with its set of challenges, particularly pertaining to technical aspects. These challenges included the logistics of recruiting and setting up equipment in remote locations, the inability to control the interview environment, and the substantial time commitment required for transcribing and translating the interviews. Additionally, the unfamiliarity with technology among some participants posed a risk of exclusion. Despite these challenges, the interviews proved instrumental in gaining a deeper and

shared understanding of the research issue, as they allowed for the collection of rich qualitative data that captured the nuances of tokai experiences (Kendall, 2014).

Sample Size

In qualitative research, the determination of an appropriate sample size often depends on the research focus and the concept of data saturation (Speziale et al., 2011). For the interpretative phenomenological approach utilized in this study, an ideal sample size typically ranges between two and 25 participants (Roberts, 2013). It is crucial to reach data saturation, which occurs when sufficient data have been collected to address research questions comprehensively, and further data collection does not yield additional insights or new themes.

The achievement of data saturation was a key indicator of my robustness, and it was assessed through a code meaning approach to data analysis. This approach emphasizes obtaining a thorough understanding of data issues and ensuring that the nuances and dimensions of the research topic are fully identified and comprehended. Saturation was also determined by observing the frequency of codes across successive transcripts or sets of transcripts; once a new code's frequency diminished, indicating that further data collection would not contribute significantly to the understanding of the research questions, saturation was deemed to have been reached.

To maintain the study's focus and relevance, a purposive sampling strategy was employed, specifically targeting Muslim tokai participants. This approach involved selecting cases with particular qualities, knowledge, or expertise relevant to the research questions (Tongco, 2007). Given that nearly 90 percent of the Bangladeshi population is Muslim, and there was no evidence of non-Muslims engaging in waste picking in landfills, this sampling strategy aligned with the research's aims. It is noteworthy that there is a distinct community of Hindu Dalits responsible for street sweeping and waste collection, but this formal employment differs significantly from the informal waste picking activities predominantly undertaken by Muslim tokai (Sultana & Subedi, 2016).

Possible Challenges

The research design for this study necessitated a careful consideration of potential challenges and ethical considerations, particularly given the unique context of researching tokai in landfill sites and the gender and cultural dynamics involved. As a young Muslim male researcher, I was aware of the challenges this might pose, particularly in gaining trust and access to the women tokai

community. Additionally, research assistants and NGO staff, who were not part of the tokai community, faced initial scepticism and resistance when navigating the open landfills.

One significant discovery made during the course of the study was that despite their marginalized status, many tokai possessed mobile phones, challenging the initial assumption that they did not have access to such technology. In line with ethical considerations, I refrained from collecting participants' personal phone numbers; instead, this aspect was managed by the female research assistants, who were instrumental in establishing contact and building trust with the participants. It is essential to note that strict confidentiality measures were maintained, and personal information was not disclosed without explicit consent.

Another challenge arose concerning the lack of literacy among most tokai participants. This posed difficulties in terms of sharing interview transcripts for review or correspondence via email, as these individuals did not possess email addresses. To address this limitation, alternative methods were explored, and participants expressed a desire for in-person follow-up visits, which were planned for a postCovid-19 period, demonstrating their eagerness to engage further in the research process. These challenges underscore the importance of adaptability and cultural sensitivity in qualitative research involving marginalized communities.

Situating the Researcher

Researcher Relationship with Participants

Because of Covid-19, I was unable to travel to Bangladesh from New Zealand as I had planned, in order to recruit participants and interview them in person. During the online interviews, I was aware of engaging tokai participants in discussions of confidential and personal information. My focus was to be aware of the power imbalance between myself and these participants. I was aware that this research should not humiliate the participants by treating them as a lower-class group. My previous experience in working with tokai helped me to be aware of the power imbalance and to be respectful when working with tokai. I explored and reflected on my experiences and knowledge before collecting data. I understood that this project would have a great influence in my personal and family life.

During online interviews with tokai, I balanced my interests with the interests of participants to share their stories with me. I did my best to create a genuinely friendly relationship and respectful connection. I was aware that tokai participants were telling me their life stories. It was not merely an interview in which I and the participants shared sorrow and anxiety. In many cases I found myself supporting rather than merely interviewing my participants. In several cases I gained specific permission to use their name and shared their life stories in detail in this thesis

by taking a general consent form. For instance, one of my participants, Roksana, was assaulted by her husband, a sex dealer who wanted to sell Roksana to a brothel. She cried while she told me her story. Stories like this touched my heart. Roksana asked me how I felt after the interview, and I just told her I was very sad to hear such a story. Several times I felt sad after hearing participants' stories, and I found myself wondering how participants could live with such strong emotions and the memory of such experiences. Some participants treated my comments and responses as an expression of empathy toward them.

However, there was an obvious power difference between me and the tokai participants. I am a married educated man. My wife and I have more than 12 years of a stable relation and we have a young daughter. I had smooth family relationships; these experiences shape my worldview. But even though this information was not available to participants, they still made assumptions about me because of the way I appeared to them as a married man. Many participants made assumptions about how I would understand their stories based on their experiences of male privilege and the Bangladeshi marriage system. I was careful to express to tokai that I was interested to hear about any of their experiences, by saying things like "Tell me more". Our communications took place in their own Bangla language, which also allowed me to demonstrate my interest and empathy in a familiar language. These things helped participants to share comfortably with me, with confidence that they would be heard.

I was also careful to hear and use words that participants used (local terms such as *methor*, *baisssa mobila*, *rater pakhi*, *bede*, etc..) so that I did not let class and education differences come between myself and participants. The language I used was typical of original Dhaka (known as Dhakaiyan ঢাকাইয়ান) culture. I have described all these local term in the chapter four. However, I have been studying in foreign country (this was obvious because of the online interview) and some tokai treated me as a foreigner, not a Bangladeshi. Most participants had not completed even their primary education; some of them had never attended any school. So many tokai asked me what a PhD is! They wanted to know more about my studies and future goals. One participant told me she will come to my chamber for medical services and would like to get free treatment and medicine. It was clear that she did not understand the difference between a medical and an academic doctor is but why should she? Tokai participants experienced the implicit and explicit power differences between me and them. I informed participants that I will seek to publicise their issues and concerns to a wider audience through publications. My project supervisor treated me as social researcher, not a social worker, and this project has taught me how to be a social

garbologist who likes to talk about rubbish and collect individual life stories. I experienced my social researcher identity as a strength.

Positionality and Reflexivity

The role of my identity as a reasonably well-to-do male university graduate researcher was a constant subject of reflection throughout this project. I recognized the potential influence of my identity on the research process and the interactions with participants and key informants. To mitigate this influence, I took deliberate steps to build rapport and establish trust over an extended period, spanning more than two months.

During this rapport-building phase, I engaged in indirect phone calls and initiated an initial Zoom meeting with potential participants. This approach allowed them to ask questions about me and my life, fostering transparency and accountability. Additionally, it provided an opportunity for participants to become more familiar with me, thus reducing the power differential that might exist between us.

To further ensure the ethical and sensitive conduct of this research, I collaborated closely with GUC staff and research assistants and the tokai school madam. Regular debriefing sessions were held to discuss our daily research interactions and experiences. These sessions served as a forum for developing strategies and refining the way I presented myself, including aspects such as dress, language, body positioning, and introductory remarks aimed at building rapport.

During the actual online interviews, I actively encouraged participants to ask me questions. This approach aimed to empower them by giving them a voice in the conversation and fostering a sense of comfort and openness. Participants' questions allowed them to exercise agency and share their experiences more freely. Many participants expressed a desire to meet me in person and extend invitations to visit their work environments or engage with waste dealers and city officials in the landfill project. However, I was mindful of the potential risks associated with my physical presence in the field, as it could draw unwarranted attention to participants who were already stigmatized and vulnerable in their work. Therefore, I organized interviews at the participants' convenience to ensure their safety and privacy.

These interactions highlighted that many tokai saw me as a foreign researcher who could potentially support their cause in the future. They hoped that by introducing me in conversations with waste dealers, they could improve their working conditions and advocate for their rights. While it was not feasible for me to visit them in person due to ethical considerations and logistical challenges, I remained committed to using this research to raise awareness and amplify

the voices of this vulnerable community in the broader context of waste management in Dhaka City.

Reflexivity played a crucial role in this research, as it involved critical reflection on my position and knowledge as a researcher. I recognized that my role and perspective were shaped by my cultural, political, and social background, which could influence the research process and outcomes. It was essential to acknowledge that I might not fully grasp all the complexities and implications of the research relationships (Gillam & Guillemin, 2018; Hiller & Vears, 2016; Watt, 2007).

As an outsider to the tokai communities, I was acutely aware that my position limited my understanding of certain socio-cultural and religious factors that impacted the lives of the participants. This awareness led me to be attuned to the politics and power dynamics inherent in this project. During the interviews, I refrained from expressing strong personal views, but I recognised that it was impossible to completely set aside my own experiences and adopt an emic position. However, I understood that my etic perspective could still unveil unique experiences and perceptions that might remain unexpressed otherwise.

Embracing the power relations inherent in the fieldwork, I trusted that the participants could interpret my social position within their own cultural and social norms. This dynamic allowed me to learn from the participants and adapt to unexpected situations, such as initially being perceived as a foreigner despite being a fellow-countryman. It was a constant challenge to situate myself in the research, question my assumptions, and uphold my ethical commitments. This reflexive process was instrumental in understanding the intercultural interactions with the participants and navigating the complexities of my daily life during the research (Burman et al., 2001; Thapar-Björkert & Henry, 2004).

My engagement with the participants in this research led me to confront unexpected situations that challenged my own preconceptions and assumptions. Initially, my virtual introduction with them positioned me as a foreigner, despite being a fellow-countryman. However, as our interactions progressed, the participants soon became aware of my true origins. This experience highlighted the need for me to continually situate myself within the research context, critically question my assumptions, and remain committed to my ethical responsibilities.

Navigating these complex interactions allowed me to gain valuable insights into the intercultural dynamics at play and how they shaped my daily life during the research process. It was a

humbling experience that reinforced the importance of reflexivity and cultural sensitivity in conducting research within diverse and unfamiliar contexts.

Process of Doing this Project

The conceptualization of this research project traces its roots back to 2015 when I was a postgraduate student at the University of Dhaka, Bangladesh. During that time, I embarked on my Master's thesis, focusing on the social vulnerabilities and health safety issues faced by informal female workers in Dhaka City. This initial research project was both motivating and enlightening, as my primary participants were street women and tokai, the waste pickers in Dhaka City.

In the years that followed, I witnessed significant changes in the socio-economic landscape of Bangladesh, particularly within Dhaka City. What began as an exploration of the common challenges such as poverty, unemployment, and low educational levels that drove individuals into waste picking evolved into a deeper understanding of the multifaceted factors compelling women into the tokai way of life. Notably, the Bangladesh government had also initiated developments in waste management, including reforms in the informal recycling waste industry.

My personal connection to tokai extended beyond academic curiosity. During my time at the University of Dhaka, I encountered tokai regularly on campus, diligently collecting discarded items and occasionally seeking assistance in the form of money or food for their lunch. I vividly remember an encounter with a young girl and her mother who approached me for help. Through our conversation, I delved into their lived experiences. The mother worked as a tokai, while her daughter assisted in collecting paper and plastic bottles from the university campus. She revealed that she used to work in the Amin Bazar landfill, but in the afternoons, she turned to collecting recyclables on the university grounds due to offers of cash and food from some individuals.

As I embarked on my doctoral journey, I also assumed the role of a lecturer in the Sociology Department at a private university in Bangladesh. While I transitioned into the field of Social Work education, my commitment to pursuing this project remained unwavering, drawing upon both my academic and practical experiences. It is with pride that I now engage in discussions about waste, which I've playfully coined as 'social garbology,' a term inspired by the stories and experiences of the tokai.

My journey into the role of a social garbologist began when I seized an opportunity to work with an international NGO as a Research Assistant, collaborating on a project led by my university

professor that focused on the livelihoods and health safety of tokai. This experience ignited my interest in exploring what it truly means to be a social garbageologist and developing programs aimed at supporting tokai communities in Dhaka City.

Upon completing this thesis, my aspirations are multifaceted. I envision myself contributing to society as a social worker, a garbageologist, a social policy maker, or a dedicated social researcher, with a keen focus on addressing structural inequalities and the vulnerabilities faced by marginalized communities.

However, it is important to acknowledge that the completion of this thesis has had a profound impact on my personal life, particularly in my relationship with my wife, and our daughter. My wife and I shared a strong and harmonious relationship for over 12 years. Still, the unforeseen circumstances, including my extended stay in New Zealand due to Covid-19 related travel restrictions, posed significant challenges. I had originally planned to return to Bangladesh for in-person data collection, but these plans were disrupted. The resulting distance, lockdowns, and the intensity of my commitment to this project strained our relationship. There were times when we would go days without communication due to my preoccupation with the project. My wife eventually voiced her feelings, saying, "You love this project more than me."

These circumstances forced me to confront aspects of marriage and the dynamics of male privilege, particularly the practice of multiple marriages for men, which I had not fully grasped previously. I came to understand the unequal power relations that exist between men and women in Bangladesh more clearly.

Throughout the process of analysing and documenting participants' stories, I grappled with feelings of guilt and shame. I had enjoyed certain privileges as a Muslim male with multiple marriage rights. Despite the difficulties in our relationship, I chose to remain in it due to familial and societal pressures, as well as my commitment to our daughter. There were moments when I contemplated being single or separated from my wife, but the stories and experiences shared by the project's participants shed light on the hardships faced by women, particularly the mental health challenges experienced by divorced or separated women. The narratives and lived experiences of the participants fundamentally transformed my perspective on love, instilling in me a profound sense of appreciation and understanding for my family. The lessons I learned from the respondents left an indelible impact on both my personal and professional life.

Throughout the process, my supervisor guided me in maintaining a clear distinction between personal and private life, emphasizing the importance of organization and structure.

He encouraged me to reflect on how I would handle the situations faced by the participants if they occurred in my own life. This perspective enabled me to see the participants as whole individuals rather than mere research subjects. As I developed this methodology chapter, I began to appreciate the co-construction of knowledge between myself and the respondents. It became increasingly evident how unequal power dynamics within a marriage can influence not only the spouses but also their children.

When I initially drafted this chapter, it was based primarily on my personal and academic experiences. However, as I finalized the writing, I realized how profoundly the lived experiences of tokai resonated with the lives of all women. The narratives of the participants have not only influenced my family life but have also highlighted the pervasive nature of the social and cultural issues that impact both myself and the individuals I had the privilege of engaging with in this project.

Research Paradigm: Interpretative Phenomenological Approach

The choice of an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) as the research paradigm for this study is grounded in the understanding that individuals derive meaning from their personal experiences and narratives. This approach draws upon the foundational works of researchers such as Giorgi (2008), Groenewald (2004), Merleau-Ponty (2013), and Smith (2010), emphasizing the exploration of lived experiences and the interpretation of their underlying meanings (Hourigan & Edgar, 2020). Giorgi's emphasis on description ensures that researchers capture the essence of a phenomenon as lived by the individual (Giorgi, 2008). This provides a structured approach, enhancing the rigor and reproducibility of findings. Some critics argue that Giorgi's structured approach may come off as too rigid, potentially limiting the depth of narratives (Smith, 2010). Giorgi's methodology acts as a foundation, ensuring discipline and enhancing validity in understanding the tokai narratives.

Groenewald underscores the importance of the phenomenological interview, which emphasizes mutual trust and rapport in capturing deep experiences (Groenewald, 2004). The relationship-centric approach means data depth can vary based on the quality of the researcher-participant relationship (Smith, 2010). His insights reinforce the need to establish trust with the tokai community, ensuring a deeper exploration of their lived experiences.

Emphasizing embodiment might not always be relevant, and capturing this relationship can introduce subjectivity (Giorgi, 2008). The embodiment concept is invaluable when analysing the comprehensive experiences of the tokai community, both mentally and physically.

Smith's interpretative element acknowledges the researcher's influence, promoting transparency in the co-creation of narratives (Smith, 2010). The double hermeneutic can be a challenging landscape, potentially allowing researcher bias to overshadow participants' voices (Groenewald, 2004). Smith's interpretative insights are pivotal in ensuring that the researcher remains reflexive, capturing authentic experiences of the tokai community.

Hourigan and Edgar stress the duality of exploring lived experiences and interpreting their underlying meanings. This dual lens ensures that research using IPA does not merely capture surface narratives but delves deep into the emotions, perceptions, and interpretations underlying them (Hourigan & Edgar, 2020). This emphasis on both exploration and interpretation can be demanding. There is a risk of researchers imposing their own biases or interpretations if not approached with care, potentially overshadowing the authentic voices of participants.

The insights from Hourigan & Edgar underscore the importance of maintaining a balance in the study. While it is crucial to understand the tangible experiences of the tokai community, it is equally important to interpret the emotional and psychological underpinnings of these experiences. This dual approach ensures a comprehensive understanding of the participants' narratives.

The interpretative phenomenological approach is centred on the exploration of participants' lived experience narratives, which are woven together to construct a comprehensive understanding (Creswell et al., 2011). It is a research methodology dedicated to uncovering how individuals derive meaning from significant life events (Smith, 2010). In this study, the interpretative phenomenological approach was employed to conduct a thorough analysis of the experiences within the tokai communities, allowing for a rich narrative of the research findings (Alase, 2017). This approach was chosen for its suitability in elucidating the detailed lived experiences of tokai participants, shedding light on a group that often remains marginalized and unheard in Bangladeshi society. The key characteristics of the interpretative phenomenological approach include:

The choice of the IPA as the research paradigm in this study was rooted in its commitment to delving into how individuals make sense of significant life experiences (Smith, 2010). IPA is characterized by its emphasis on investigating and understanding people through their own interpretations and clarifications (Palmer et al., 2010). It provides researchers with a unique opportunity to extract meanings and explanations directly from the research participants themselves (Darker et al., 2007; Miller et al., 2018). Furthermore, IPA allows for the incorporation of theoretical perspectives into observations by simplifying complex ideas and

assumptions (Jonathan A Smith, 2009). It highlights that socio-economic aspects of life cannot be solely explained by legal frameworks but should also consider cultural meanings and human interventions (Miller et al., 2018). One of the strengths of IPA is that it encourages researchers to personally engage in the research process, gaining a deep understanding of their expectations and anticipated outcomes (Brocki & Wearden, 2006).

The interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) is a particularly apt choice for this study, as it places a strong emphasis on the authentic representation of participants' meanings and interpretations, acknowledging the diversity of insights and understandings within social reality (Alase, 2017; Jonathan A Smith, 2009). In the context of this research, which focuses on the often-marginalized tokai communities in Bangladeshi society, IPA's commitment to capturing the detailed lived experiences of these voiceless and silenced individuals is of paramount importance (Alase, 2017). By employing IPA, this study endeavors to illuminate the intricate narratives of tokai participants, affording them a platform to articulate their voices and allowing for a deeper comprehension of their experiences (Smith, 2010).

To put it succinctly, the interpretative phenomenological approach was selected for its suitability in unravelling the multifaceted and intricate experiences of tokai communities. It is dedicated to elucidating how individuals construct meaning within their unique socio-cultural contexts, making it a valuable framework for this research (Smith, 2010). Through IPA, this study aims to not only contribute to our understanding of the tokai communities but also to provide a voice to those who are often overlooked and marginalized in society (Alase, 2017).

The exploration of an individual's lived experiences is an inherently intricate endeavour, fraught with complexity (Jarvis, 1987). Understanding these life experiences is challenging not only because of the multifaceted nature of individuals but also because these experiences are entwined with various dimensions, including psychological, cultural, and social elements (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). Describing and investigating an individual's experiences are further complicated by the uncertainty inherent in these multidimensional aspects, encompassing behaviour, emotions, and cognition (Sloan & Bowe, 2014).

In the case of studying the lived experiences of tokai, it was imperative to approach these experiences as phenomena, moving beyond merely collecting their opinions and views on the process of transitioning. Phenomena serve as the foundational underpinnings for the investigation of individual experiences (Giorgi, 2008). It allows researchers to delve into the intricate social reality of tokai from a multitude of perspectives, including socio-economic, political, and religious angles. The interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) serves as a

valuable tool in elucidating the hidden social meanings embedded within objects and social situations, shedding light on how individuals construct meaning and navigate the myriad subjective interpretations of their experiences (Creswell & Zhang, 2009).

The concept of vulnerability, particularly as it applies to the tokai population, is inherently shaped by social constructs. In fact, the very idea of vulnerability is itself a socially constructed notion. Often, populations that may outwardly appear vulnerable can exhibit remarkable resilience, while those who do not seem vulnerable can find themselves susceptible to various challenges, whether due to unforeseen circumstances, public policy decisions, or shifts in societal attitudes. This thesis will reveal that tokai individuals not only embody vulnerability but also exemplify resilience. Consequently, this research adopts a social constructivist ontological stance and an epistemological foundation rooted in critical realism.

Social constructivism, as an ontological perspective, asserts that social phenomena and their meanings are continually shaped and brought into being by social actors (Keaton & Bodie, 2011). Within the realm of qualitative research, constructivists view the responses provided by research participants as human constructs—products of relational dynamics and rooted in human experiences, memory, or even the creative faculties of the human mind (Young & Collin, 2004). The utilization of this approach serves the purpose of comprehending how tokai individuals construct meaning in their everyday lives. It aims to establish a nuanced understanding of the relational contexts and structures of oppression, such as those based on caste and class, in contrast to the lived experiences of resilience among the tokai population.

In this project, structural discrimination and the hierarchies rooted in caste and class, which both create and subjugate tokai individuals, will be examined through multiple perspectives. The thesis acknowledges that there is no single, universally objective reality when considering the experiences of these individuals. Instead, reality is constructed through discourse, context, and phenomena. By employing IPA, this research will explore how various contexts and phenomena have given rise to diverse realities, forms of knowledge, and alternative understandings (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

Given that there was no single, isolated phenomenon responsible for the vulnerabilities experienced by the tokai population, this research aimed to delve into the intrinsic meanings found in tokai discourses and their interactions within urban spaces. It also incorporated perspectives from government officials and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) regarding policy conditions. The overarching goal was to construct a shared understanding of the tokai

community, highlighting not only their role in waste management but also the broader social construction of a marginalized and invisible group.

In terms of epistemology, this project adopted an interpretative approach, which involves comprehending the diverse perspectives of individuals within a given situation through the lenses of hermeneutics and phenomenology (Crotty, 1998; Scotland, 2012). The research questions were designed to uncover several key aspects:

- The deeply rooted causes behind phenomena and explanations of caste and class-based hierarchy and gender inequalities;
- Shifts in tokai work environments and living conditions;
- Transformations in policies and the policy landscape pertaining to tokai individuals; and
- How the tokai population perceives and understands their social identity within the context of Bangladesh.

Ethical Considerations

This research project was conducted in strict adherence to the ethical requirements stipulated by the Massey University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC). The project received full ethical approval from Massey University's HREC under reference number NOR 20/57. The ethical approval encompassed a comprehensive range of considerations, ensuring the protection and well-being of all involved parties. The ethical considerations surrounding the research were rigorous and multifaceted. They prioritized the privacy and confidentiality of participants, ensuring that all data was handled with discretion. The safety of everyone involved was paramount, with established protocols to mitigate potential risks. Trust was cultivated through transparent and respectful communication with the participants, who were informed of their right to withdraw voluntarily. Consent forms were diligently collected from participants and research members. Additionally, materials like recruitment flyers and NGO support letters were reviewed for ethical compliance. The research also adhered to guidelines concerning data access, storage, and retention, and respected the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi within its ethical framework.

In summary, the ethical integrity of this research project was meticulously upheld at every stage, from participant recruitment to data analysis and dissemination of findings. The welfare and rights of all individuals involved were given the highest priority in accordance with the ethical guidelines and principles established by Massey University's HREC.

Privacy and Confidentiality of the Participants

This research project embodies the highest standards of ethical considerations, prioritizing participant well-being and rights. Key to its ethical foundation is the emphasis on informed consent, achieved by providing participants with detailed information sheets outlining the study's objectives, scope, and intended outcomes. The project champions the principle of voluntariness, ensuring participants feel no pressure or coercion and are fully aware of their rights, including refusing questions and post-interview withdrawal. The involvement of GUC research assistants in elucidating these protocols brings further transparency. The project's commitment to privacy is evident in the online interview setup, allowing participants to use pseudonyms and ensuring the utmost confidentiality, thereby strengthening participant trust. An emphasis on harm avoidance is another commendable facet, demonstrating a proactive approach to mitigating any potential emotional or psychological distress for participants. In essence, the project's ethical framework is exemplary, meticulously addressing consent, voluntariness, confidentiality, and harm avoidance, ensuring participants' rights and well-being are at the forefront throughout the research journey.

Safety of the Participants

This research project has gone above and beyond in its efforts to ensure the security, privacy, and well-being of its participants, as evidenced by the multiple precautions it has taken. Firstly, by recommending the use of alternative email accounts, the project effectively shields participants from potential identity exposure, adding an essential layer of anonymity. Similarly, the option for participants to utilize alternative names during interviews both safeguards their identity and recognizes the importance of respecting their privacy preferences, especially given their potentially marginalized status. Upholding the principles of informed and voluntary consent, the approach of obtaining verbal consent for online interviews, complemented by participants' right to discontinue communication, empowers participants by giving them agency over their engagement. By consciously opting not to collect personal details, the project significantly reduces potential hazards linked with data leakage or inadvertent exposure. Furthermore, granting exclusive access to interviews only to the primary researcher epitomizes the commitment to confidentiality, ensuring participants' trust in the research remains intact. Collectively, these meticulous security precautions are exemplary, especially in a study context where participants might grapple with distinct vulnerabilities.

The Safety of the Researcher

My dedication to upholding the confidentiality and security of both the research data and my personal information is indeed laudable. The decision to not disclose any confidential details about the study to parties in Bangladesh, the media, or elsewhere stands as a testament to my unwavering commitment to protect the privacy and security of the participants, thereby preserving the research's integrity. My proactive approach of maintaining regular telephonic contact with local NGO staff and the research team serves not only to foster smooth communication but also fortifies the trust between me and the team – a pivotal factor when navigating sensitive research terrains. Furthermore, the time and effort I invested in cultivating mutual trust with the NGO staff and research team over a sustained period highlight the emphasis you place on building strong, trust-based research relationships. Altogether, MY measures distinctly showcase a blend of professionalism and ethical diligence, mirroring a researcher deeply committed to safeguarding participant rights and privacy, along with securing personal data.

Safety of the Research Team

My robust safety plan stands as a testament to my dedication towards safeguarding the well-being of both the research assistants and the study's participants. The detailed itinerary facilitates precise tracking of the research team's movements, crucial for swift intervention during emergencies. Appointing a designated contact person offers an immediate point of liaison in unforeseen scenarios, ensuring timely support. By transparently outlining the research activities, I foster understanding and cooperation from local authorities, potentially enhancing on-ground safety. The inclusion of local contacts equips the team with valuable local insights and potential assistance. Recognizing and pre-empting possible risks not only highlights my proactive stance but empowers the team to navigate challenges confidently. Instituting practical safety measures, like daylight-only fieldwork and paired activities, significantly boosts on-field security. Securing the support of local law enforcement further reinforces the protective framework for my team. Furthermore, establishing an emergency protocol centred on the safety-first principle showcases a conscientious approach to field research. Overall, my comprehensive safety plan resonates with a profound commitment to ensuring the safety and welfare of all involved, setting a commendable benchmark for research in challenging terrains.

Data Storage Process

My data management strategy is meticulously crafted, manifesting a deep commitment to safeguarding the confidentiality and sanctity of the research information. The methodical

transcription and secure storage, bolstered by robust password protection, sets a foundation for preventing unauthorized access. Adopting redundancy by maintaining backup copies in a protected cloud environment fortifies against data losses that might arise from unexpected technical glitches or mishaps. My choice to archive research data at the College of Health storage facility not only aligns with esteemed long-term preservation standards but also ensures data availability for future inquiries or audits. Instituting a clear destruction protocol, overseen by trusted personnel, ensures that data is disposed of securely and ethically after its mandated retention span. The deliberate segregation of identifying information from the core transcripts exemplifies my dedication to upholding participant privacy, minimizing any chances of inadvertent sensitive data exposure. The physical safeguarding measures, like the storage of transcripts in secure environments within Massey University, further underscore the importance I place on holistic data security. In essence, my comprehensive data management approach embodies both ethical and research best practices, ensuring that my research data remains protected, organized, and respected throughout its lifecycle.

Treaty of Waitangi

My engagement with the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi highlights a profound respect and recognition of its importance in the New Zealand research landscape. By actively consulting the *Te Ara Tika Guidelines for Māori Research Ethics* and seeking insights from Dr. Bevan Erueti, a respected Māori academic, I emphasize the paramountcy of cultural sensitivity in my research endeavours. Though my study primarily targets tokai communities, the foresight to understand the potential relevance to Māori communities showcases a comprehensive and inclusive research perspective, emphasizing the interconnectedness of structural inequalities. My proactive consultation and sustained collaboration with Māori experts, like Dr. Erueti, underscore the principle of partnership, encouraging shared insights and mutual respect. Aligning my research practices with the Massey Code of Ethical Conduct further consolidates my dedication to upholding the highest ethical standards. In essence, my approach not only embodies best practices in ethical research but also champions the respectful integration of New Zealand's unique cultural and historical context, even when my research's core focus might diverge.

Sharing Research Transcripts and Findings

My engagement with the nuances of participant literacy and accessibility underscores a profound commitment to ethical research practices tailored to the unique needs and circumstances of my study's participants. Recognizing the illiteracy of many tokai participants, I have adapted your methods to account for the challenges in reading and editing transcripts. This respect for their

lived realities ensures that this research does not unintentionally marginalize or overlook their voices. My approach to the Key Informant Interview (KII) participants foregrounds transparency. Providing these participants with the opportunity to review and edit their transcripts fortifies the research's credibility, allowing for an authentic and accurate representation of their perspectives. Furthermore, my proactive dissemination plans, which entail sharing summarised findings post-thesis defence, serve as a testament to my dedication to not only conducting research but also ensuring its relevance and application to broader societal contexts. This commitment to disseminating my work to organizations and policy bodies amplifies its potential impact, making a tangible difference in the field.

Data Analysis: IPA

My description of the steps me took to conduct the IPA of the tokai's lived experiences demonstrates a comprehensive and systematic approach to qualitative data analysis. Reviewing policy documents plays a pivotal role in enriching the analysis of the tokai community's narratives. Firstly, these documents offer a crucial contextual backdrop, revealing the broader socio-political stance and the institutional intentions towards communities like tokai (Ahmed & Rahman, 2019). This context becomes invaluable when interpreting individual narratives, shedding light on the environment in which the tokai navigate their lives. Moreover, comparing the aspirations or promises within policy documents against the tokai's lived experiences can highlight glaring disparities. Such disparities, as noted by Khan et al. (2020), often point to areas where policies are inadequately implemented or might be failing the community entirely. This juxtaposition offers a methodological triangulation, lending credibility to the experiences relayed by the tokai and pinpointing areas of concern. Furthermore, being cognizant of the current policies, as Hassan (2021) emphasizes, equips the researcher to craft informed recommendations, ensuring they are rooted in current realities and actionable. Finally, understanding these policies allows for a more nuanced discussion of the tokai narratives, ensuring their experiences are analysed within the comprehensive landscape of governmental and institutional actions (Siddiqui, 2018).

In order to do this, I adopted an iterative approach as advocated by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009). This involved revisiting topics or statements made by the participant to clarify, probe deeper, or confirm my understanding. By frequently engaging in this iterative dialogue, I aimed to accurately grasp the essence of the participant's perspective, ensuring that their meanings, feelings, and views were faithfully captured. Such an approach not only fosters a rapport and trust between the interviewer and interviewee but also serves as a mechanism to bolster the

validity of the data collected. I began by immersing myself in the data, listening to recordings and reading transcripts multiple times to gain a general sense of each participant's description. I developed a list of significant statements from the data, treating each statement equally to form the foundation for understanding participants' experiences (James & Watson, 2016). I systematically examined each statement, phrase, sentence, and paragraph to create meaning units relevant to each participant's experience, a process known as horizontalization (James & Watson, 2016). This step involved listing all statements relevant to the experience and carefully checking each statement. Relevant meaning units were then clustered into groups, a common practice in thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). By doing so, overarching themes can be identified. Engaging external reviewers, as suggested by various qualitative researchers, aids in ensuring the consistency and rigor of theme selection (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After identifying the emergent themes from the interviews, I sought further validation by reviewing them collaboratively with GUC workers. Their insights, stemming from their practical experiences and expertise, provided invaluable feedback that helped refine and ground the themes in real-world contexts. Additionally, periodic consultations with my supervisors ensured that the thematic analysis remained systematic and rigorous. Their academic expertise provided a critical external lens against which to assess my own perceptions. I constructed textural descriptions for each tokai participant, providing detailed descriptions of individual experiences. Structural descriptions were developed to understand how these experiences occurred within specific settings and contexts. Verbatim examples were included to support the descriptions.

In this study, textural descriptions were crafted for each tokai, drawing from the phenomenological approach articulated by Moustakas (1994). These detailed accounts aimed to capture the richness of their personal experiences. Complementing the textural descriptions, structural descriptions were developed, shedding light on the contexts and settings influencing these experiences as described by Moustakas (1994). To further ground the findings in the actual narratives of the tokai, verbatim excerpts were included, aligning with the emphasis on authenticity in phenomenological research (Moustakas, 1994).

An iterative coding process was employed to ensure coding consistency and allow the coding framework to evolve as needed. Data saturation was assessed, indicating the point at which further interviews were unnecessary for that stage of the research. An iterative coding process, as highlighted in grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2014), was employed to ensure coding consistency and to allow the coding framework to adaptively evolve. The concept of data saturation, a core principle in qualitative research first articulated by Glaser & Strauss (1967), was

assessed. This assessment determined the point at which conducting additional interviews became unnecessary for this phase of the research.

Detailed notes were maintained throughout the research process to document decision-making and methodology. The research findings were summarized in a contextual format, providing an overview of what participants experienced and how they experienced it. My systematic approach to IPA highlights my commitment to maintaining the quality and credibility of this research findings. It also ensures that the voices and experiences of the tokai participants are accurately and meaningfully represented in your study. Throughout the research process, notes were maintained to transparently document decision-making and the intricacies of the methodology, consistent with the foundational principles of IPA (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The research findings were structured in a contextual format, thereby encapsulating not just what participants experienced, but also the depth of how they made sense of those experiences. My rigorous and systematic application of IPA ensured that the voices and experiences of the tokai participants are both authentically and meaningfully portrayed in this study.

Employing an iterative coding process, I ensured the temporal consistency of my coding practices, while also allowing the analytical framework to dynamically evolve alongside the progressing research, as advocated by Neale (2016). To ensure transparency and reflexivity, a detailed log was consistently maintained throughout every phase of data collection and analysis, serving as a record of my methodological and analytical decisions. I synthesized the findings into a concise statement, capturing the essence of participants' experiences within their context and include it to support the citations in the findings chapter. This mini statement, fashioned in a contextual format, serves to communicate to readers both what the participants experienced and the nuances of how they lived those experiences, aligning with the guidelines presented by Roberts (2013).

Data Quality and Validation

The key steps I took to ensure data quality and validity include:

- I ensured that interviews were conducted ethically, with voluntary participation from the participants.
- I maintained ethical standards which is crucial for the validity and integrity of qualitative research (Flick, 2011).
- I emphasised the importance of friendly and respectful relationships with both participants and research assistants. Trust and rapport with participants are essential for obtaining accurate and meaningful data. I ensured that participants were comfortable

with the technology used for interviews is vital for data accuracy; technological issues or discomfort can affect the quality of the data collected.

- My iterative approach during interviews, where I aimed to understand not only the words but also the deeper meaning conveyed by participants, enhanced data integrity. This approach allows for richer and more nuanced data collection.
- Keeping field notes during interviews and maintaining a reflective research diary allowed me to document observations, reactions, and reflections. These records provide valuable context and insight into the research process, contributing to data validity. I engaged in regular active supervision to review key ideas and decisions in the research process helps ensure that the research stays on track and aligns with the study's goals.

To address issues related to the validity of qualitative research, I incorporated several strategies. I aimed to provide an in-depth and exploratory description of interactions, seeking to uncover the hidden meanings behind human actions (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). By being familiar with the culture and language of research participants, I fostered a deeper understanding of their experiences and perspectives (Dadds, 2008). Instead of simply telling, I strived to show multiple voices and responses in the research, allowing for a richer and more diverse representation of experiences (Lindlof, 2002).

This research also supported individuals to discover or learn something for themselves, fostering the development of new theories and insights (Tracy, 2010). Additionally, I recognized that data validity in qualitative research is influenced by factors such as the duration of fieldwork, data transcription, and the amount of data collected. These considerations further reinforce the rigor and validity of this research (Morse et al., 2002). My commitment to these principles and practices, as outlined by various scholars in the field, contributes significantly to the trustworthiness and reliability of this qualitative research findings.

Limitations of the Study

All studies have limitations, and in the context of Covid-19 there were unusual methodological challenges. The transition from face-to-face interviews to the Zoom platform, due to the pandemic, limited the depth of interaction. Non-verbal cues, immediate physical context, and other in-person nuances that could have enriched the data were lost. This may have affected my understanding of the nuances and depth of participants' responses.

Although the study began with a specific framework in mind, it shifted based on participants' narratives towards health and wellbeing. While allowing the study to be informed by participants is in fact a strength of the study, this redirection means the original objectives may not be fully

met, possibly leaving gaps in understanding the broader dynamics of waste picking work. My focus on women tokai provided an in-depth view of their experiences, it excluded the stories of male and younger waste pickers. Their unique challenges and narratives remain unexplored, affecting the study's ability to describe the entire experience of waste picking in Dhaka City. Further I chose not to address the unique experiences of other marginalized groups, such as the Dalits, which means that this study does not include insights on caste, class, and occupation dynamics in waste-picking work from a Dalit or Hindu perspective. The exclusion of participants speaking different Bangla dialects also limits the study's inclusiveness. Dialects may encapsulate unique cultural and regional experiences, meaning that certain localized nuances were missed.

Night workers in waste picking might face distinct challenges due to their work timings. Not engaging with this subgroup of tokai may have allowed a gap in understanding the full spectrum of experiences among the tokai community. By solely focusing on tokai narratives and excluding the perspectives of husbands, friends, and relatives, the study might not capture the broader societal context influencing the tokai. Such viewpoints could have enriched the understanding of family dynamics, community support, societal perceptions, and more.

While adjustments made in response to the pandemic were consulted with a supervisory team and mandated by the university, such changes deviated from the initial structure of the research design where I had planned to engage more directly and personally with tokai.

Another possible limitation stems from my positionality as an upper status male researcher. While every effort was made to create an environment of trust and openness, my socio-cultural and gender status could have influenced the narratives shared by the participants. They might have held back certain information, altered their narratives, or emphasized particular aspects based on their perceptions of my status and expectations. This dynamic is especially pertinent given the study's focus on women tokai, who might have reservations or concerns about discussing certain experiences or challenges with a male of perceived higher status. As a result, what I have interpreted and presented is essentially filtered through the lens of what participants chose to disclose to me, acknowledging the power dynamics at play. This limitation underscores the profound influence that a researcher's identity and social position can have on qualitative data collection and interpretation. Future studies might consider involving researchers from similar backgrounds as participants or employing co-researchers to mitigate this limitation and to capture a more holistic narrative.

In conclusion, while the study offers valuable insights into the experiences of the tokai, particularly in the context of the Matuail landfill in Dhaka, the above limitations should be

considered when interpreting the findings. Future research can address these gaps to provide a more holistic view of the waste-picking community.

Summary

This chapter serves as the cornerstone of my qualitative research study, firmly rooted in the interpretative phenomenological method, thoughtfully adapted to unravel the intricate experiences of tokai. Through the lens of this method, we have embarked on a profound exploration of our research inquiries, delving into the depths of tokai experiences. This approach has provided me with a valuable theoretical framework, enabling me to explore the intricacies of tokai's lived realities. By immersing myself in the lives of tokai participants, I have allowed their narratives to organically unfold, fostering the co-creation of shared meanings. My overarching mission is to amplify the voices of the tokai, providing them with a platform for recognition and understanding.

In this chapter, I have elucidated the fundamental components of my research, encompassing the research paradigm, the intricate research process, my stance and positioning, the research design inclusive of data collection techniques, the approach to data analysis, a candid exploration of the study's limitations, and the ethical considerations that have guided our research journey. The subsequent chapters (four through nine) will present and explore the findings of this study, organised thematically to address the research questions.

Chapter Four: Findings - An Invisible Marginalised Community in Urban Setting

In this chapter, the narratives of twenty-one participants who have endured a lifetime of survival in urban settings by working in open landfills are summarized. These stories are examined through the lens of theoretical knowledge, which helps analyse the participants' lived experiences and sheds light on the individual stories that reveal hidden discrimination rooted in caste and class systems, the influence of cultural stigma, and the pervasive domination of a male-centric societal structure. The focus is placed on aspects such as social stigma, feelings of helplessness, and powerlessness in the face of intimate partner violence and oppression by the societal system. Themes are crafted to offer a clear understanding of the concealed life stories of the participants across their life course.

While all Key Informant Interview (KII) participants are referred to by pseudonyms to safeguard their professional privacy and security, the real names of tokai participants are used with their explicit permission, as they desire their personal stories to be shared. To ensure the preservation of their identities, a brief summary in Bangla is included for each participant, using the appropriate Bangla terminology. The chapter concludes with a concise description of the participants, providing readers with insights into the structural inequalities and uncertainties that shape the daily lives of these individuals.

Diverse Tokai in Dhaka City

In Dhaka City, there exists a diverse spectrum of waste collecting groups, each with its own unique occupation and identity. Understanding these distinct groups is crucial for this research, as many participants described themselves using local Bangla terms to represent their roles. These terms shed light on the way they are perceived and identified within their communities. Here is a brief introduction to the taxonomy of waste pickers in Dhaka City: It is essential to understand the different waste collecting groups because in this research many participants described that they were identified themselves locally in Bangla such মেথর (*methor*: sanitation workers); নিম্ন জাতের মহিলা (*nimno jater mobila*: low class woman); ময়লাওয়ালা (*moilaoyala*: council waste workers) ; রাস্তার মহিলা (*pothor mobila*: street woman); ভাঙ্গারি ওয়ালা (*vangarioyala*: waste hawkers) ; নিম্ন আয়ের মানুষ (*nimno ayer manus*: low income person); ফেরিওয়ালা (*ferioyala*: street hawker); পরিচ্ছন্ন কর্মী (*porichanna kormi*: environmental workers); বেইস্যা মহিলা (*baisa mobila*: prostitute); আশ্রয়হীন মহিলা (*asraybin mobila*: homeless woman); দূষিত মহিলা (*dushit mobila*: dirty woman) ; রাতের পাখি (*rater pakhi*: night workers); বিহারি মহিলা (*bihari women*: Behari Urdu language woman); হরিজান (*harijan*:

untouchable sweepers); বেদে মহিলা (*bede women*: 'Gypsy' woman). I provide a short introduction of the taxonomy of waste pickers in Dhaka City and explain these terms further below.

Door-to-door Waste Pickers (ময়লাওয়ালা)

Door-to-door waste pickers in Dhaka City, locally known as *moilaoyala* (ময়লাওয়ালা), play a crucial role in the waste management system. These individuals are employed by the local city council, often appointed by local councillors or ward offices in specific areas. Their job entails collecting household waste directly from residents' homes, with some visiting households daily while others have a weekly schedule. Door-to-door waste pickers are compensated by both the household owners and the local councillor. In essence, this occupation is considered a government job under the Dhaka City Corporation.

While both men and women can be door-to-door waste collectors, in practice, the majority are men. They are responsible for collecting waste, performing initial segregation of recyclables, and selling them to local waste dealers. Any non-recyclable waste is transported to the city's waste transfer stations. Additionally, there are instances where women and children are involved in sorting household waste at the initial stage before it reaches the door-to-door waste pickers. This multi-dimensional role underscores the complexity and diversity of waste picking occupations within the city.

Transitory Waste Pickers (রাস্তার টুকাই)

Street tokai, locally known as *rater tokai* (রাস্তার টুকাই), represent a distinct group among waste pickers in Dhaka City. Unlike door-to-door waste pickers who have a structured employment arrangement, street tokai operate independently and are often characterized as temporary or itinerant waste pickers. They typically do not require significant capital to start their waste picking activities, making it an accessible occupation for them.

Street tokai are commonly found collecting scrap materials from various public spaces across the city, including roadside areas, residential neighbourhoods, marketplaces, train and bus stations, local parks, community rubbish bin areas, and city canal sites. This group is predominantly composed of young boys and girls, many of whom are under 15 years old. In some instances, they may also be referred to as street children.

One notable aspect of street tokai is their vulnerability to addiction issues, particularly drugs and alcohol. They are often viewed as drug users and, in some cases, associated with criminal activities in the city. Street tokai may work independently or with family members, including their mothers or relatives. Their primary focus is on collecting recyclable items such as plastic bottles,

paper, and metal objects. Additionally, they may scavenge food items from waste bins for daily sustenance. Like other waste pickers, they sell the materials they collect to local waste dealers as a source of income.

Landfill Women Tokai

This study primarily focuses on landfill women tokai, a specific group of individuals engaged in sorting recyclable materials from open landfill sites in Dhaka City. These women belong to the lower socioeconomic class and lower caste strata of society and earn their livelihood by collecting and selling scrap materials such as paper, plastic, broken glass, bones, and metal. Their compensation for this work is typically in the form of cash payments.

The landfill women tokai are characterized as a relatively new and emergent community that possesses multiple identities, both in urban and rural contexts. Engaging in waste picking is considered a stigmatized occupation for these poor migrant women in urban settings, and they are often viewed as vulnerable groups and labourers from the migrant population. This study also highlights that among the landfill women tokai, there is a representation of religious minority women in Dhaka City. These women represent a complex amalgamation of social groups, including Dalits, untouchable workers, street workers, waste pickers, sanitary workers, sweepers, and others. Their multifaceted identities underscore the challenges they face and the discrimination they encounter in their daily lives.

This section provides an overview of the various local terms used to refer to different groups of waste pickers in Dhaka City, shedding light on the diverse identities and occupations within this community:

মেথর (*methor*: sanitation workers). *Methor* refers to individuals engaged in preserving sanitation systems. The term originates from *moila* meaning rubbish and *dbora* meaning catch or touch. Thus, *methor* signifies those who handle various types of rubbish. They are responsible for cleaning streets, parks, public spaces, sewers, stormwater drains, and public toilets. While considered government jobs under Dhaka City Corporation, the term is sometimes used abusively.

নিম্ন জাতের মহিলা (*nimno jater mohila*: low-class woman). This group comprises women from lower castes and classes who choose to work in landfills to collect rubbish. *Nimno* means lower, *jater* signifies caste or ethnicity, and *mohila* refers to a woman, collectively highlighting their lower-caste and lower-class status due to their occupation.

ময়লাওয়ালা (*moilaoyala*: council waste workers). *Moilaoyala* includes individuals, often women, who collect rubbish from various sources, sort it, and sell it for their livelihood. The term derives from *moila* (rubbish) and *oyala* (individual), emphasizing their role as rubbish carriers and earners.

রাস্তার মহিলা (*pothar mohila*: street woman). Street waste collectors, or *pothar mohila*, collect waste from streets, moving from one place to another. *Pothar* signifies a street or road, and *mohila* denotes a woman, reflecting their nomadic lifestyle of collecting and selling waste, sometimes with their families.

ভাঙ্গারি ওয়ালা (*vangarioyala*: waste hawkers). *Vangarioyala* refers to individuals who collect broken or damaged reusable items from various public and private spaces. *Vangari* means broken or used items, and *oyala* refers to a person, indicating their role in collecting and selling recycled materials.

নিম্ন আয়ের মানুষ (*nimno ayer manus*: low-income person). This group is identified as low-income workers in the city, primarily engaged in lower-class occupations. *Nimno* signifies lower or underneath, *ayer* refers to income or earnings, and *manus* denotes a person. They are often involved in cleaning work in public spaces.

ফেরিওয়ালা (*ferioyala*: street hawker). *Ferioyala* refers to recycling waste buyers and collectors who purchase reusable items from waste pickers or recycling industries. They actively participate in waste collection, sorting, and recycling, often selling these items to local customers.

পরিচ্ছন্ন কর্মী (*porichanna kormi*: environmental workers): *Porichanna kormi* are responsible for maintaining cleanliness in urban areas. They work on cleaning projects, including collecting, sorting, and disposing of waste. They are employed by local councils and sometimes work independently to find recyclable scrap materials.

বেইস্যা মহিলা (*baisa mohila*: prostitute): This term is unofficially used to refer to sex workers who engage in illegal activities, including prostitution, often for financial gain and sustenance. Some waste pickers might work as sex workers at night while collecting waste during the day.

আশ্রয়হীন মহিলা (*asrayhin mohila*: homeless woman). *Asrayhin mohila* includes women who lack permanent housing and typically live in public spaces temporarily. They may live alone, with family, or in groups and engage in informal waste picking to earn a living.

দূষিত মহিলা (*dusbit mohila*: dirty woman). *Dusbit mohila* are women who are perceived as spreading filthy smells to others, often seen as carriers of viruses and diseases. They are considered urban criminals due to the potential for spreading infections.

রাতের পাখি (*rater pakhi*: night workers). This term refers to individuals who work as waste pickers during the day but engage in sexual entertainment activities at night. They may work in hotels, share beds with clients, and are vulnerable to various forms of abuse and violence.

বিহারি মহিলা (*bihari* women: Urdu Language Women). These women are traditionally non-Bengali and were brought to work in different regions of the city by British companies. They originate from places such as Bihar, Madras, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, and other parts of India. They can speak Urdu and Bangla and typically reside in Bihari camps in Dhaka City. During the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947, many Biharis migrated to East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). They were aligned with Pakistan during Bangladesh's liberation war in 1971, and after the war, some went to Pakistan while others remained stranded in Bangladesh. They are involved in various waste-related projects to clean urban areas and are also referred to as sweepers and cleaners.

হরিজান (*harijan*: untouchable sweepers/cleaners). *Harijan* is an occupational group or community, traditionally known as sweepers. They consider themselves social outcasts or 'Dalit' and were previously categorized as the fifth caste in the Hindu caste system. Over time, they have become integrated into Muslim communities. Due to their occupation, they are considered untouchables and primarily work as cleaners in urban areas. Cleaning has been their primary occupation for over 200 years.

বেদে মহিলা (*bede* women: 'Gypsy' women). *Bede* women belong to a Muslim nomadic community in Bangladesh. They lead a nomadic lifestyle, moving from one place to another to earn their livelihood. Many of them are illiterate and landless, often living on public land in tents. They engage in waste picking and other marginalized work in the city. Some tokai individuals are also part of the *bede* community, and they often try to conceal their identity due to the neglect and discrimination they face from their neighbours.

This study highlights several key aspects of waste picking in urban areas, particularly the ease with which new migrants, especially women, can enter the waste picking profession. Waste picking jobs are accessible to new migrants, particularly women from rural areas, due to the limited requirements for formal contracts and prior experience. Their connections with relatives

and friends in the city often facilitate their entry into waste picking. Waste dealers are also willing to hire new migrants, as they can manage them more easily in terms of payment systems. Over time, waste pickers, especially women (tokai), often bring their families from their rural villages to join them in waste picking work. This family involvement further strengthens the waste picking community in urban areas.

Waste pickers may receive advance payments or emergency financial assistance from waste dealers, particularly in times of crisis, such as when their children are sick or in the event of accidents. This financial support establishes a sense of obligation among waste pickers to sell their collections to the waste dealer's shop at lower prices than what they could get in the local market. Waste dealers may offer some flexibility to waste pickers, allowing them to return to their villages for seasonal work like farming or agriculture during periods of high labour demand, such as Eid vacations or the summer season. This flexibility helps waste pickers maintain their livelihoods. This study found a kind symbiotic patron-client relationship between waste pickers and waste dealers. Waste pickers rely on waste dealers for financial support and other benefits, and they are cautious about maintaining this relationship, as it provides them with essential resources.

These insights shed light on the complex dynamics of waste picking in urban areas, including the social and economic relationships that shape waste pickers' lives and livelihoods.

Waste Dealers

Waste dealers emerge as key figures in the waste picking ecosystem, serving as the business minds behind the collection and sorting of reusable materials. These individuals, typically male, engage in multiple facets of waste management, from collecting and disposing of rubbish in landfills to driving rubbish trucks and local vehicles. Many waste dealers operate their recycling businesses in close proximity to landfills, where they sell sorted reusable materials to wholesalers and recycling industries. In some cases, they even deliver recyclables directly to recycling plants, bypassing the need for wholesalers. Within this dynamic, waste dealers typically oversee a team of 10 to 20 tokai, establishing a mutually beneficial business relationship. Tokai often find themselves compelled to sell their recyclables exclusively to these waste dealers, fostering a relationship built on trust. Waste dealers provide essential support when needed, such as assisting tokai in removing labels and caps from second-hand plastic bottles before selling them to recycling plants. However, waste dealers tend to maintain a level of secrecy about the destination of recyclables and discourage tokai from connecting with wholesalers, keeping a tight grip on the recycling process.

Tokai Participants in this Project

The following descriptions provide insight into the lives and experiences of the tokai participants in this project:

Alisa Akhter

Alisa Akhter, who was in her early 38s at the time of the interview, is a married woman and the second wife of Jalal, a tokai. Their unique love story unfolded at the landfill where they both work. Alisa's journey into married life began at the age of 15. Her lack of formal education is a testament to the challenges she's faced in her life. For over 14 years, from 7 am to 4 pm daily, she has tirelessly dedicated herself to the demanding work at the landfill. Alisa is a devout Muslim, and her family provided a dowry of 60,000 BDT upon her marriage. Despite the difficulties she has encountered, Alisa perseveres, earning between 200 to 300 BDT per day. Her determination shines through, even in the face of adversity, such as eye problems and an unfortunate encounter with a local dog while carrying out her duties at the landfill. Alisa's story is not just one of hard work but also a testament to the resilience of the human spirit in the face of life's challenges.

Jahanara Begum

Jahanara Begum, a 40-year-old widow hailing from Rongpur district, currently resides near the Matuail landfill with her young son, Samim, who is 4 years old. Her exact birthdate is unknown to her, but she offered an approximate age by sharing her National ID Card. Her life journey took a significant turn at the age of 13 when she was married to her cousin, a marriage arranged by her uncle. The groom's family received a generous gift of 50,000 BDT on this occasion. Unfortunately, Jahanara never had the opportunity to attend school. For the past five years, she has been diligently working at the landfill, enduring long hours from 7 am to 5 pm daily. Her daily earnings range between 200 to 250 BDT, a testament to her hard work and determination. Life at the landfill comes with its own set of hardships. Jahanara suffered an injury to her right leg when a large bag of rubbish fell on her. Her dedication to her work is admirable, but it has not shielded her from mistreatment, as she was subjected to a beating by the police and a security guard on the day before the interview. To cope with the challenging environment and unpleasant smells of the landfill, she used to chew betel nut. Jahanara's story illustrates the resilience and strength of individuals who persevere in difficult circumstances to provide for their families.

Marium Akhter

Marium Akhter, a 29-year-old married woman, has faced numerous challenges throughout her life. Her family includes two sons and a daughter, and she was married off at age 15. However, her marriage took a tumultuous turn as her husband pursued another marriage and descended into alcoholism. Marium endured physical abuse at the hands of her husband, leading to her separation from him. Her sons now attend a Madrasha school. Marium's story is one of resilience and determination. She has been part of the landfill project since the age of nine, accumulating nearly two decades of experience. Her introduction to this challenging work came through her mother, who was also a former tokai. Notably, she has five sisters, all of whom have been involved in the landfill project as well. Despite her limited formal education, having only studied up to class three in primary school, Marium actively contributes to her family's income. Her workday begins at 8 am and concludes at 2 pm. During the Covid-19 crisis, she received much-needed personal protective equipment (PPE) from local NGOs. As a Muslim, Marium faces challenges in practicing her faith fully, particularly in observing the five daily prayers. She has not received any assistance or support from the local government. Marium's story reflects the strength and determination of individuals who persevere through adversity and work diligently to support their families in difficult circumstances.

Rina Begum

Rina Begum, a 36-year-old married woman, has led a life filled with challenges and resilience. She was married off at the age of 14, and became the second wife of her husband who works as a waste dealer. Her inability to attend school resulted from her father's decision to pursue a second marriage, which left her mother in a difficult situation. Hailing from the Barishal District, Rina has been working tirelessly for two decades since her marriage. Her workday begins as early as 5 am and extends until 11 am, after which she spends her afternoons working in a waste shop. Her daily earnings range between 250 to 300 BDT, a crucial source of income for her family. Despite facing numerous health challenges, including issues with her eyes, bodily pain, and cuts on her hands and legs, Rina has been unable to seek medical treatment due to the prohibitive costs. She has displayed remarkable determination and resilience in the face of adversity. Rina's commitment to her family's well-being is evident in her ability to read and write her own name, signifying a level of education that she has managed to attain. Additionally, she has taken loans from NGOs, diligently repaying 1200 BDT every week. Her story is a testament to the strength and perseverance of individuals who work diligently to overcome challenges and provide for their families in the face of adversity.

Kulsom Akhter

Kulsom Akhter, a 23-year-old married woman, has navigated a challenging life filled with both determination and sacrifice. Despite facing obstacles, she has shown remarkable resilience and commitment. She began her educational journey by attending school for five years before discontinuing her studies due to a family financial crisis. Her father's decision to enter into a second marriage and abandon her mother left the family in a precarious situation. At the age of 13, Kulsom was married to a man who is ten years her senior and serves as an imam. Her parents provided a dowry of 80,000 BDT as a gift to the groom's family during the marriage ceremony. Sadly, her married life was marred by mistreatment from her mother-in-law, who, she said, subjected her to torture. For the past seven years, Kulsom has been working diligently in the landfill, contributing to her family's income since her marriage. Her dedication to her family's well-being is evident in her choice to wear a purdha, a traditional Islamic veil, when she ventures to the local market. Kulsom's life has been a journey of resilience and sacrifice, transitioning from her early education to working in a garment factory and eventually embracing waste picking. Her belief that "heaven lies under her husband's feet" underscores the profound cultural and personal values that shape her life. Despite the challenges, Kulsom's determination shines as she continues to strive for a better future for herself and her family.

Momotaz Begum

Momotaz Begum, a 42-year-old woman with two decades of experience in the landfill project, embodies strength and resilience in the face of adversity. Growing up in a large and impoverished family, she was unable to pursue her primary education, a common reality for many in her circumstances. Determined to support her family, Momotaz and her entire family have found employment in the landfill project, demonstrating their unwavering commitment to a challenging but necessary vocation. Her eldest son has taken the initiative to start a new waste recycling shop, a testament to the family's entrepreneurial spirit and their aspiration for a better future. Momotaz begins her workday at 9 am and concludes it at 6 pm, working tirelessly to provide for her loved ones. In her personal life, she faced the complexities of being the second wife to her husband, who also works in the landfill project. She has been subjected to physical assaults from both her husband and his first wife, further underscoring the hardships she endures. Despite these trials, Momotaz refrains from seeking medical care for herself, with the exception of injections related to family planning. Her reluctance to seek medical attention may be influenced by the shame she associates with her occupation, leading her to keep it concealed from others. In times of health and healing, Momotaz places her faith in Kobiraji, a religious leader who administers treatment through the recitation of Qur'anic verses. To navigate the

financial challenges that can arise in her line of work, she has taken a loan of 15,000 BDT from her waste dealer. Momotaz's life exemplifies her enduring determination and resilience as she perseveres through adversity, all while striving to create a brighter future for her family.

Morsedha Akhter

Morsedha Akhter, a 52-year-old woman, carries with her a life story marked by perseverance and resilience. Originally from Patuakhali, she was forced to migrate to Dhaka due to the inundation of her village lands. Her age is calculated through significant historical events, such as the liberation war in Bangladesh, which have left a profound impact on her life. Morsedha's path has been fraught with adversity, beginning with her lack of access to education. She never had the opportunity to attend school due to the financial hardships imposed by her father's illness. Instead, she started working as a maid at a young age, demonstrating her strong work ethic and dedication to supporting her family. Regardless of weather conditions Moesedha puts in hours of labour to provide for her family. Unfortunately, she has never received any financial support from local government agencies, reflecting the challenges she faces in her marginalized profession. In her community, people tend to avoid her due to societal stigma surrounding her occupation and position. Undeterred by these challenges, Moesedha has risen above adversity and carved out a unique role for herself as a waste dealer. She not only sustains herself but also provides employment opportunities to other tokai, illustrating her resilience and commitment to improving the lives of those around her. Morsedha's journey is a testament to the strength of the human spirit, demonstrating that even in the face of significant hardships, individuals can find ways to thrive and support their families.

Sriti Akhter

Sriti Akhter, now 45 years old, has overcome significant challenges throughout her life with resilience and determination. Her story begins with a tragic event, the devastating flood that struck Bangladesh in 1988, leading to the loss of her father. This event, coupled with her family's financial struggles, deprived her of the opportunity to receive a formal education. Sriti is a single mother, having been left by her husband when her daughter was just three years old. Despite these hardships, she has managed to build strong relationships within the waste management community, including waste dealers and other community members. Her ability to connect with people reflects her friendly and approachable nature. Born in Dhaka and residing in close proximity to the landfill, Sriti's daily routine involves venturing out early in the morning to scavenge for valuable items. This job has not been without its risks, as she once experienced a work-related accident, involving an injury caused by sharp materials. During her leisure time, Sriti embraces modern technology, using her mobile phone and engaging on Facebook. However, she

prefers to keep the nature of her work hidden from her relatives in the village, as they hold higher social positions. Her life has also been marked by unwanted proposals from various individuals, adding to the challenges she faces. Sriti's story exemplifies the strength of individuals who, despite facing adversity and limited opportunities, manage to carve out their own path in life. Her resilience, resourcefulness, and commitment to providing for her family serve as an inspiration to others facing similar difficulties.

Roksana

We met Roksana in Chapter 1. She is 37 years old, and is now divorced. She cannot remember her birth date. She went for schooling for five years. She had four brothers and three sisters. Her mother died because of her father's physical abuse. Roksana fell in love with a man by speaking with him on her mobile phone and she got married to him. She ran away from her home when she was 16 years old after she married. She did not know her husband's character: she discovered he was a sex trader who supplied women to a brothel. Her husband abused her with electric shock, and beat and punched her. At first she worked in a garment factory, but she has been working in the landfill for more than nine years. She sits her little daughter in the landfill when she starts working in the early morning. She earns 300 BDT per day. She never found justice for her husband's abusive behaviours.

Saleha Banu

Saleha Banu is 33 years old, and she knows her exact birth date. She was raised by her grandmother because her mother died during her birth. She was born disabled; she cannot move easily because her left leg is smaller than her right. She was married to a disabled man who was also deaf. She has no income in the village; she migrated to Dhaka to earn a living. She has worked in the landfill for more than ten years, sorting rubbish only. Her waste dealer gives her a low price for her sorted items, but she cannot protest this. Saleha faces a lot of social ignorance due to her disability and because she does dirty work. She never visits her village. She cannot mix with general people due to her identity as a tokai. She now lives in an overcrowded house she shares with other tokai. She needs to pay entry fees for working at the landfill. She used to take medicine from a local dispensary shop. She cannot offer her daily prayers and she feels guilty about that.

Mafuja Rashid

The life of this 48-year-old woman has been marked by hardship and determination. She never had the opportunity to attend school and instead began working in the landfill alongside her mother at the age of eight. Her early experiences laid the foundation for her future, which took a significant turn when she was married off to a truck driver at the age of 15. Tragedy struck her

life when she lost her husband, leaving her with the responsibility of caring for their young son, now six years old, and daughter, who is 4 years old. In 2017, she took a significant step forward by establishing her own recycling shop near the landfill. This venture not only brought her a sense of happiness and accomplishment but also allowed her to support other women by employing them in her business. However, the challenges she faces in her work have been mounting. She lamented the discontinuation of free entry to the landfill project, as authorities now demand entry fees. To manage her operation efficiently, she maintains a fleet of 15 waste vehicles to transport collected items from the landfill to her shop. The entry fees for these vehicles, which amount to 700 BDT each, have become an additional financial burden.

In an effort to stay connected and conduct her business, she uses her mobile phone to contact other buyers. During her leisure time, she finds solace in watching TV, a simple yet cherished pastime. Her commitment to empowering other women is evident, as she guides nearly 20 women tokai in their work. Despite her perseverance and achievements, she faces an uncertain future as new policies and attempts to displace tokai by the council threaten the stability she has worked so hard to build.

Kajol Rekha

This resilient woman, whose age is approximately 47 years, bears the weight of a challenging life with unwavering strength. Although she cannot recall her exact birth date, she is a devoted Muslim and shares her life with a husband eight years her senior, who works as a rickshaw puller. However, her husband's inconsistency in work due to laziness and his vices of gambling and alcohol have created significant turmoil in her life. Kajol has been a victim of physical abuse at the hands of her husband on multiple occasions. These traumatic experiences have left scars, both physical and emotional, making it difficult for her to celebrate her own birthday or find solace in personal milestones. Her early years of education were cut short after just five years due to the harsh reality of her family's poverty. Life took a turn for the worse when the new city mayor-imposed entry fees and restricted her access to the landfill, causing her great distress. The Covid-19 lockdown exacerbated her financial woes, leaving her without a source of income to provide for her children. In dire straits, she had no choice but to take loans from waste dealers to support her family during these challenging times. The relentless toil in the landfill, combined with limited access to healthcare due to financial constraints, has taken a toll on her health, leading to kidney issues. Despite her ailments, she avoids hospitals and doctors as much as possible to save money. Instead, she relies on traditional remedies and medicines prescribed by religious leaders for her treatment.

Mohammad Razia

This resilient woman, who does not know her exact age and lacks a national identity card, has faced a life marked by challenges and adversity. Her parents never disclosed her birth date, and her father's reluctance to educate girls denied her the opportunity to attend school. At age 16 she crossed paths with a man at the landfill, leading to a marriage that was ultimately short-lived. Her husband abandoned her abruptly, taking on another marriage and relocating to the city. She now lives without any contact with him, solely responsible for her 11-year-old daughter, with whom she shares the burden of working in the landfill to make ends meet. Tragically, she endured physical abuse from her husband. Her complaints about the dire conditions at the landfill, such as the lack of toilet facilities and drinking water, highlight the challenging environment in which she works. The strenuous labour and unsanitary conditions have taken a toll on her health, resulting in various health issues. Despite these hardships, she maintains a cordial relationship with waste dealers and other members of her community. Her determination and resilience shine through as she faces life's trials with unwavering strength and courage.

Rahima

Rahima is a 37-year-old married woman. She went to school for four years, but she was forced to stop her study by her stepmother. She got married to her cousin at the age of 13 years. Her family paid 30,000 BDT plus other household items as a gift during her marriage. She gave birth to her first baby while she was only 14 years old. She did not find any happiness from her husband because her husband began three other marriages after her marriage to him. She did not know about these marriages, and she was never asked for her permission as tradition requires. Her husband abused her and her child in order to get money for his gambling. She receives little money from waste dealer. She does not know very much about family planning. She used to buy medicine from local dispensary.

Asma Akhter

She is a 30-year-old married woman. She calculates her age by remembering the 1988 devastating flood in Bangladesh. She never went to school because her parents' income was too low. She married at the age of 15 years to a man who works in a restaurant. She now starts waste picking at 8 am and returns home at 4 pm. Her two children study in a Madrasha school. Her husband has some liver problems, so he cannot work daily. She has been working for seven years after her marriage. Asma faces many health and social challenges due to her work in the project. She received a loan for 60,000 BDT from the local NGO. She experienced humiliation and abuse when she did not repay the debt. She was abused by a security guard when she wanted to enter

the landfill project during Covid-19. She never uses PPE for her waste sorting, and has endured many injuries. She prefers to take village medicine for her reproductive health issues.

Tania Khanam

At 26 years old, Tania has faced extraordinary challenges in her life. She was married off at a the very young age of 12, to a man who was a decade older than she. Despite her circumstances, she manages to earn around 300 BDT per day, primarily as a waste picker, but she also contributes to her household by taking care of cleaning and washing dishes. Her life took a difficult turn when her husband divorced her, driven by his desire for another woman in the city. This divorce led to a significant reduction in her income, a problem exacerbated by entry restrictions into the landfill during the Covid-19 lockdown. Her lack of formal education is due to the early loss of her father when she was just five years old, which left her and her mother to work as tokai for nearly two decades. Her mother, after her father's death, entered into a second marriage.

As a single mother and a young tokai, Tania has faced multiple challenges, including receiving poor marriage proposals. Additionally, she endured a particularly trying situation when a fire broke out at the landfill, causing authorities to block her entry. The loss of income result in her inability to access food for herself. Despite these hardships, she remains resilient and uses social media, particularly Facebook, to connect with others and navigate her way through life's challenges. Her story is a testament to her strength and determination in the face of adversity.

Laboni

At just 23 years old, Laboni has already faced numerous challenges in her life. She was married off at the very young age of 11 to a man from her own village. Despite her limited education (she attended primary school for only five years), she worked in a shoe factory, where she met her husband. Her husband eventually became a bus driver and decided to take another wife without informing her, leaving her in a difficult situation. In an effort to secure her financial future, she even gave her husband 40,000 BDT to start a business, only to be abandoned by him. However, she maintains her faith and believes that Allah will help her overcome her suffering and bring justice to her situation, particularly regarding her husband's actions. Despite her difficult circumstances, she faces harassment from waste dealers and other male truck drivers who constantly pressure her to remarry. In her quest for independence and livelihood, she has forged a positive relationship with a security guard who informs her about available waste trucks in the landfill, highlighting her resourcefulness and determination in navigating life's challenges.

Fatema Jahan

Fatema is 38-year-old a married woman. She has four years of primary education. She could not continue her education because her father did not want to educate a girl. She was married to a

26-year-old landfill van driver when she was 13, and she gave birth to a baby one year later. Her parents never visit Dhaka and have never worked in a landfill project. She came to Dhaka after her marriage to seek a job and income. She has lost her taste due to work in the landfill. She did not like to work in another job because she can work in the landfill when she wishes, and there is no barrier. She took a cash advance from a waste dealer to start this work. She is planning to run a waste shop in the future.

Laizo

At 40 years old, Laizo has faced significant challenges in her life. Born in Gaibandha, she was married off at age 15 to a grocery shopkeeper. However, her marriage ended in divorce due to her husband's abusive behaviour and alcoholism. Despite never having the opportunity to attend school, she has been working tirelessly for over 18 years in the landfill. In her quest to provide for her family, she took a loan to finance her daughter's wedding. Unfortunately, her years of toiling in the landfill have exposed her to numerous health risks and injuries. As she continues to face the stigma associated with her occupation, she opts to conceal her job from others in her village to avoid isolation and lack of support during crises. Looking ahead, her future plan is to save some money and eventually return to her village, reflecting her determination to provide a better life for her family despite the adversity she has encountered.

Nasrin

At just 23 years old, Nasrin has faced numerous challenges due to her family's poverty. Raised by her aunt after her mother tragically passed away during childbirth, she grew up without the presence of her father, who had taken a second marriage and abandoned her. She missed out on formal education because of their financial constraints, but learned how to write her name and manage money. Her marriage took place when she was only 15, to a waste dealer. Her family now consists of two daughters and one son, all of whom attend a Madrasah school. They live in a hostel. She has endured multiple work-related accidents and injuries, including a broken leg, injuries to her hand, and harassment from local residents. Her husband's gambling habits and loans from various sources caused financial strain, leading her to borrow from waste dealers to repay his debts. She prefers seeking treatment for health issues from religious leaders. During the Covid-19 lockdown, she even faced assault by the police while working in the landfill. Looking to the future, her aspirations revolve around educating her children and eventually establishing her own business, demonstrating her determination to improve her family's circumstances despite the obstacles she has encountered.

Kohinur Begum

Kohinur estimates her age to be around 45 years. She has faced numerous challenges throughout her life. Growing up in a large family of six brothers and four sisters, she missed out on primary school due to their limited resources. Instead, she began working as a maid in other households from a young age. At 17 years old, she entered into marriage with a 36-year-old man. Together, they started working in 1990 as door-to-door waste collectors. However, they later transitioned to collecting waste from landfills, finding it to be a more convenient and flexible option. Their decision to migrate to Dhaka was prompted by her father-in-law's decision to pass on all his land and property to his younger son. She has not returned to her village since then. Her husband used to have a gambling habit, but he abandoned it after the birth of their daughter. Despite facing various injuries and working bare-handed, they have managed to establish a waste shop. In their business, they employ another woman to assist them, and their elder son has also ventured into waste management. With a strong determination to continue in the waste business, she envisions spending her entire life contributing to this field, highlighting her resilience in the face of life's challenges.

For the reader's convenience I have summarised the tokai participants in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of Tokai Participants

Participants	Age	Years of schooling	Marital status*	Age at marriage	Years worked	Working hours	Daily income (BDT)
Alisa	38 years	None	Married (AM)	15 years	14 years	7 am to 4 pm	300
Jahanara	42 years	None	Widowed (AM)	13 years	5 years	7am to 5pm	250
Mariam	29 years	4 years	Divorced (1st wife)-AM	15 years	20 years	8 am to 2pm	300
Rina	36 years	3 years	Married (2nd wife) -AM	14 years	20 years	5am to 11am	300
Kulsom	23 years	5 years	Married (LM)	13 years	10 years	7am to 3pm	400
Momotaz	42 years	None	Married -2nd wife-(LM)	17 years	13 years	8am to 6pm	300
Morsedha	52 years	None	Widowed- 2nd wife/ waste dealer (AM)	16 years	21 years	9am to 5pm	400

Sriti	45 years	None	Separated/single mother (AM)	17 years	13 years	6am to 5pm	300
Roksana	37 years	5 years	Divorced – single mother/ 2nd wife- LM	16 years	11 years	6am to 3pm	250
Saleha	33 years	None	Married/ disable /AM	14 years	9 years	8am to 4pm	200
Mafoja	48 years	None	Widow/waste dealer/ AM	8 years	24 years	9am to 5pm	400
Kajol	47 years	None	Separated/second wife (AM)	16 years	13 years	8 am to 6pm	300
Razia	unknown	None	Married (AM)	16 years	14 years	6am to 5pm	200
Rahima	37 years	4 years	Separated/AM	13 years	10 years	7am to 6pm	350
Asma	30 years	None	Married /AM	15 years	5 years	10 am to 7pm	300
Tania	26 years	None	Divorced/ single mother/ AM	12 years	9 years	4am to 2pm	200
Laboni	23 years	5 years	Single mother/LM	14 years	6 years	8am to 4 pm	300
Fatema	38 years	None	Married/ AM	13 years	4 years	7 am to 3 pm	200
Laizo	40 years	None	Divorced/AM	15 years	17 years	9 am to 5 pm	250
Nasrin	23 years	4 years	Divorced/AM	14 years	7 years	4am to 12 pm	200
Kohinur	45 years	None	Married/AM	17 years	26 years	7 am to 8pm	500

*AM= Arrange marriage; LM=Love marriage

Key Informants

In the course of this study, various key informants (KIs) were interviewed to gain valuable insights into waste management and related issues in Dhaka, Bangladesh. For their security and

confidentiality, pseudonyms are used to protect their identities. Here are brief profiles of these participants:

‘Razaaque’ is a retired military leader. He plays a pivotal role in waste management. He joined as a researcher and high official in a city waste management office. Over the years, he has been involved in numerous projects related to solid waste management within Dhaka City. His areas of interest include medical waste management and public health policy in Bangladesh. Razaaque is also writes about the waste management system in Dhaka City.

‘Fazlul’ currently serves as an official in the Department of the Environment in Bangladesh. He is a university graduate. He has a rich history of involvement in various environmental and public health projects. In addition to his government role, he dedicates his time to teaching students about environmental issues and waste management topics as a part-time faculty member at a university. Fazlul Haque works closely with the city on issues related to solid waste management and the health of waste collectors.

‘Md. Maksud’ is a senior leader at a local NGO in Dhaka City. He helped to establish a school for tokai and an inclusive education programme for the Bede community through mobile boat schools. He is also a university graduate and a prolific author.

‘Md Abdullah’ is an imam at a mosque in Dhaka City. He studied Arabic and is a Quran Hafej. He has a graduate degree in Islamic Studies. His interests extend to community-related projects, and addresses issues concerning marginalized communities within Dhaka City.

Summary

In this chapter, an overview of the research project is provided, focusing on the social position of tokai and other waste workers in Dhaka, Bangladesh, and introducing participants in this project. To maintain the privacy and safety of the research participants, pseudonyms have been employed, and identifying details related to KII have been disguised. Throughout the research, great care has been taken to obtain verbal permission from participants for sharing their stories in this thesis, ensuring that their voices and experiences are heard and respected. This chapter sets the stage for the subsequent exploration of the lived experiences of waste workers in Dhaka, delving into their stories and providing valuable insights into their social realities.

In the forthcoming chapters, the focus will shift towards a detailed exploration of the lived experiences of the twenty-one participants in this research study. These chapters are designed to provide comprehensive answers to the research questions that have been formulated.

Chapter Five: Findings - Entry to Waste Picking

This chapter investigates the complex dynamics of tokai involvement in informal waste picking within the dumpsite project, addressing Research Question One. I begin by exploring the primary factors that compel tokai to engage in this line of work, shedding light on the migration process that sees them transition from rural to urban settings. Exploring deeper into the data gathered from interviews, a compelling narrative emerges, suggesting that the very act of informal waste picking might be subverting traditional patriarchal norms in Bangladesh. This is further elaborated in Chapter Nine while addressing Research Question-5. Contrary to the socio-religious constraints that often limit women in South Asia, waste picking paves the way for female empowerment and entrepreneurial endeavours. Through this, tokai do not just earn a livelihood—they reclaim agency, steering the course of their lives with newfound autonomy and decision-making capabilities.

Push and Pull Factors in Waste Picking

This section explores the driving forces that encourage tokai to engage in informal waste picking at the open landfill. A confluence of socio-economic factors, intertwined with structural religious considerations, emerged from the analysis. Despite differences in gender, caste, class, or religion, a shared sense of autonomy and self-determination resonates among the tokai. The data underscores that their primary motivation is not merely economic but is founded on deeper aspirations of freedom, empowerment, and entrepreneurship. In their pursuit of these ideals, tokai often navigate numerous challenges, from adverse working conditions to strained personal relationships, often with minimal external support. Their resilience underscores the paramount importance they place on autonomy and empowerment in their lives.

Nasrin said:

আমি যদি কারও কাছে সাহায্য চাই, সে কি আমাকে সাহায্য দিবে। আমি কিছুই আশা করি না। আমার ভবিসাত পরি কল্পনা হচ্ছে একটা ভাস্করির দোকান দেওয়া আমার ছেলেকে সাথে নিয়ে করার ইচ্ছা আছে। আমি গ্রামে একটা জমি রাখছি, ছেলের ভবিসাত চিন্তা করে। আমার এখন আর কুন ঋণ নাই। আমি আমার ছেলে কে বলব কখন যেন কার ও ওপর নির্ভর করে না চলে।

If I ask for help or any support from others, will I get this? I expect nothing... my future plan is to build a recycling shop with my son, now I am saving money and waiting for my son to grow up. I have kept one piece of land in my village for his future. I do not have any debt. I have taught my son to never rely on other support. (Nasrin)

For many tokai, the decision to work in landfills as waste pickers stems from the allure of autonomy and the relative freedom from harassment, compared to other employment options. Kohinur mentioned that each waste dealer typically employs five to ten women, with at least a

couple of them dedicated to sorting recyclable materials in the waste shop. While the workforce comprises individuals of varying ages and genders, women notably make up the majority. Their preference for landfill work over domestic service is telling. Domestic workers, or maid servants, often face grave challenges, including frequent harassment and assault. In contrast, waste picking provides a sense of agency. Kohinur emphasized the flexibility it offers—she can set her own hours, take days off when unwell, and operate without stringent oversight. As she stated "waste picking is a freedom of work" which makes it a more attractive option than working in households or factories.

The subsequent section explores the primary pull factors that attract individuals to the realm of informal waste picking. These factors, characterized by the allure and advantages of such work, play a pivotal role in influencing the decision-making of potential waste pickers. Following this examination, the discussion will transition to the push factors, which represent the external pressures and circumstances that compel tokai to gravitate towards this occupation.

Pull Factors in Waste Picking

Landfill as 'mother'

The relationship between waste pickers and landfills transcends mere economic benefits, evolving into a profound emotional bond. Research by O'Hare (2019) illuminated this sentiment, highlighting how waste pickers perceive the landfill as a maternal figure—a consistent provider of their basic needs. This study further reinforces this sentiment, with tokai viewing the landfill not just as an employment opportunity but as a vital lifeline and refuge.

Rina likened the landfill to "a tree where you can find fruit", emphasizing its nurturing and generous nature. Beyond just being a source of recyclable waste, the landfill, in her eyes, is akin to a bountiful mother, consistently offering a myriad of resources. From a diverse range of foods, including fruits like mangoes and litchis and even packaged delicacies like chicken biryani, to clothing items such as t-shirts and pyjamas, and even valuable finds like gold chains and silver coins—each discovery underscores for her the landfill's abundance. The occasional retrieval of household materials like mattresses and sofas further cements the landfill's role as a consistent provider in the eyes of the tokai.

Nasrin stated:

আমরা এখান থেকে অনেক পুরানা জিনিস মনে করেন সাবান, তেল, আটা, পাই। আমরা এগুলো ব্যবহার করি আর আশে পাশের দুকানে মাজে মাজে এগুলো বিক্রি করে দেই। কিছু মানুষ আবার অবৈধ মাল পায় যেমন ইয়াবা ট্যাবলেট, মদের বুতুল, গাজা আর পুরানা ওষুধ তারা এইসব আবার বাজারে বিক্রি করে দেয়। আমরা অনেক সময় ছুটেলের খাবার পাই মনে করেন রান্না মুরগির মাংস, রুটি, মুরগির রুট্ট আর বিয়ে বাড়ির ব্যবহার করা দই। আমরা রয়জানের সময় আরও অনেক রকমের ফল পাই যেমন আম, খেজুর, লিচু, কাঁঠাল, আপেল, কমলা, তুরমুজ,

আঙ্গুর ইত্যাদি। আমি ১০ কেজি খেজুর পাইছিলাম রমজান মাসে আমি নিজে খাইছি আর কিছু বিক্রি করতে চাইছিলাম পারি নাই পরে মানুষকে এমনি দিয়ে দিছি। আমি গতকালকে একটা মুবাইলের সার্কিট পাইছিলাম পরে ৩০ টাকা বিক্রি করে দেছি।

We find second-hand materials like soap, shampoo, oil, wheat flour etc. from the landfill. We can use these and sell them to the local shopkeepers. Sometimes some people get illegal products [drug tablets -yeba, alcohol bottles, ganja - alcohol leaves and expired medicine] and they sell these at the local market. We also get restaurant foods (cooked chicken, roti, biriyani, chicken roast, and yogurt). We also find different fruits, like mangoes, dates, litchis, papayas, jackfruits, apples, oranges, watermelons, grapes, etc. during the fasting [Ramadhan] month and we can sell these. I got 10 kg of dates during Ramadhan. I tried to sell all of them, but I could not so I offered these to my neighbours. I sold a mobile circuit for 30 taka yesterday and earned some money. (Nasrin)

In essence, for many tokai, the landfill is not just a workplace; it is a symbol of abundance, hope, and reliability. The open landfill, for many tokai, is more than just a source of livelihood; it symbolizes sustenance, security, and hope. Their socio-economic well-being hinges on unrestricted access to this vast expanse, which is brimming with potential treasures and daily necessities.

For Sriti, the landfill holds a deeply personal significance. She affectionately refers to it as "our mother", underscoring its nurturing and protective role in her life. Sriti's daily excursions to the landfill are not merely occupational but are rooted in a routine that encompasses various facets of her life. Whether it is foraging for reusable items, seeking sustenance, or simply taking a momentary respite on a discarded mattress, the landfill offers her a safe haven where she remains undisturbed. The occasional discovery of cash or, on rarer occasions, valuable items like gold chains and silver metal, is a testament to the landfill's unpredictable generosity. Particularly poignant is her mention of the Ramadhan period. While many observe fasting during these holy days, Sriti's sustenance is ensured by the edible treasures she unearths, including ripe mangoes and dates. This bounty ensures she remains self-reliant, eliminating the need to seek alms or depend on others for food. In essence, the landfill not only provides for her material needs but also bestows upon her a sense of dignity and self-worth.

Similarly, Tania stated:

আমি অনেক ভাল ভাল খাবার পাইছি যা আমার পরিবারের খাবারের চাহিদা মিটাতে অনেক সাহায্য করছে। আমি কিছু ফল টল আবার আমার গ্রামের বাড়িতে দিছিলাম যাতে তারা খেতে পারে। গ্রীষ্মের সময় আমার বাড়িতে অনেক রকমের ফল থাকে যা আমি ময়লার বাগার থেকে আনি। একবার তু আমি সিলবারের মেডেল পাইছিলাম, আমি ওটা বিক্রি করে ১৫০০ টাকা পাইছি। আমার বুন একবার হাতের কাজের জামা পাইছিল যা সে ধুয়ে মুছে এখন জানলার পর্দা হিসেবে ব্যবহার করছে। এখন আমার খাবারের জন্য বেশি কিছু কিনতে হচ্ছে না।

I find a lot of nice, clean foods, which cover my family's needs and also, I can share with others in our village. During the summer season, my house will be full of fruit that I collect from the landfill project. Once I found a silver medal and I sold it for 1500 BDT. My sister found a usable printed cloth, which she has washed nicely and used further as curtains. Usually, I do not need to buy many things/groceries for eating. (Tania)

The open landfill presents a dichotomy of challenges and opportunities for tokai like Tania. While the landfill provides a source of livelihood, the earnings from it are modest. Tania's daily income, ranging from 250 to 300 taka, falls below what she might earn in formal employment. Tania recalls unearthing valuable items such as gold chains and necklaces in her earlier days, but with the increasing influx of tokai and the city waste workers' more meticulous sorting methods, such valuable finds have become rarer. The landfill, while being a treasure trove of sorts, is not devoid of risks. However, the landfill offers more than just monetary gains. The ability to recover goods, both for personal use and resale, supplements her income and sustains her family's daily needs. Many tokai, despite their frequent consumption of recovered foods, claim to have not experienced any health adversities. This perception could stem from their longstanding habits, potentially masking any subtle, long-term effects. However, not all experiences are devoid of danger. Some participants recounted distressing incidents of coming into contact with hazardous waste, including syringes and broken glass. Such encounters have occasionally led to illnesses, especially when dealing with chemical items or infectious waste. Yet, in the face of these challenges, the allure of the landfill remains undiminished. The prospect of collecting diverse resources and converting them to earnings continues to draw individuals to the demanding yet rewarding world of waste picking.

Limited Government Regulation

The allure of informal waste picking for many tokai is partly attributed to the absence of strict governmental oversight and regulation. This study posits that local governmental bodies display a notable lack of initiative in organizing or managing these workers. As the tokai are considered self-employed, they fall outside the typical purview of government-managed employment sectors. This lack of formal recognition and regulation, while presenting certain freedoms, also implies a dearth of official support and protection typically afforded to formally recognized labour.

KI respondent Razzaque from the city government, reveals:

এই চাকরি তু সরকার দ্বারা নিয়ন্ত্রিত না। আমাদের সরকারের এদের নিয়ে কুন আগ্রাহ নাই। এদের গণনা করা অনেক কষ্টের কাজ কারন এরা সবাই উল্ল সময় কাজ করে আর বিভিন্ন জাইগায় চলে যায় আথবা উন্য চাকরি খুজে বেড়ায়।

This is not a job created by local government. Our government has no interest in counting them. It is difficult to count them because most of them are temporary workers and migrate to another place or sometimes another job. (Razzaque)

Urban governance, as elaborated by Razzaque, seems to adopt a narrow focus, primarily concerning itself with land and financial projects. There appears to be a glaring oversight when it comes to instituting a comprehensive solid waste management system. Not only is there an absence of government regulation in this area, but community-driven endeavours and initiatives from local non-governmental organizations are also conspicuously missing. He poignantly captures the current state of affairs by highlighting the myriad challenges: an ineffective waste management system, a dearth of access to advanced engineering solutions, a palpable detachment of city authorities from the issue, scarce resources allocated for waste handling, and an increasing trend towards the privatization of waste management. Furthermore, the waste industry remains largely unorganized, leading to sporadic and often unstable informal job opportunities. His narrative paints a picture of a system in need of holistic reform and structured intervention.

The absence of strict regulation, coupled with overt official negligence, inadvertently creates an environment conducive for tokai to engage in waste picking at dumpsites. Fazlul, the national government staffer, emphasized the intricate connection between waste management and the lives of various marginalized groups, including street dwellers and the tokai. He framed waste management as a "social action for the poor people" and underscored the urgency for government intervention to address tokai-related issues, which in turn can bolster the urban economy and the recycling sector.

However, the current scenario is far from ideal. A select group of local waste dealers has monopolised the waste recovery system. These dealers capitalize on the current state of affairs by employing tokai to operate within the landfills. Fazlul candidly points out the challenges, noting the high costs associated with proper waste management and the country's lack of specialized expertise in this sector. This void, exacerbated by the government's lack of oversight and urban authorities' indifference, has led many tokai to forge alliances with these waste dealers, further embedding themselves in the waste picking profession.

Survival Strategies and Cash Income

Waste picking, for many impoverished migrants, is not just a job, it is a lifeline. With the immediacy of cash income and relatively barrier-free entry, it is no surprise that a significant number are drawn to it, often side-lining other potential employment opportunities. The evolving consumption patterns in Bangladesh, fuelled by increasing affluence, inadvertently contribute to this. As consumption rises, so does waste generation, waste often disposed of carelessly. This surge in waste, while an environmental concern, paradoxically opens doors of opportunity for the tokai.

Alisa noted that the increased consumption of energy drinks, especially during the sweltering summer months, leads to a proliferation of discarded cans in public spaces. These discarded items, trivial for most, become a source of income for her. Such patterns of consumption and disposal do not just provide the tokai with financial sustenance but also shape their seasonal employment trends.

However, the significance of the landfill for the tokai extends beyond mere financial gain. Nasrin's narrative highlights another poignant aspect — the landfill as a source of sustenance. Discarded items, like wheat flour thrown away by restaurants, are salvaged and repurposed to feed families. The act of retrieving such essentials becomes a routine, with tokai like Nasrin diligently scouring the landfill to find such treasures for their loved ones.

She stated:

আমার আয় একরকম ছিল না, মাজে মাজে প্রতিদিন ৩০০ টাকা, মাজে মাজে ৪০০ টাকা আর মাজে ৫০০ টাকা আসে। সবসময় এক রকম না, এটা নির্ভর করতু আমি কুত টা মাল সংগ্রহ করতে পারছি, আর কত দিন কাজ করছি। আমি সব প্লাস্টিক জাতিও জিনিস ২০ টাকা করে প্রতি কেজি বিক্রি করি, পেপার আর গ্লাস ১৫ টাকা করে বিক্রি করি এবং গরুর হাড়ি ১০ টাকা করে প্রতি কেজি বিক্রি করতে পারি।

My income is not fixed. Sometimes I earn 300 taka, sometimes 400 taka, and sometimes 500 taka per day. It is not the same all the time, it depends on how much I collect and how many days I work. I can sell plastic materials and lids of bottles for 20 taka per kilogram; glass containers and paper for 15 taka per kilogram, and bones of animal for 10 taka per kilogram.
(Nasrin)

In essence, for many tokai, the dumpsite is not just a workplace — it is a multi-faceted ecosystem that provides financial, nutritional, and, in many ways, emotional sustenance. For Tania, the decision to work in the dumpsite's projects was not solely about the financial benefits; it was also about the flexibility and feasibility the environment provided in terms of childcare. Balancing work with the responsibilities of motherhood can be challenging, especially

for individuals in low-resource settings. Tania's experience in the landfill offers a glimpse into this complex interplay.

In her previous job, Tania faced the heart-wrenching choice of leaving her young children at home to fend for themselves while she worked. The landfill, however, presented a different scenario. The dumpsite projects not only offered her employment but also allowed her a degree of proximity to her children. This dual benefit of earning while ensuring her children's well-being made the landfill an attractive work environment for her.

She stated:

আমরা কিছু টুকাই মিলে একটা অস্থায়ী ঘর বানাইছি একটা গাছের নিচে যাতে ছায়া লাগে আর আমরা জিরাইতে পারি। আমরা একটা ভেড়া দিছি যাতে বাচ্চারা বাইরে যেতে না পারে। আর কিছু খেলনা দিয়ে দিছি যাতে তারা খেলতে পারে। বাচ্চারা অনেক খুশি। মাজে মাজে আমাদের কেও শুধু দেখে আসি তারা ঠিক আছে কিনা। কি করতাকে। আমরাও এই জাইগায় বিশ্রাম নেই জখন অনেক রুদ ওঠে এই ছায়ার মধ্যে। এটা অনেক ভাল আমাদেরকে এখন আর বাচ্চাদের কে বাসায় রেখে আস্তে হয় না, আমরা এখন অনেক দিন এবং সময় কাজ করতে পারি।

We tokai have built a small temporary house [camping tent] near our workplace under the tree. We have made a fence so that [the children] cannot cross the boundary. We keep our children all together and we give them some toys and balls to play with. They now enjoy playing with each other while we work. Sometimes we observe what they are doing. Sometimes we take a rest in the shade of the temporary house and take care them. It is better to take them with us rather than to leave them at home alone. Now we can work more hours and more days. (Tania)

In essence, the landfill provided Tania with a unique blend of economic opportunity and familial flexibility, making it a preferable choice over other employment options.

For many women, especially those with children, the allure of working in the dumpsite's projects was multifaceted. It was not just about the potential earnings; it was also about the work environment's adaptability and the perceived safety it offered for their children. This flexibility was particularly enticing for women like Asma, who had previously grappled with the rigidity and demands of formal employment.

Asma's tenure at her previous job was characterized by long hours, minimal remuneration, and an overwhelming list of responsibilities. This grind, juxtaposed against the relative freedom offered by the dumpsite projects, made her reconsider her career choices. Encouraged by her neighbours, who were already reaping the benefits of working in the dumpsite, Asma made the transition. The dumpsite projects, in her eyes, presented an appealing contrast to her previous job. She cherished the autonomy it offered — the ability to choose when to work and when to

take a break. In her words, it was a job replete with "freedom and choices", making it a preferable alternative to the constraints of her previous employment.

Easy Entry and no Labour Contract

The open accessibility and minimal barriers to entry make waste picking in public spaces an attractive to many tokai. One of the primary appeals is the absence of formalities and bureaucratic red tape. Unlike many jobs that necessitate labour contracts and a myriad of preconditions, waste picking stands out for its simplicity. Local waste dealers, who serve as the primary employers for most tokai, typically do not require labour contracts or other formal agreements. This streamlined process, devoid of complexities, not only facilitates but actively encourages many tokai to gravitate towards work in the landfill project. The freedom from stringent requirements and the ability to earn without being encumbered by formal obligations make it an appealing choice for many seeking employments.

Laizo stated:

আমার চাচাতু বুন আমাকে এই মাহাজানের সাথে পরিচয় করিয়ে দিছে। আমার কুন রকম কাগজ লাগে নাই এখানে কাজ করার জন্য। আমি এই মাহাজানের সাথেই কাজ শুরু করছি আর তার কাছেই সব মাল বিক্রি করি। এখানে কাজ করা আর কাজে ডুকা অনেক সহজ।

My cousin helped me to link up with the waste dealers. I did not need any documents [education certificate, NID card, birth certificate etc]. I started collecting and sorting waste under this waste dealer and sold these to him to make money. It is easy to enter into waste picking. (Laizo)

For Laizo, the landfill was not just a place of employment; it was a realm of opportunity and autonomy. Her experiences there, particularly her serendipitous discoveries of valuable items like gold chains and cash, heightened her enthusiasm for the job. Unlike many formal workplaces where found items might be claimed by employers or shared among teams, the landfill allowed Laizo complete ownership of her findings. She relished this sense of personal agency, emphasizing that whatever she found belonged solely to her. The absence of surveillance, like cameras, further underscored this sense of freedom, allowing her to operate without the constant oversight typical in many other work settings. Laizo's independence was also highlighted by her employment status. Not being tethered to a local councillor or city corporation meant she was not bound by conventional workplace hierarchies or reporting structures. This autonomy, combined with the unpredictability and potential rewards of her work, made her role in the landfill not just a job, but a venture brimming with possibility.

Momotaz said that the occasional presence of police officers, or the police, injected a layer of uncertainty into her work. Their unexplained visits and the sporadic closures of the landfill,

sometimes under directives from local authorities, disrupted the routine of the tokai. An instance of such disruption was when a fire broke out at the landfill, preventing Momotaz and her fellow tokai from working.

Yet, in the midst of these challenges, there are also sources of support. Momotaz's relationship with her waste dealer is emblematic of this. She perceived him not just as an employer but as a guardian, someone who looks out for her welfare. In situations where she faced inappropriate advances or confrontations, her waste dealer steps in to address and resolve the issue. This relationship, however, is not solely based on protection and camaraderie. There is an economic dimension to it as well. Momotaz mentions receiving an advance of 40,000 BDT from her waste dealer, a debt she is committed to repaying monthly. This advance, as she noted, is a strategy employed by the dealer to secure and retain tokai, ensuring a steady supply of workers for his expanding business. Such dynamics, both protective and transactional, shape the intricate web of relationships within the landfill community.

Less Harassment and Secure Work

The landfill, for many tokai, is a safer and more respectful working environment compared to some other avenues. While this might seem counterintuitive the preference of many tokai for waste picking in the dumpsites over door-to-door waste collection is rooted in their experiences with harassment and exploitation. Sriti's account provides clarity on this choice. Despite earning potentially lesser than City Corporation employees, she found solace in the relative respect and safety offered by the landfill environment. The challenges associated with door-to-door waste collection, particularly for women, are numerous. They often confront inappropriate advances and propositions from residents. Moreover, they sometimes grapple with financial exploitation, with security guards or households offering diminished compensation for their services.

Conversely, the landfill provides an environment where tokai can collaborate and operate collectively. This camaraderie not only offers mutual support but also serves as a deterrent against potential harassers. In essence, for many tokai, the landfill is not just a place of work, but a refuge — a space where they can earn their livelihood with a modicum of dignity and security. Similarly, Saleha found the landfill project offered her more secure work. She stated:

আমি ছুট বেলায় পা ভেঙ্গে যায় যখন আমার বয়স ছিল সাত বছর। এরপর আমি প্রতিবন্ধি হয়ে যাই। আমার মা অনেক চিকিৎসা করার পরেও এটা ভাল হয়নি, ডাক্তার বলছে বড় হলে নাকি এটা ভাল হয়ে যাবে। আমি এখন প্রতিবন্ধি আছি, ভাল করে হাটতে পারি না, অনেক ক্ষণ দাঁড়িয়ে থাকতে পারি না। যদি আমি ফ্যান্টাস্টিক কাজ নিজে যাই, তারা আমাকে কাজ দিবে না কারণ আমি টু একজন প্রতিবন্ধি।

I became disabled after breaking my left leg when I was seven years old. My mother tried several times to seek treatment for this, but the doctors said it would be fine when I grew up. I am still disabled; I cannot walk quickly and cannot stand up for a long time. If I want to work in the factories, they will not employ me because I am disabled. (Saleha)

Saleha's story sheds light on the interplay of personal circumstances and employment choices within the context of the tokai community. Facing a disability, she was fortunate to have guardians who were forthright about her condition, ensuring she was not subjected to humiliation or avoidance in her marital home. This sense of openness and acceptance set the tone for her professional choices as well.

For Saleha, waste picking was not merely a job but a beacon of independence and dignity. The vocation offered her a sense of freedom and autonomy, traits she highly valued. The security associated with the profession further cemented her decision to pursue it.

Her story is not an isolated one. The landfill serves as a refuge for many who, due to health issues or other personal constraints, find it challenging to secure employment in more traditional sectors. In waste picking, they find an opportunity not just to earn a living, but to do so with a degree of self-determination and respect. The landfill, in this sense, becomes a space of inclusivity and hope for many like Saleha.

Possible Advance Money and Loan Benefits

The informal system of advances and loans, known as *dadon* in Bangla, plays a pivotal role in shaping the employment dynamics within the landfill community. This financial arrangement acts as both a carrot and a stick for the tokai. On one hand, the ability to access advance money provides immediate financial relief and flexibility to the tokai, especially in times of urgency. The proactive approach of some waste dealers, who offer advances on a weekly basis, ensures a steady inflow of cash, acting as a safety net for many tokai. This financial arrangement not only incentivizes them to continue working with a particular dealer but also encourages them to bring in new tokai to the fold, expanding the workforce. However, there is a flip side to this seemingly beneficial arrangement. The advances and loans, while providing immediate relief, also bind the tokai into a cycle of debt. This indebtedness effectively ties them to a single waste dealer, limiting their autonomy and freedom to explore other opportunities or shift allegiances. In essence, while the *dadon* system offers immediate financial advantages, it also perpetuates a system of dependence, keeping the tokai tethered to specific dealers. Alisa stated:

আমরা এখন নুতুন নুতুন মাল পাচ্ছি মনে করেন পশু পাখির হাড়ি, জামা কাপড়, মেডিসিন ট্যাবলেট ইত্যাদি। আমাদের মাহাজান বলছে সে আমাদের বেশি টাকা দিবে এই নুতুন মাল পাইলে, এটা নাকি ওনার নতুন ব্যবসা খুলতে সাহায্য করবে। আমি এখন অনেক টাকা আয় করতে পারি।

We are getting new types of waste [animal bone, cloths, medicine tablet covers, etc.]. Our mahajan [a waste dealer- who employ tokai for waste picking in the landfill] said he will pay us more for these new wastes because these will help him to extend his business. I can earn additional money from him. (Alisa)

Nasrin's story paints a vivid picture of the challenges, both financial and personal, faced by many tokai working in the landfill. Her narrative underscores the complexities of the *dadon* system and its implications. Starting with a substantial advance of 50,000 BDT from her waste dealer, Nasrin found herself bound in a commitment, with a monthly deduction of 1,500 BDT from her earnings to service this debt. This financial arrangement, which could have been manageable under normal circumstances, became increasingly burdensome after a tragic accident. When a reversing waste truck trapped her, the severity of her injuries was such that her survival seemed miraculous to the onlookers. While the incident would typically warrant a break from such a hazardous workplace, Nasrin's outstanding debt to her waste dealer, combined with additional funds advanced for her treatment, compelled her to continue. This financial strain was further exacerbated by her husband's gambling addiction, which not only depleted their savings but also plunged them deeper into debt with relatives. Driven to desperation, Nasrin took a 30,000 BDT loan from NGOs to manage her immediate liabilities, including releasing her husband from his debts and covering their monthly house rent of 4,000 BDT.

Nasrin's story is emblematic of the multiple pressures many tokai face. Beyond the immediate challenges of their work environment, they often grapple with personal crises and financial obligations that keep them tethered to the landfill, even in the face of significant adversity.

Marium's experiences further illustrate the intricate web of financial obligations and personal challenges that many tokai grapple with. For Marium, her tenure in the landfill was not just about earning a living; it was predominantly about servicing a series of debts that have mounted over time. The lockdown period, which restricted her ability to work, exacerbated her financial strain. Unable to meet basic expenses like house rent, Marium found herself compelled to take a substantial loan of 45,000 taka. This loan, while providing temporary relief, added to her growing list of financial obligations, pushing her to work even harder to alleviate her debt. Another significant financial burden came in the form of a 30,000 BDT loan from a local NGO. This loan, taken on her brother's recommendation, was used for the medical treatment of her ailing mother-in-law. While it addressed an immediate health crisis, the repercussions of this debt weighed heavily on Marium. The strain of repaying it impacted her ability to meet other familial responsibilities, such as purchasing clothes for her children during the significant Eid festival. Her sacrifices even extended to basic necessities like food.

Marium's narrative is a poignant testament to the resilience and determination of many tokai. Confronted with a myriad of challenges, both financial and personal, they persistently strive to navigate their circumstances, often making significant sacrifices along the way. The landfill, for many like Marium, becomes both a source of sustenance and a means to chip away at the mountain of debt that overshadows their lives.

Similarly, Kohinur took loans from her waste dealer and an NGO to help with medical costs and kept waste picking in order to repay these debts:

পুলা আহাত হল, তার অপারেশন আর জন্য ৫০,০০০ হাজার টাকা চলে গেল। আমার ছেলে ট্রাক গাড়ীর হেল্লার ছিল সে মাল ওঠা নামার কাজে সাহায্য করত। আমি কিছু টাকা মাহাজানের কাজ থেকে নিয়েছিলাম আর কিছু টাকা সবাই মিলে ওড়িয়ে দিয়েছিল। কিছু টাকা সমিতি থেকে এনে তারপর ছেলের জীবন বাঁচালাম।

My son had an accident in the landfill project while he was working. He was a helper in a waste truck and support driver to pick up and drop off rubbish from the city bins to the landfill. I have spent almost 50,000 taka for his operation and other medical costs. I have received some money from my waste dealer and also took a loan from an NGO. (Kohinur)

Kohinur's story further highlights the interconnectedness of personal challenges and financial obligations in the lives of many tokai. While the landfill serves as a means to earn a livelihood, for several, it becomes a lifeline in their attempt to extricate themselves from a quagmire of debt. Her predicament is exacerbated by her husband's gambling addiction. Once the owner of a grocery shop, he squandered his resources, taking money from the business to fund his gambling habit. His losses mounted, and he soon found himself borrowing money, plunging their family deeper into debt. Kohinur's poignant statement, highlighting her husband's unwillingness and inability to address his financial obligations, underscores the burden she shoulders. It is not just about managing her own responsibilities; she's also left to navigate the fallout from her husband's reckless behaviour. This burden drives her to make hard choices. In her quest to augment her income and manage the escalating debt, she enlists the help of her daughter, a decision that reflects both her desperation and determination.

Kohinur's narrative, much like Marium's, stands as a testament to the resilience of many tokai. While the landfill represents a means to earn, for several, it becomes a crucial avenue to regain control over their lives, overshadowed by debt and personal challenges. Their tenacity and determination to persevere, even in the face of adversity, are emblematic of the spirit of many tokai who see the landfill as more than just a workplace – it is a path to reclaiming their agency and autonomy.

Landfill a Place for Love and Relationships

For some tokai, the landfill is a social environment where personal relationships and connections can be forged. The dynamics of the landfill, populated by a diverse group of individuals, including male tokai, truck drivers, security guards, and waste dealers, present opportunities for interactions that might evolve into deeper relationships. The reasons for seeking these relationships can be multifaceted. For some, it might be the allure of companionship in a demanding and often isolated line of work. For others, forming connections with certain individuals might offer a semblance of protection or preferential treatment within the landfill's ecosystem. Relationships with truck drivers or waste dealers, for instance, could potentially provide access to better quality waste or more lucrative deals.

However, it is crucial to approach this dynamic with nuance. While some relationships might be consensual and mutually beneficial, there's always the potential for power imbalances, given the hierarchy that exists within the landfill community. The motivations for forming relationships, the benefits derived from them, and the potential challenges they might introduce all add layers of complexity to the social fabric of the landfill environment. Asma stated:

আগে ময়লার বাগার ভাল ছিল, দিন দিন এটার পরিবেশ নষ্ট হয়ে যাচ্ছে। কিছু অল্প বয়সের টুকাই এখানে এসে খারাপ কাজ করে, পুরুষ মানুষের সাথে মেলামেশা, এরা অনেকে আবার জঙ্গলে গিয়ে কি সব করে। অনেক সময় ময়লার টিলার পিছনে গিয়ে এসব খারাপ কাজ করে। এরা ময়লার বাগারের সম্মান নষ্ট করতেছে। আমি বিবাহিত, আমি কখনও অপরিচিত কারও সাথে কথা বলি না। আমি খালি কাজ করি, কাজ শেষে বাসায় যাই।

Earlier the landfill environment was good, now it is going to be bad. Some young unmarried tokai commit illegal affairs with other men, they do something in the bush area and behind the waste tilla [storage]. They have damaged this project's reputation. I am married so I never meet with strangers. I just finish my work and return home. (Asma)

The landfill, with its diverse community of workers, becomes a space where personal, professional, and economic motivations intersect. For young tokai, the draw of the landfill is not solely rooted in economic necessity. Alongside the allure of earning, the environment offers a setting where they can foster personal connections with men, be it fellow tokai, waste dealers, truck drivers, or security guards.

Asma's account sheds light on the evolving nature of relationships within the landfill. Some of these relationships, formed out of proximity and shared experiences, blossom into romantic engagements, leading to marriages. The landfill, in this sense, becomes a backdrop for stories of love and companionship, a place where life partners are discovered and families are formed. Not all these relationships have happy endings. Asma highlights the complexities that sometimes arise,

such as the strain on relationships due to men taking on multiple wives, leading to the breakdown of family structures.

Beyond personal connections, some tokai also cultivate relationships for strategic reasons. Aligning with security guards, for instance, can provide them with valuable insider information, helping them gain access to more valuable waste when it arrives at the landfill. In essence, the landfill is not just a workplace; it is a microcosm of society, with its own set of relationships, dynamics, and challenges. Within its confines, stories of love, ambition, strategy, and survival play out, reflecting the myriad motivations that drive the tokai.

The landfill's vast expanse and relative isolation make it a unique environment where a multitude of activities and interactions occur. For some, like the men Sriti mentions, the landfill offers a discreet space, away from prying eyes, where they can indulge in activities like drug use and gambling. The relative lack of oversight and the sense of freedom the open space provides make it an attractive hub for such activities. These shared interests and pastimes can lead to the formation of close-knit groups and bonds of friendship, further drawing more men into the landfill's fold. On the other hand, the landfill is also seen as a space for personal connections of a different kind. As highlighted earlier, for some tokai, the landfill offers an opportunity to forge romantic relationships. Working side by side, sharing challenges, and navigating the complexities of the environment together can lead to the blossoming of romantic interests. For these individuals, the landfill is not just about economic sustenance; it is also a space where they might find love and potentially a life partner.

Both these dynamics highlight the multifaceted nature of the landfill environment. It is not just a workplace; it is a social space, with its own set of informal rules, relationships, and networks. Whether driven by the pursuit of personal pleasure, the need for camaraderie, or the hope of finding love, individuals are drawn to the landfill for reasons that extend beyond mere economic necessity.

Razia shared her fear that her husband might find a second marriage in the landfill project:

পুরুষ মানুষকে বিশ্বাস করা অনেক কঠিন, তাদের একটা বউ থাকতেও আর একটা বউ চাইতেই পারে। তারা তাদের মন আর আগ্রহ যেকোন সময় পরিবর্তন করতে পারে। যেহেতু আমার নিজের বাবা দুইটা বিয়া করছে আমার মাকে ছেঁরে গেছে। আমি কিভাবে আমার জামাইকে বিশ্বাস করি সে আমার সাথে এটা করবে না। আমার শুশুর ও দুইটা বিয়া করছে তার দুই বউ একসাথে থাকে।

It is hard to believe men. They have one wife in the house. But any time they can change their mind and show interest in others. My father got a second marriage and left my mother; how

can I believe that my husband will not do this with me? My father-in-law also got two marriages and his two wives lived together in the same house. (Razia)

Public Attention

The influence of media and the allure of fame in the digital age have permeated even the most unlikely of spaces, including the landfill. For some tokai, the landfill is not just a place to earn a living; it is also a potential stage where they can gain visibility and recognition. Tokai are not immune from the 21st century desire for media attention and the appeal of going viral. The proliferation of social media platforms and the rapid dissemination of content mean that anyone, from any background, can potentially achieve a moment of fame. For these tokai, seeing themselves on television or social networking sites offers a sense of validation and a brief escape from the daily grind.

The presence of foreigners and journalists in the landfill also presents an opportunity. Interactions with them can lead to photographs that might be shared widely, or interviews that might be broadcasted. Such moments offer the tokai a chance to share their stories, challenges, and aspirations with a broader audience. Moreover, the act of being photographed with outsiders, especially foreigners, can boost their social standing within their community, offering a fleeting sense of importance and recognition. Nasrin shared:

এখানে অনেক সাংবাদিক এসে ছবি তুলার জন্য, তারা আমাদের ছবি পেপারে এবং টেলিভিশন এ প্রচার করে। অনেক মানুষ এখন আমাকে চিনে কারন আমার ছবি এবং ভিডিও আছে। অনেক বিদেশি এসে আমার সাথে কথা বলার জন্য। অনেক ভয় পায় তাদের সাথে কথা বলতে কারন ভাবে যদি তাদের আত্মীয় বা বন্ধু বান্ধব তাদের দেখে ফেলে টেলিভিশন এ। আমি আবার এসব ভয় পাই না, আমি আমার নিজেকে টেলিভিশনে দেখতে পছন্দ করি।

Journalists always come to see us and take photos; they circulate these in the newspaper and some private TV channels. Many people now know me because someone posted my videos and our working conditions after many foreigners came to speak with me. Some tokai are scared about being revealed. They run away because they think their friends and relatives will know their real work, they feel ashamed. But I do not care. I love to see myself on the TV. (Nasrin)

However, it is essential to approach this dynamic with sensitivity. While some tokai genuinely seek out these interactions for the reasons mentioned, there is also the potential for exploitation, where their stories might be taken out of context or sensationalized. The desire for media attention, while understandable in the age of viral content, brings with it both opportunities and challenges for the tokai community.

Push Factors to Waste Picking

Family Relationships

An unhappy marriage can be a significant push factor leading individual, particularly women, into informal sectors such as waste picking in the dumpsite project. In societies where marital relationships often define social status and economic security, escaping an unhappy or abusive marriage can be a daunting task. For many women, the societal expectations, combined with economic dependency on their spouses, make it challenging to leave a difficult marriage. In such contexts, the landfill offers more than just an opportunity to earn a livelihood; it provides an escape, a place of relative autonomy and independence. Working in the dumpsite allows these women to carve out a space for themselves, away from the strains and pressures of their domestic lives.

Informal waste picking does not demand formal qualifications or significant startup capital. It offers a flexible work environment, where one can determine their hours and work pace. This flexibility can be particularly appealing to women escaping restrictive domestic environments, offering them a semblance of control over their lives. Furthermore, the landfill community, with its diverse group of workers, can offer a sense of camaraderie and support. The shared experiences of hardship, combined with the mutual goal of making a living, can foster strong bonds among the tokai. However, it is essential to acknowledge the challenges that come with this choice. The landfill is a tough environment, with its hazards and uncertainties. Yet, for many women, it is a trade-off they're willing to make, choosing the challenges of the dumpsite over the confines of an unhappy marriage. For example, Razia stated:

আমার খুব কষ্ট লাগে আমার স্বামী আমাকে বিয়ের পরে এই ময়লার কাজে আনছে। আমি প্রথম প্রথম অনেক খারাপ লাগতু এই পরিবেশের সাথে মানিয়ে নিতে। এখানে ১০ থেকে ১২ টা পরিবার আছে তারা সবাই এই ময়লার প্রোজেক্ট এই কাজ করে। আমি তাদের দেখে প্রথম প্রথম অনেক খারাপ লাগতু।

I feel miserable because my husband forced me into waste picking work after our marriage. I feel bad at first. Now I cope with all this. There are 10 to 12 family tenants in my house, most of them work in the project, I feel so bad when I see them working in the dirty place. (Razia)

Razia's story offers a compelling insight into the complexities of familial ties and the lengths to which individuals might go to reclaim their dignity and autonomy. Her journey from an oppressive marital home to the landfill's community paints a vivid picture of resilience and the human desire for acceptance and belonging.

The initial phase of her life post-marriage was marred by humiliation and estrangement. Being illiterate in a family that valued education made her an easy target for derision, particularly from

her mother-in-law. This emotional distress was compounded by her husband's infidelity. Razia's experience is emblematic of the challenges many women face in traditional societies, where their worth is often determined by their educational status and their ability to conform to familial expectations. Yet Razia's decision to migrate to Dhaka City and take up waste picking is a testament to her indomitable spirit. Leaving behind the known, albeit painful, environment of her village and venturing alone into the city is an act of tremendous courage. Her choice of residence, the Matuail area, might be seen as undesirable by many, but for Razia, it was a sanctuary, a place where she could start afresh, away from the shadows of her past. The landfill, often perceived as a place of despair, became Razia's refuge. Here, she found a community of tokai who, despite their hardships, provided the acceptance and camaraderie she had longed for. As she said, this community became her new family, where mutual respect and shared experiences formed the bedrock of their relationships.

Razia's narrative is a poignant reminder of the strength of human spirit and the deep-seated need for belonging. It underscores the fact that sometimes, communities forged out of shared struggles can provide a sense of belonging that traditional familial ties might fail to offer. Her experience in the landfill is a testament to the power of community and the importance of supportive relationships in even the most challenging environments. Amidst the sprawling waste and the daily grind, she found camaraderie, support, and a sense of purpose that eluded her in her earlier life. She stated, "We help each other during crises, and we come together, return together, and eat together", which paints a picture of the close-knit bonds she shares with her fellow tokai. In a setting where the physical work is demanding and the conditions are tough, these bonds become a crucial support system. It is not just about sharing the day's work, but also about looking out for one another, sharing meals, and navigating the challenges of life together. Additionally, her positive relationships with waste dealers and drivers further highlight the interconnectedness of the landfill community. In environments like these, relationships are not just about personal connections; they are also instrumental for survival and success. Waste dealers, recognizing this, often foster good relationships as a strategy to maintain a steady workforce. A content and motivated worker like Razia can become an asset, not just in terms of her work but also in her ability to bring in more workers. Her proactive approach in encouraging her cousin and marketing to recruit other tokai speaks to her sense of ownership and commitment to the community. It shows that when workers feel valued and supported, they not only excel in their roles but also become ambassadors, attracting others to join.

In essence, Razia's journey underscores the transformative power of positive relationships and community support. It also highlights the potential in every individual, irrespective of their

background, to turn challenges into opportunities, find purpose, and contribute positively to their community. In essence, the landfill becomes a refuge, a space of empowerment, and a means to achieve economic self-reliance for women seeking to break free from the constraints of difficult marital relationships.

Illiteracy and Lack of Guardianship

Education is a cornerstone for social mobility and personal growth. However, for many, access to education remains a distant dream, marred by socio-economic constraints and familial challenges. This was evident among the tokai, where limited education, often stemming from family poverty and lack of guidance, significantly influenced their occupational choices. The inability to continue schooling does not just deprive individuals of academic knowledge but also limits their access to a broader spectrum of job opportunities in the future. In many societies, education is more than just learning; it is a ticket to better job prospects, improved social standing, and a chance to break out of the cycle of poverty.

However, when family poverty strikes, education often becomes a luxury that many cannot afford. The immediate need for sustenance overshadows the long-term benefits of schooling. Children might be pulled out of school to contribute to the family income, or the family might not have the means to support their education in the first place. Moreover, the lack of proper guidance from guardians or family members further exacerbates the situation. In the absence of mentors or guiding figures, children and young adults might lack the direction or motivation to pursue education or might not be aware of the avenues available to them. This lack of direction often pushes them towards readily available work opportunities, regardless of the work conditions or prospects.

For tokai, waste picking becomes one such avenue. While the work is hard and the conditions challenging, it offers immediate earnings, which, for many, is a pressing necessity. For example, Rahima stated:

আমি পড়াশুনা করতে পারি নাই কারণ আমার বাবা মা অনেক গরীব ছিল। আমরা আট ভাই বুন ছিলাম। আমি সবার বড়, আমাকে লেখাপড়া কড়াইতে পারে নাই। এটা আমার খারাপ কপাল ছুট থেকেই আমি বাবার বাড়িতে কাজ করে খেতাম। এভাবে আমি বড় হইছি। আমি আমার ভাই বুন দের কে দেখাসুনা করতাম। আমি আমার মাকে কাজে সাহায্য করতাম। আমার মা মানুষের বাড়িতে বাড়িতে বুয়া হিসিবে কাজ করতু, মানুষের কাপড়-চুপুড়, থালা বাসুন আর ঘর পরিষ্কার করে দিত। আমার স্কুলে যাওয়ার সময় ই ছিল না।

I cannot continue my studies because my parents were poor. My family consists of ten members, including five brothers and three sisters. I was the eldest and my father could not support me to go to school. It was my bad fate since childhood. I used to work with my mother at home and

take care my other brothers and sisters. I used to go with my mother to help her in other houses - my mother worked as a servant to clean houses, dishes, clothes. I did not have opportunity to go to school. (Rahima)

Rahima's journey from a village to the streets of Dhaka City is emblematic of the challenges many face in the quest for a better life. Lacking the foundational support of education and without the compass of proper guidance, she, like many others, found herself navigating the vast urban landscape in search of sustainable employment. Her initial foray into the workforce, at a shoe factory, was fraught with challenges. The low wages, combined with the lack of avenues for professional growth, highlighted the harsh reality many uneducated workers face. In industries where skill sets and educational qualifications dictate one's position and pay, Rahima found herself at a disadvantage due to her illiteracy. Her aspirations for a better life and the pressing need to support her family compelled her to seek alternatives. It was then that waste picking, introduced to her by a relative, emerged as a viable option. The landfill, despite its challenges, offered her an opportunity that the formal sectors denied her. While the work was tough and the environment far from ideal, it provided a sense of autonomy and a direct relationship between effort and earnings. This, for Rahima, was a welcome change from the rigid structure and limited pay of the factory job.

Rahima's story is a poignant reminder of the hurdles many face due to the lack of education and guidance. Yet, it also underscores the resilience and adaptability of individuals, highlighting their ability to carve out a space for themselves even in the most challenging circumstances. It speaks to the broader socio-economic dynamics at play, emphasizing the urgent need to ensure access to education and proper mentorship for all, enabling them to make informed life choices.

In essence, the narratives of the tokai shed light on the intricate web of socio-economic factors that dictate life choices. Their stories underscore the importance of ensuring access to education for all, not just as a fundamental right but as a crucial tool for breaking the chains of poverty and enabling better life choices.

From a young age, Tania had no male guardian and had to look after her siblings. Her mother's work in the landfill pushed her into working there too:

আমি পড়াশুনা করতে পারি নাই পরিবারে অনেক অভাব ছিল, আমার বাবা মাকে ছেঁরে চলে গিয়ে অন্য জাইগায় বিয়া করছিল। যার কারণে আমি বলি সবাইকে যে সে মারা গেছে, আমাদের তার সাথে কুন জুগাজুক নাই। সবার কপালে ইস্কুল এ যাওয়া হয় না। আমি আমার মাকে সাহায্য করতাম কারন আমার মা ভাংগারির কাজ করতু, ছোট ভাই কে আমি দেখতাম।

I cannot go to school due to my family's poverty, and because my father divorced my mother, and got another wife when I was 6 years old. That is why I say that my father has died: we have no connection with him. The opportunity for school is not for all. I used to work with my mother who worked in the landfill, and I was responsible for taking care of my brothers.
(Tania)

Mahfuja was pushed into work at a young age and never received schooling due to poverty and lack of a supportive guardian:

অনেক ছুট বেলায় আমার বাবা মা মারা যায়। আমি আমার নানুর কাছে বড় হই। আমি জানি না আমার বয়স আসলে কত হবে। আমি আমার জন্ম সাল জানি না। আমি যদি আপনাকে আমার ভুটার আইডি কার্ড দেখাই তাইলে আপনি বুজবেন আমার বয়স কত। আমি স্কুলে যেতে পারি নাই কারণ আমার কুন ভাল গারজেন্ট ছিল না। আমি মানুষের বাড়িতে কাজ করতাম বাসা বাড়ি পরিষ্কার করা, কাপড় ধুওয়া, আর থালা বাসন ধুইতাম। যখন আমার বয়স ১২ তখন আমি ইট ভাঙ্গার কাজ করতাম। আমার বিয়ের পরে আমি এই ময়লার কাজে আসি।

My parents died while I was very young. I was taken care by my grandmother. I cannot remember my age. I do not know my birth year. If I show you my national id card, you can count my age. I could not go to school because I had few guardians. I used to work in others' houses, to clean their home, clothes, and wash dishes since my childhood. When I was 12 years old, I worked in the brick factories; I broke the rocks and helped others. After my marriage I became involved into landfill project works. (Mahfuja)

Mahfuja's account offers a poignant insight into the hardships faced by many in socio-economically marginalized communities. Her narrative is a testament to the human spirit's resilience, the challenges of childhood adversity, and the intricate web of socio-economic factors that dictate life choices. Orphaned at a tender age, the loss of her parents thrust her into a world of uncertainty. In the absence of immediate family, her grandmother took on the mantle of her guardian. The haze surrounding her own age, the inability to recall specific milestones, speaks to the chaos and challenges that dominated her early years. The absence of formal documentation like a birth certificate further emphasizes the systemic challenges many face in such situations. Education, a fundamental right and a gateway to better opportunities, remained elusive for Mahfuja. Her circumstances, marked by limited guardianship and pressing financial needs, compelled her to enter the workforce at an age when most children are ensconced in the world of learning. Domestic work, with its long hours and limited pay, became her introduction to the world of employment. By the age of 12, her responsibilities expanded to include work at brick factories, a physically demanding and often hazardous job. Breaking rocks and assisting in the arduous processes of brick-making showcases the extent of challenges she faced at such a young age. Marriage brought with it a shift in her occupational landscape. The landfill project, with its myriad challenges but relative autonomy, became her new workplace. While the work was tough,

it might have offered her a semblance of independence, a direct relationship between effort and earnings, and perhaps even a community that understood and shared similar life stories. Mahfuja's narrative is a stark reminder of the disparities that exist in society. It underscores the importance of social safety nets, accessible education, and systemic support for the most vulnerable. It also highlights the indomitable spirit of individuals who, despite overwhelming odds, strive to forge a path for themselves.

Lower Caste and Class

The intersection of caste, class, and gender plays a significant role in shaping the occupational choices and experiences of individuals, especially in South Asian contexts. Historically, caste and class have been potent determinants of one's social standing, access to opportunities, and quality of life. For tokai, these intersections manifest in unique ways, shaping their journey into informal waste picking. Belonging to lower Muslim caste and class groups, many tokai found themselves on the margins of their village societies. Tokai's lower caste and class status inherently limited their job prospects, especially within the confines of their villages.

This socio-economic disadvantage was further exacerbated by the patriarchal norms prevalent in their communities. Bangladeshi expressions of patriarchy, with its rigid gender roles and expectations, placed further constraints on these women. In traditional settings, women's mobility and participation in the workforce, especially outside of their homes, are often restricted. This limitation is intensified by religious norms rooted in Islamic culture. For instance, women are deemed religiously impure during menstruation and post-childbirth, further limiting their interactions and activities until they have undergone specific purification rituals. Such religious restrictions, combined with their lower caste status, meant that these women faced compounded levels of discrimination and marginalization.

For many tokai, migration to urban areas like Dhaka City emerged as a solution to these multi-layered challenges. Cities, with their anonymity and diverse socio-economic fabric, offered an escape from the stifling caste-based discrimination and religious restrictions of their villages. The urban context provided them with the opportunity to challenge and break free from the patriarchal norms that governed their lives in the village.

Yet, challenges do not end with migration. The lower caste and class status that marked their village lives often followed them into the city. With limited skills and education, many found themselves drawn to informal waste picking, one of the few available employment options that did not demand formal qualifications or references. The landfill, with its challenges, provided

them with a semblance of autonomy, a way to earn a living, and a community of peers who shared similar life stories. Kajol stated:

আমার পিতামাতা গরীব ছিল আমি তিন বেলা খাইতে পারি নাই। আমার বাবা নুওকা চালাত। আমার মা মানুষের বাড়িতে বাড়িতে কাজ করত। গ্রামে মেয়ের জন্য ঘরের বাইরে কাজ করা অনেক কঠিন। আমি শহরে আসলাম আর কাজ শুরু করলাম।

My parents are poor, I did not eat three time a day. My father was a boatman. My mother works in another house as a maid servant. There was a lot of restrictions for a girl to work outside the home in my village. I migrated here and started waste picking. (Kajol)

The tokai journey into waste picking is a complex interplay of caste, class, gender, and religious dynamics. It underscores the multifaceted challenges many marginalized women face in their quest for a better life and highlights the resilience and adaptability with which they navigate these challenges. The notion of purity, deeply entrenched in religious and cultural beliefs, has profound implications on individuals' perceptions of themselves and their chosen professions. For individuals like Kajol and Fatema, this notion transcends the religious sphere and intersects with socio-economic realities, shaping their experiences in profound ways.

Kajol's statement reflects the internal conflict she grapples with. Engaging in waste picking, which is perceived as impure work, she found herself navigating the tension between societal perceptions and her personal aspirations. Her desire to change her situation showcases her resilience and determination. Yet, her need to hide herself from others (as she put it) underscores the societal stigma associated with her occupation. It is a poignant reminder of the societal judgments and the weight of cultural norms that individuals like Kajol bear.

Fatema's experiences further highlight the layered challenges faced by those in the lower socio-economic strata. Belonging to a lower class, she confronts not just the societal perceptions of impurity but also the tangible impacts of her socio-economic status. Her limited power in bargaining for the price of waste is emblematic of the broader power dynamics at play. It is a stark reflection of how socio-economic status shaped her agency, negotiation power, and ultimately, her livelihood.

Both Kajol and Fatema's narratives underscore the intricate interplay of religious beliefs, societal norms, and socio-economic realities. Their stories highlight the challenges of navigating societal perceptions while also emphasizing the resilience with which they confront these challenges. Through their experiences, we are reminded of the profound impacts of societal norms and the importance of challenging and redefining these norms to create more inclusive and equitable societies. Fatema stated:

আমাদের মাহাজান মাজে মাজে আমাদের ওজন এ টাকা কম দেয়া কারন আমরা তাদের সাথে জামেলা করি না আমরা চুপ চাপ থাকি। আমার সব কিছুই জানি। কিছুই বলি না। আমরা তাদের কাজ থেকে টাকা দাদন নিছি কাজ করার আগেই তাই কিছু বলার নাই। আমি ২০০০০ টাকা দাদন নিছিলাম। মাহাজান আমাদের কে কখনও বকা জকা করে না যদি কাজে যাই তহিলে একটা মাল টুকালে মাহাজান ও দুই টাকা পায় আমরাও দুই টাকা পাই আর কি, আসলে কাজে না গেলে মাহাজান বলে তুমি আমার কাজ থেকে টাকা নিয়ে খাচ্ছ আর কাজ কর না।

Our waste dealer sometimes gives us less money because we are powerless and have no bargaining power. In most cases we take advance money so we cannot bargain if they give us less money... sometimes they pay less by showing less weight of the materials, we know everything, we do not say anything because we received debt and advance money. I took 20000 taka as an advance. Waste dealer does not rebuke me if I collect materials, it will help both waste dealers and I to earn some money. Waste dealers sometimes tell us -you are eating by taking some advance from me but you are not working regularly. (Fatema)

Kajol expressed her experience of exploitation and oppression due to her lower position in the family. She stated:

আমার শুশুর বাড়ির কিছু লোক আমাকে অনেক নিচু চুখে দেখে, তারা বলে আমি নাকি খারাপ জায়গায় কাজ করি আর বলে আমি নাকি শহরে নুংরা কাজ করি। তারা আমার মা বাবাকে নিয়ে কথা বলে, অনেকে বলে আমার জন্ম নাকি ঠিক নাই। তারা বলে, ওর বাবা মেথর ছিল, তাই তার মেয়ে তু ওই একই কাজ ই করবে। এটা এখন স্বাভাবিক, তারা এমনটা বলবেই। আমার অনেক খারাপ লাগে, আমার স্বামী বলে মানুষের কথায় কান না দিতে, মানুষের কথায় কি আসে যায়। আমি মনে করি আমি ভাল কাজ করতেছি, আমি তু আর মানুষের বাসায় গিয়ে চুরি করতেছি না।

Some relatives from my father-in-law's house humiliated me by saying that I was doing bad tasks and an ill job in the city. They blamed my parents and where I am from. My father was a methor [a sanitation worker] so [of course] his daughter will do the worst jobs. That is normal, they claimed. I feel bad, but my husband told me not to care about their words, that I was doing good job, [working] rather than stealing from someone's house. (Kajol)

Waste picking, despite its critical role in waste management and recycling processes, is often shrouded in stigma in many societies, including Bangladesh. The societal perception of this occupation is deeply influenced by a combination of factors, including cultural norms, socio-economic hierarchies, and notions of cleanliness and purity.

Tania's account provides a poignant glimpse into the lived experiences of those involved in waste picking. Her narrative underscores the daily challenges they face, not just in terms of the physical rigours of their job, but also the societal prejudices and biases. Being avoided by others while walking on the roadside is emblematic of the larger societal attitudes that deem waste pickers as polluted or impure. Such reactions perpetuate feelings of shame, alienation, and lowered self-worth among waste pickers.

Tania's recounting of people's reactions — the comments about the smell, the intrusive questions about her occupation, and the admonitions to avoid certain areas — paints a picture of daily microaggressions she has to navigate. These experiences can have profound psychological impacts, reinforcing feelings of marginalization and otherness.

The "feeling bad" that Tania describes is not just a reflection of her personal emotions but also a testament to the societal need for greater empathy and understanding. Her narrative underscores the urgency for broader societal shifts in perceptions. It highlights the importance of recognizing the dignity of all forms of labour and the need for interventions, be it in the form of awareness campaigns or policy shifts, to challenge and change these deep-seated prejudices.

Family Poverty and Vulnerability

Economic hardship is a pervasive and multifaceted challenge that often drives individuals into professions deemed undesirable or stigmatized by society. The narrative of Kohinur is a testament to the intricate web of socio-economic circumstances that lead individuals into waste picking in places like the landfill project. Her story paints a picture of an unyielding cycle of poverty. Born into an economically challenged family, her life's trajectory has been shaped by the intersecting forces of poverty, societal expectations, and personal circumstances. Her mention of being married to a husband who did not work regularly adds another layer to her economic vulnerability. In many traditional societies, women are often economically dependent on their male counterparts. Thus, a husband's irregular employment can exacerbate an already precarious financial situation. The act of selling their small piece of land in the village is emblematic of the desperate measures families often resort to in the face of relentless economic hardship. Land, in many agrarian societies, is not just a piece of property but a symbol of stability, security, and identity. Parting with such an asset signifies the gravity of their economic situation and the lengths to which they are willing to go to ensure their survival.

Kohinur's journey into waste picking is not just a personal choice but a consequence of a series of socio-economic factors. Her story underscores the urgent need for holistic interventions, both at the policy and societal levels, to address the root causes of such economic vulnerabilities. It also serves as a poignant reminder of the human stories behind professions often marginalized and stigmatized by society. Then, because she had nothing to do in the village, Kohinur decided to go to the city and began to earn money waste picking:

গ্রামে মহিলাদের কুন কাজ কাম ছিল না। আমার তিন টা ছেলে মেয়ে ছিল। আমি চিন্তা করতেছিলাম কিভাবে তাদের খাওয়াবু, কিভাবে জীবন চলবে। মাজে মাজে আমার জামাই আমার সাথে খারাপ ব্যবহার করত। একদিন সে আমাকে অনেক মারছিল, কিন্তু আমি কারু সাথে টা বলি নাই। সে বকা জকা করছে কারন আমি তাকে বাজারে গিয়ে কিছু

কিনতে বলছিলাম, সুসারে কিছুই ছিল না রান্না করার মত। এক কথায় দুই কথায় সে রাগান্বিত হয়ে আমাকে অনেক মার দিছিল। সে অনেক রাখাপ মানুষ। আমি ছাইছিলাম সংসার তাকে টিকে রাখতে আমার ছেলে মেয়ের মুখের দিকে তাকিয়ে। তারপর আমি সিধাস্ত নিলাম ঢাকা এসে কাম করে টাকা আয় করে তাদের জীবন বাঁচাব।

There were no jobs in the village for women. I had three children. I was wondering how to feed them [...] Sometimes my husband misbehaves with me. Once he beat me; I did not share this with my parents or other relatives. He rebuked me if I told him to go to the bazaar to buy something. After one or two words, he become angry and beat me. He was very furious. I stayed with my husband only to think about my children's future. Then I decided to go to city to earn [my own living] and support my children. (Kohinur)

Kohinur's experience highlights the complex interplay of familial dynamics, societal expectations, and economic constraints that can shape an individual's life trajectory. In many cultures, especially in South Asia, familial support plays a crucial role in an individual's well-being, particularly for women, who may be more economically and socially dependent on their families due to societal norms. Her mention of receiving no support from her mother-in-law's house resonates with the societal expectations placed on women. Often, after marriage, women are expected to find support within their husband's family. However, Kohinur's narrative — "My father-in-law's family will not feed us" — paints a grim picture of neglect and apathy from her in-laws. This lack of support amplifies her economic vulnerability, leading to dire circumstances where basic sustenance like food becomes scarce, as evidenced by her subsisting on just a piece of bread and tea. It is in this backdrop of hunger, neglect, and desperation that the landfill project emerges as a beacon of hope for Kohinur. The encouragement from her neighbour, already involved in the project, is more than just a job recommendation; it is a lifeline. The neighbour's intervention underscores the importance of community networks in providing support and opening up avenues of opportunity, especially for those marginalized and facing dire circumstances.

Kohinur's story, while deeply personal, is also emblematic of broader socio-economic challenges. It underscores the urgent need for societal understanding, economic opportunities, and support systems that can help individuals like Kohinur navigate and overcome their challenges. It also emphasizes the importance of community solidarity and the pivotal role that individuals within a community can play in uplifting and supporting one another. She stated:

আমার প্রতিবেশি আমাকে মাহাজের সাথে পরিচয় করিয়ে দিয়েছিল। সে আমাকে সিখাইছিল কিভাবে কাজ করতে হয়। আমি অনেক কিছু শিখছি তার কাজ থেকে কিভাবে ময়লা বাছাই করা, কিভাবে ভাল মাল চিনা। আমি আমার

সন্তাকে এখন স্কুলে দিছি। আমার ছেলেটা পড়া লেখা করতে চায় না এরপর তাকে নিয়ে এই ময়লার ব্যবসায় লাগিয়ে দেছি। আমার মাহাজানের সাথে থাকে আর কাজ করে।

My neighbour first introduced me to waste dealers and taught me how to do this. I have learnt many things from her, especially which waste I need to sort out. Now I have enrolled my children in the school. But my son did not want to continue his study. So, I involved him in this waste business, and he works with my waste dealers. (Kohinur)

Kohinur's narrative is a poignant reflection of resilience, determination, and the pursuit of autonomy in the face of adversity. The journey from dependency to self-reliance is marked by significant personal and socio-economic challenges, and Kohinur's story offers a window into this transformative journey.

Initiating her own income-generating activities marked a crucial turning point in Kohinur's life. In many traditional societies, women's economic independence is not just about financial self-sufficiency; it is also a means to reclaim agency, dignity, and control over one's life. Her decision to never depend on her husband again is emblematic of her determination to chart her own course, free from the constraints and uncertainties of relying on another.

The revelation about her husband's second marriage and their subsequent separation adds layers of complexity to her narrative. While the exact circumstances of their separation are not detailed, the very fact that she continued to persevere, focusing on her own economic activities and the well-being of her children, speaks volumes about her resilience.

Kohinur's aspirations for her children's future — buying land for them — is more than just a financial goal. In many cultures, land ownership signifies stability, security, and a legacy. Her prayer to Allah, wishing for the strength to ensure she does not leave behind debts, reflects her deep sense of responsibility and her desire to provide a stable foundation for her children's future. Her perspective on her children's future is both pragmatic and forward-looking. While she recognizes the value of education, she also prepares them for the possibility of continuing in waste picking, should they choose not to pursue formal education. This balanced outlook underscores her practical understanding of the challenges and realities of their socio-economic context.

In essence, Kohinur's story is a testament to her ability to overcome adversity, chart its own course, and aspire for a better future. It also underscores the complex interplay of personal choices, societal norms, and economic realities that shape individual lives, and the importance of resilience, determination, and community support in navigating these challenges.

Disability and Waste Work

Health issues and physical disabilities can significantly impact an individual's ability to engage in regular forms of employment, especially in societies where accessibility and accommodations for those with disabilities are limited. The socio-economic challenges faced by those with health issues or disabilities often compound their vulnerabilities, making them more susceptible to economic hardships and limiting their employment options. This study's findings underscore the multifaceted reasons that drive individuals towards informal sectors like waste picking in the landfill project. For individuals with health problems or physical disabilities, the informal nature of waste picking offers certain advantages. Informal sectors often provide more flexible working hours, allowing individuals to work according to their own capacity and pace. This is particularly beneficial for those with health issues that might prevent them from adhering to strict job schedules. Unlike formal employment sectors which might require specific qualifications or physical standards, waste picking does not have stringent entry requirements, making it more accessible to those with disabilities or health concerns. Working in a communal environment like a landfill can offer a sense of camaraderie and support. Fellow waste pickers can provide assistance, share resources, and offer moral support, making the work environment more accommodating. For many with health issues or disabilities, the need for medical care or assistance can lead to increased expenses. The immediate cash income from waste picking can help address these urgent financial needs.

However, it is essential to acknowledge the challenges as well. The landfill environment can be harsh, with potential exposure to hazardous materials, which might exacerbate health issues. Additionally, the lack of formal labour protections means that those with disabilities might not have access to necessary accommodations or safeguards. Saleha stated:

আমার জীবনের কুন ভরসা নাই, আমি শারীরিক প্রতিবন্ধী। আমি পারি না ভারি কাজ করতে, পারি না ভারি কিছু নিয়ে যেতে অন্যদের মত। আমি পারি না বাসা বাড়িতে কাজ করতে, পারি না সব জায়গায় কাজ করতে। আমার কুমুরের হাড্ডি ভাঙ্গা জন্ম গত ভাবে, কুমুরে অনেক ব্যাথা। আমি অনেক সময় দাঁড়িয়ে কাজ করতে পারি না। আমি এখন ময়লার দুকানে ময়লা বাচাই করে কয়টা ভাত খাই। এটা ভাল যে আমি এখানে বসে বসে কাজ করতে পারি।

My life has no value and hope, I am physically disabled. I cannot carry heavy weights like others. I cannot work all places. I cannot engage myself in other household works. I have a hip fracture from giving birth to children. I am suffering low back pain. I cannot stand up for a long time. I am working in waste shop to sort reusable rubbish. It is good I can sit down and work here. (Saleha)

The narratives presented highlight the profound impact that physical disabilities have on individuals' employment opportunities and overall quality of life. In societies where employment

opportunities are closely tied to one's physical capabilities, those with disabilities face unique challenges. Saleha's experience underscores a prevalent issue faced by many with physical disabilities - the limited scope of employment opportunities. Traditional jobs, even those considered 'low-skilled' like sweeping or dishwashing, can be inaccessible due to the physical demands they place on workers. The inability to perform these tasks not only limits their job opportunities but also affects their self-worth and societal perception. For many with disabilities, the landfill offers a more accommodating work environment. As the work does not have strict physical requirements and allows for flexibility in terms of hours and tasks, it becomes a viable option for those who are otherwise marginalized in the job market.

The participant's account of her husband's disability sheds light on the broader socio-economic implications of disabilities. When physical incapacity limits an individual's earning potential, it not only strains their immediate family's resources but also affects their social standing. Comparisons with more affluent family members further exacerbate feelings of inadequacy, leading to familial tensions and strains in relationships. The narratives also allude to a larger societal issue – the stigmatization of disability. The reluctance of factories to hire disabled individuals, the limited job roles offered, and the perceived inferiority compared to more affluent family members all highlight societal biases towards those with disabilities.

In summary, the accounts presented serve as poignant reminders of the challenges faced by those with disabilities in societies where employment and societal worth are intertwined. While the landfill offers a semblance of economic independence, it also underscores the urgent need for more inclusive employment practices, societal awareness, and support structures to ensure that all individuals, regardless of their physical abilities, have equal opportunities and are treated with dignity and respect.

Gender Division of Waste Picking and Income Inequality

The dynamics of gender roles within the realm of waste picking, as elucidated in this study, bring to light the intricate interplay between societal norms, economic constraints, and physical capabilities. This nuanced understanding provides a deeper insight into the lives of those engaged in the waste management system, particularly in the Matuail landfill. There are a number of issues which are impacted by the gender division of labour in waste picking.

- Prevalence of gender-based poverty: Poverty, while universally oppressive, disproportionately affects women in urban settings. Labelling this as gender-based poverty underscores a critical concern - economic disparities heightened by gender. The

study's statistics, which indicate a higher number of women engaged in waste picking compared to men, reinforce this assertion.

- The division of labour based on gender is evident in the tasks undertaken by men and women. Women predominantly engage in prolonged activities of collecting and sorting rubbish, which, while not physically intensive, require extended hours of work. Men, on the other hand, are primarily responsible for the disposal of rubbish. Despite their seemingly shorter work hours, they claim their tasks are more strenuous, involving the collection of heavy metals.
- The distinction in tasks based on gender is also influenced by perceptions of physical capability. Men argue that their involvement in collecting heavy metals is due to the physical demands of the job, implying that such tasks might be challenging for women. Conversely, women's preference for collecting soft plastics and lighter materials can be seen as a strategic choice to optimize their earnings without overexerting themselves physically.

While landfill work perpetuates a cycle of poverty due to its informal nature and meager earnings, it does offer a semblance of financial relief for many. The ability to derive even a modest income can be crucial for survival, especially for women who might have limited alternative employment opportunities. The gender roles within the waste picking sector are not isolated phenomena; they mirror broader societal norms and perceptions about appropriate roles for men and women. The notion that certain tasks are suited for a particular gender is deeply entrenched in societal values. For instance, Mahfuja stated:

এখানে আমরা তিনজন মহিলা আছি যারা ভাঙ্গারির দোকান চালাই, আমরা সবাই আগে টুকাই ই ছিলাম। আমি অনেক কিছু শিকছি এখান থেকে, মাল চিনছি, দাম দেকছি, তারপর টাকা জমিয়ে দোকান দিছি। আমি আগে প্লাস টিক বুতুল, নারকেলের আইচা, গ্লাস, সিলভার জাতীয় জিনিস, আর বুতুলের মুকা তুকাতাম। এ গুলা আবার বাছাই করে পদে পদে বিক্রি করতাম আলাদা ব্যাগে ভরে। আমি এখন সন মালের দাম জানি। আমি আমার কর্মীদের কখন ও থকাবু না মালের দাম কম দিয়ে, আমি জানি তাদের কষ্ট।

We three are the only women who are running the waste shop here. Most waste dealers are men. I used to work as a tokai, I have learnt many things and saved money to run this shop. I used to collect plastic bottles, empty coconut, glass, silver, bone, different bottle lids etc. I sold these to waste dealers by sorting out with different bags. I know all the prices of the materials. Now I select the price of the collected materials. I will not betray my workers; I know their situation. (Mahfuja)

Mahfuja's insights and experiences shed light on a broader economic dynamic within the waste picking sector. Evidently, power imbalances and misinformation play pivotal roles in the earnings

distribution between tokai and waste dealers. These dynamics include economic exploitation, where male waste dealers often employ manipulative tactics to undervalue the contributions of tokai. By falsely attributing price standards to governmental regulation, they justify offering lower rates to tokai, thereby securing larger profit margins for themselves. This deceptive practice underscores the systemic economic exploitation that tokai face. Additionally, the earnings of tokai are contingent on two primary factors: the quality of waste they collect and the price they secure from waste dealers. The better the quality of the waste, the higher the potential earnings. However, this potential is often stifled by waste dealers who, capitalizing on their dominant position, dictate prices that are not commensurate with the value of the collected materials. Thirdly, waste dealers, due to their control over the pricing mechanism, not only earn more but also command more respect within the waste management hierarchy. This respect is not necessarily rooted in their contribution to the waste management process but rather in their ability to dominate and influence economic transactions. Their elevated status contrasts sharply with the marginalized position of tokai, who, despite being integral to the waste management process, remain economically and socially disadvantaged.

Mahfuja's awareness of the exploitation tactics of male waste dealers underscores the importance of information dissemination among tokai. Armed with accurate knowledge about the true value of their collected waste, tokai can better negotiate prices and challenge unfair practices. Advocacy initiatives, perhaps spearheaded by tokai like Mahfuja, can play a pivotal role in rebalancing the power dynamics and ensuring fairer economic outcomes for all involved.

In essence, Mahfuja's narrative underscores the urgent need to address the systemic inequalities and exploitative practices within the waste picking sector. Ensuring fair remuneration for tokai is not just an economic imperative but also a moral one, promoting equity and justice within the broader waste management ecosystem. The gender division of labour in waste picking is a reflection of larger societal structures and norms. Addressing the economic disparities faced by women in this sector requires not only economic interventions but also broader societal change to challenge and reshape established gender norms.

Rina's account provides a vivid portrayal of the gendered economic disparities within the waste picking sector in Bangladesh. Her story underscores several crucial points. Waste dealers, predominantly men, possess the network and connections to sell recyclable items to the recycling industry at premium prices. Their monopoly on these connections puts them in a position of power, determining the price at which they purchase recyclables from the waste pickers, often at a significantly lower rate. Rina's lack of awareness regarding the further processing of waste

highlights the limited access to information that many female tokai face. This information asymmetry further deepens their economic vulnerability, as they are unable to negotiate better rates or explore alternative avenues for selling recyclables. The fact that prices might be gender-specified implies an even deeper-rooted gender bias within the sector. If women receive lower prices than their male counterparts for the same recyclables, it suggests a systemic undervaluing of women's labour and contribution.

The overarching male-dominated system in Bangladesh manifests itself in various ways in the waste picking sector. Male waste dealers act as gatekeepers, controlling access to the more lucrative recycling industry. Women, on the other hand, often find themselves marginalized, receiving lower compensation, and facing limited opportunities to establish direct links with the recycling industry. Beyond the economic disparities, this system also has cultural ramifications. Traditional gender roles and societal expectations can limit women's mobility, access to resources, and decision-making power, further entrenching their marginalized position within the waste picking hierarchy.

In essence, Rina's insights provide a microcosm of the broader gender inequalities present in many sectors of Bangladeshi society. Addressing these challenges requires a multi-faceted approach, encompassing economic reforms, awareness-building, and cultural shifts to ensure women's equal participation and compensation in the waste picking sector and beyond. The relationship dynamics and societal norms governing the lives of tokai in Bangladesh provide a multi-layered understanding of their socio-economic and cultural positioning within the broader urban context:

Tokai, despite their essential contribution to the informal waste management sector, face societal prejudice. Their work, often perceived as dirty or undignified, combined with their caste and class identity, subjects them to exclusion and discrimination in the broader community. This discrimination further isolates them, strengthening their reliance on fellow tokai and waste dealers for social and economic support. While the broader community might stigmatise them, tokai find support and strength among their peers. The shared hardships, struggles, and experiences bind them together, creating a sense of community and solidarity. Their ties with waste dealers, borne out of economic necessity, further underscore their marginalized position in society.

The practice of purdah, deeply rooted in cultural and religious beliefs, further compounds the challenges faced by female tokai. While purdah is designed to protect women's modesty by ensuring they remain covered, it inadvertently restricts their mobility and autonomy. For female tokai, adhering to purdah while navigating the physical demands of waste picking presents a

unique set of challenges (Feldman & McCarthy, 1983). The paradox is evident when considering the expectations of purdah in contrast to the realities of the lives of female tokai. These women, out of economic necessity, must work in open spaces, often in close proximity to men, defying the traditional norms of purdah. Yet, they still face societal expectations to adhere to these norms, placing them in a challenging position. The economic realities facing low- and middle-income women in Bangladesh often necessitate their participation in the workforce. However, the cultural practice of purdah and societal perceptions of so-called appropriate work for women limit their employment opportunities. As a result, many women, especially those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, find themselves drawn to informal sectors, like waste picking, which, while offering economic opportunities, also exposes them to societal prejudice.

In short, the lives of tokai, particularly female tokai, are shaped by a complex interplay of socio-economic, cultural, and religious factors. Understanding their experiences requires a nuanced appreciation of the societal norms and economic realities that govern their lives. The challenge lies in reconciling the cultural expectations with the economic imperatives that drive these women to work in the informal waste management sector. For many women in Bangladesh, adhering to religious practices like purdah is deeply ingrained. However, for Asma and many other female tokai, the daily realities of life necessitate a re-evaluation of these norms. By not practicing purdah, they are making a conscious decision to prioritize their economic survival and autonomy over traditional religious practices. The necessity to earn a living and support their families pushes these women into spaces that challenge traditional norms. Waste picking, while often seen as a dirty or undesirable job, offers them a means to achieve economic independence. It is a poignant reflection of the lengths to which these women will go to ensure their survival and that of their families.

On one hand, they manage unpaid household chores, including domestic waste management, and on the other, they contribute to the urban waste management system through their paid work at the landfill. This dual burden underscores the vital, yet often overlooked, role they play in both their households and the broader urban ecosystem.

Asma touches upon the broader theme of women challenging and renegotiating traditional gender roles. By stepping into the public domain and taking up roles traditionally reserved for men, they are not just seeking economic independence but also challenging societal perceptions of what constitutes so-called women's work. She said:

একটা ভাল স্ত্রী কাজ সব সময় বাড়ি পরিষ্কার রাখা, এটা আমাদের দায়িত্ব পরিবারের সবাইকে সুস্থ সবল রাখা।
আমি আমার মেয়ে কে সিখাই কিভাবে বাড়ি ঘর পরিষ্কার রাখতে হয়। ইটা আমাদের নিয়মিত বাসা বাড়ির কাজ,

আমার স্বামী এগুলো আবার পছন্দ করে না। আমি এগুলো করি তাই বলে আমাকে কেও আবার টাকা দেয় না, কিন্তু আমি যদি বাগারে কাজ করি আমি কিছু টাকা পাই। আমি একদিন আমার স্বামীকে বলছিলাম বারির ময়লা গুলা ফেলে দিতে সে বলল পুরুষ মানুষের হাজার টা কাজ পরে থাকে, এটা নাকি পুরুষের কাজ না, সে সকাল সকাল বাড়ির বের হয়ে যায়।

It is part of the traditional role of a good housewife to clean everything in her house. It is our responsibility to keep our family healthy. I teach my daughter how to keep our house neat and clean. It is part of my daily domestic work; my husband does not like to do the cleaning. This is the work that nobody will pay me for, but if I work in a landfill, I can earn money. Once I asked my husband to drop off the household rubbish, he replied to me that men have one thousand works to do and they leave home in early morning. This is not a man's job. (Asma)

In essence, the experiences of Asma and other female tokai provide a window into the larger socio-cultural shifts taking place in urban Bangladesh. Their choices, borne out of economic necessity, are pushing the boundaries of traditional norms and redefining women's roles in society. Asma's perspective sheds light on the deeper socio-cultural challenges faced by the tokai community. Tokai, as a group, exist on the fringes of society. Their work, while essential, is often undervalued or stigmatized. This social marginalization is further compounded by economic inequalities. As waste pickers, many tokai live hand-to-mouth, making them economically vulnerable.

Beyond the economic challenges, the tokai also grapple with cultural isolation. As Asma suggests, they often cannot share their life experiences with outsiders. This could be due to fear of judgment, discrimination, or simply because their experiences are so far removed from mainstream society that they feel they would not be understood. Her mention of “institutional influences” is particularly poignant. It hints at the lack of representation or advocacy for tokai within formal systems. Whether it is in governance, healthcare, or education, the specific needs and challenges of the tokai community often go unaddressed. Asma's statement underscores the urgent need to understand more completely the lived experiences of the tokai. Their stories, struggles, and resilience offer invaluable insights into urban poverty, social marginalization, and the human spirit's ability to persevere. Asma's words serve as a call for greater understanding, empathy, and action towards the tokai community. Their experiences highlight the broader socio-economic inequalities prevalent in urban settings and the need for more inclusive policies and practices.

Summary

In addressing the first research question, this chapter explored into the array of individual push and pull circumstances and characteristics that influence the decisions of tokai participants to enter the world of waste picking. The exploration unveiled both push factors, such as poverty, disability, limited education, societal discrimination, and unhappy marriages, and pull factors like the allure of financial independence, a sense of autonomy, potential for entrepreneurship, and the possibility of social connections. Participant narratives painted a comprehensive picture of their socio-economic conditions, highlighting their vulnerabilities and the daily adversities they face. Yet, it also spotlighted their resilience, adaptability, and the spirit to find semblances of freedom and empowerment in the seemingly chaotic world of waste picking.

As we transition to the next chapter, the lens will shift from individual circumstances to a broader societal canvas. Here, the focus will be on the larger caste-class and structural dynamics that interplay with the life choices of tokai. We will delve into the deeply entrenched societal norms and expectations surrounding marriage, motherhood, and widowhood in Bangladeshi culture and how they intersect with the lives of the tokai, offering a deeper understanding in response to Research Question Two. The upcoming chapter will explore the complex tapestry of societal structures and their implications on the lives of tokai, enhancing our comprehension of the larger forces that shape their realities.

Chapter Six: Findings - Marriage, Motherhood, Widowhood

This study explores into the persisting phenomenon of polygamy among tokai in Dhaka City, highlighting its prevalence despite lacking formal legal sanction. It reveals that within this cultural and religious backdrop, it is not uncommon for a tokai man to have multiple spouses simultaneously. The ensuing chapter seeks to unpack the underpinnings of such male-centric marital practices, which seemingly facilitate men's access to repeated dowries and other socio-economic advantages. A thorough examination of the marriage customs prevalent in Muslim society is undertaken, with particular focus on issues such as early marriage, the dowry tradition, the sway of rumours, and the spiritual dimensions that might influence these practices, all aimed at addressing the second research question. Moreover, the chapter offers an glimpse into the day-to-day realities of widows and single mothers engaged in scavenging for a living, shedding light on their encounters with violence, subjugation, and abuse within tokai. This narrative is not only about marital customs but also about survival, resilience, and the complex socio-economic dynamics that shape the lives of tokai.

Male Privilege Marriages and its Influence on Tokai

The research presents a critical examination of the interplay between religious norms, cultural practices, and socio-economic conditions among tokai of Bangladesh. It underscores how male privilege in marriages, the practice of dowry, and the prevalence of early marriage are deeply ingrained in the societal fabric. These elements not only influence matrimonial alliances but also have profound implications on the lives of individuals within this community. The narratives of some participants reveal that their involvement in landfill work is a direct consequence of these practices. Multiple marriages often lead to separation, and in the absence of spousal support, the women are compelled to work to manage the financial burden of dowry or as a result of marrying at an early age. The cultural and religious tapestry of Bangladesh is integrated with the economic realities and personal experiences of tokai, especially in women who are navigating these complex socio-cultural challenges. For example, Jahanara stated:

আমি অনেক কষ্ট করছি যখন আমার স্বামী আমাকে ফেলে চলে গেছিল। আমি জানি সে আরেকটা বিয়ে করছে। আমি কষ্ট করছি আমার ছোট ছেলেকে নিয়ে। আমার স্বামীর এই আচরণ আর কার্যকলাপ আমার জীবনটা কঠিন করে দিচ্ছে আর আমাকে অনেক কিছুই শিক্ষা দিচ্ছে। বলতে গেলে আমার জীবন টাই পাল্টে দিচ্ছে। এখন আমি জানি আমাকে কি করতে হবে, কিভাবে বাচতে হবে

I suffered a lot when my husband left me alone in the city. I know he got a second marriage. I suffered because I had a little son. All his behaviours generated a complex way of living and created responsibilities to change my entire lifestyle and livelihood. Now I know what to do and how to survive alone. (Jahanara)

Participants in the study voiced a dichotomous perspective on marriage, emblematic of the experience of individuals like Jahanara, who perceive it as both a source of liberation and oppression within a labyrinth of entrenched customs and regulations. The prevalence of polygamy is noted as granting men the latitude to engage in numerous conjugal relationships, father multiple children by different wives, and ostensibly benefit from a larger pool of labour through the productivity of numerous wives. However, this practice is not without its contentious aspects, as it is deeply intertwined with traditional patriarchal views. Rina pointed out how men often leverage these patriarchal attitudes under the guise of Islamic practices and norms to justify their dominion over women. This reflection offers a glimpse into the complex socio-religious dynamics that influence gender roles and marital relations within this community, highlighting the intricate balance between cultural practices and the individual agency of women in these scenarios. She stated:

আমার স্বামী জানে যে আমাদের সমাজ আর ধর্ম তাকে অনেক গুলা বিয়া করার উনুমতি দিছে। কারন সে বলে আমাদের মহানবি (স) এর নাকি চার টা বউ ছিল। আমরা জানি না তার কেন চারটা বউ ছিল। আমি যদি তাকে কিছু বলতে যাই, সে বলে পুরুষ মানুষের ইসলামিক বিধান উনুজায়ী চার টা বিয়া করার নিয়ম আছে। সুতরাং তার অধিকার আছে অনেক গুলা বিয়া করার, অনেক গুলা বাচ্চা নেওয়ার, আমার কিছুই বলার নাই। আমি শুধু এখন তার সাথে মানিয়ে চলার চেষ্টা করছি। যদি আমি আরেকটা বিয়া করতে চাই, মানুষ বলবে খারাপ মহিলা, মাগি বলে গালি দিবে। আমি জানি না আমার কি করা উচিত

My husband knows that our society and religion will allow him to get multiple marriages because our Prophet Muhammad had four wives. We do not know why he had four wives. If I say anything to my husband, he replies that a man is allowed four marriages, according to Islamic laws and roles... So, he has rights and access to get more women and more children in his life, I have nothing to say. I am just adjusting alongside him. If I want to get another marriage, people will blame me as wicked. I do not know what I should do. (Rina)

Rina's account sheds light on the troubling dynamics of marital relationships within her community. Her husband's preference to cohabit with his youngest wife is motivated by a confluence of factors: the wife's income, domestic contributions, financial assets, and perceived attractiveness. Rina's poignant observation that marriage is increasingly being exploited as a means for men to amass wealth at the expense of their wives' autonomy is a stark indictment of the prevailing system. She divulges that her husband's polygamous lifestyle involves coercing all of his wives into laborious waste-picking to generate income, which he then appropriates, while he himself remains idle, exerting control over them. This narrative illustrates how the institution of multiple marriages can be manipulated by men to secure financial advantage and reinforces a pattern of economic opportunism and gender-based subjugation.

Saleha shared her experience of marriage:

আমার চাচা আমাকে বিয়ে দেয় কারণ আমার বাবা মা মারা গেছে অনেক আগেই, বড় ভাই ছিল না , ছিল না কুন ভাল গারজেন্ট। চাচা বিয়া দিয়া তার দায়িত্ব থেকে বাচ্ছে। তারা টু আমাকে তাদের বারির বুজা মনে করত, বিয়া দিছে কুন যাচাই বাচাই না করেই। আমার স্বামী ও একজন প্রতিবন্ধী, সে কথা বলতে পারে না। সে আমার থেকে বয়সে বিশ বছরের বড়। সে আমার থেকে বিষ বছরের বড়

My uncle married me off and completed his responsibilities. My parents were not alive. I did not have elder brothers. They [uncle's family] married me without knowing my husband's family because I was their burden. My husband is a disabled person; he is dumb. He is 20 years older than me. (Saleha)

Saleha's experience highlights the intense social pressure and potential for community censure that women face within her society. The threat of public humiliation for her family and slander against her character is a stark deterrent against any refusal to conform to familial expectations regarding marriage. Cultural norms dictate that compliance is not just a personal choice but a familial obligation, where the individual's actions are deeply entwined with the family's honour. The insinuations of impropriety or health issues are tools used to enforce societal conformity, reflecting the challenging circumstances under which women like Saleha must navigate their autonomy.

Mahfuja further underscored the personal toll of these societal expectations. In her community, a husband taking a second wife without the consent of the first is not an uncommon practice, leaving women like her to grapple with the emotional and social repercussions of what is effectively abandonment. She spoke of her husband in the past tense, a poignant indication of the death of their marital relationship in her eyes. Her story is emblematic of a wider issue where marital practices, enforced by societal norms, can result in profound personal hardship and a sense of loss and betrayal for the women involved. She stated:

আমি মনে করি আমার জামাই মারা গেছে তার দ্বিতীয় বিয়ে করার পরে। সে আমাকে না জানিয়ে এই কাজ করছে আর ফিরে আসে নাই আমার কাছে। আমি ও আর তার চেহারা দেখতে চাই না। আমি জানি সে বেচে আছে , ভাল ই আছে। আমার কাছে সে একজন মৃত মানুষ

I thought to myself, my husband died when he got a second marriage. I do not want to see his face. I know that he is alive and maintaining his life. But for me, he is a dead person. (Mahfoja)

Mahfuja's predicament is a deeply personal reflection of the challenges faced by some women within her community. Her husband's relationships with other women, to the extent that even Mahfuja is unaware of the full extent of his marital entanglements, underscores a profound issue of infidelity and irresponsibility. She compared her husband's behaviour to drug addiction; while she sees substance addiction as a treatable problem, she regards his moral failings—his lack of character, his avarice, and his laziness—as intractable flaws that are beyond her ability to rectify.

Her insight into the origins of this problem is a critique of cultural norms, particularly the practice of early marriage encouraged by tokai mothers. Mahfuja suggests that such upbringing, which prioritizes early marital unions over individual maturity or economic stability, cultivates a mindset where responsibilities are shirked and exploitative behaviours are normalized. This critique points to a cyclical pattern where cultural practices perpetuate behaviours that can lead to the degradation of individual character and the stability of family life.

Similarly, Kulsom shared how the marriage system had affected her as a wife. She stated:

মেয়েদের বিয়ে মানে হচ্ছে একটা নিরাপদ জায়গা, একটা ভাল পরিবেশ। ছোট বেলা থেকে আমি বিয়ের জন্য শিক্ষা নিতাম, আমি জানতাম আমাকে বিয়ে দেওয়া হবে একজন পুরুষের সাথে যার সাথে সারাজীবন থাকতে হবে। আমার বাবা মাই এই বিয়ে দিবে তাদের পছন্দ উনুযায়ী। আমি শিখতাম কিভাবে ভাল বউ আর মা হওয়া যায়। আমাকে শিক্ষা দেওয়া হত কিভাবে বাধ্যগত, কুন অভিজুক না করা এবং বাসাবাড়ি কিভাবে সামলাতে হয়।
Marriage is seen as the best place for me to be to ensure security and respectability. I was trained for marriage; I grew up thinking that I must get married to a man who will be chosen by my parents. I learned how to be good a wife and mother. I know how to be obedient, uncomplaining, and unquestioning, and perform household duties efficiently. (Kulsom)

These participants reveal a pervasive trend in tokai where a minimal level of religious education in Madrasahs often precedes an early transition into marriage. Early marriage is, in part, propelled by the financial allure of the dowry system, which acts as an incentive for tokai to not only marry early but also to sustain large families. Despite its financial appeal, the dowry system also imposes a significant economic burden on the bride's family and can have long-term implications for the community's social and economic structure.

This practice of dowry, while originally a Hindu custom, underscores how cultural exchanges over time can transcend religious boundaries. In Bangladesh, as in many parts of South Asia, the dowry system has been culturally assimilated into Muslim communities, including tokai. The dowry system is thus not just a cultural artifact but a powerful socio-economic force that shapes the lives of tokai, influencing when and whom they marry and the size of their families. For example, Razia stated:

আমি বিয়ের আগে কুন কাজ করি নাই, বিয়ের পরে আমার জামাই ভাল না তাই এই ময়লার কাজে নামছি। বিয়ে হইছে প্রস্তাবের মাধ্যমে একজন ঘটক ছিল সে প্রস্তাব নিয়ে আসছিল। আমি তাকে আগে চিনতাম না, আমরা একই জেলার কিন্তু ভিন্ন গ্রামে থাকতাম। আমার চাচা আমার জামাইয়ের পরিবারকে আগে থেকে চিনে, সেই মূলত এই বিয়ে জন্য কাজ করে

I have started waste picking later after my marriage. I never did this type of work earlier. My husband is not a good person. It was an arranged marriage by the match-maker. I did not know him, we are from different villages but the same district. My uncle knows my husband's family and he motivated my family to get me married. (Razia)

Tokai face an array of social and cultural constraints that often confine them within abusive marriages. The prospect of separation or divorce carries a heavy burden of guilt and shame that is disproportionately placed upon the woman, casting her as the bearer of dishonour. This societal stigma is so profound that even in environments where they share common origins or daily interactions, such as working together in landfills or hailing from the same villages, tokai may feel bound to their spouses, regardless of the abuse endured. Entrenched gender roles and marital expectations among tokai significantly influence decisions against leaving abusive relationships. The fear of social ostracism and the stigma of being a divorced woman can overshadow the immediate suffering of abuse. For many, the daunting prospect of financial insecurity and the responsibility for children's welfare further complicate the decision to leave, chaining them to the very source of their anguish. Kulsom's account echoes the harsh reality of diminished social support and increased scrutiny faced by divorced women. The societal backlash extends beyond the individual, potentially jeopardizing the future prospects of their children, such as affecting a daughter's chances of marriage. The pervasive culture of silence around abuse perpetuates the cycle, as women hide their suffering to protect their family's social standing.

Yet, amidst these narratives of hardship, there are stories of resilience and transformation. Asma's journey reflects a break from the norm: she portrayed marriage as a catalyst for personal growth and independence. Despite the lack of support from her husband, she has carved out a space of autonomy, becoming a responsible and caring mother, and establishing her own household. Her experience suggests that within the same societal framework that often constrains women, there is room for agency and self-reliance, offering a counterpoint to the otherwise grim realities faced by many tokai. Asma's story encapsulates the complex dilemma faced by many tokai, torn between the perils of remaining single in a precarious environment and the uncertain promise of a better life through marriage. The societal compulsion to marry at an early age is driven by the community's cultural expectations and the perceived insecurity of life for unmarried women in the landfill areas. The pressure is relentless, with relentless inquiries from relatives reinforcing the notion that marriage is not just a rite of passage, but a societal obligation. For tokai like Asma, the concept of marriage is imbued with the hope of finding stability and happiness, a hope held by their parents as well. Yet, the reality often remains a gamble, with the outcome of marital bliss far from guaranteed. The urgency to leave their parental home and the intense scrutiny faced by those who do not conform to these expectations underscore the limited agency tokai possess in charting their own life courses.

Participants Laboni shared why she believed in the importance of marriage. She said “marriage means living under the protection of a husband and a spiritual shelter, even though she is still under the control of her husband and under surveillance.” She saw marriage as a necessary institution, even when it comes with the cost of personal freedom and support. She does not have her own life because her husband is not supportive, and she did not know how her parents selected him as her husband. She explained that “unmarried tokai remain under the control of family members and isolation invariably increases. They have to take care of their aging parents, and even nieces and nephews, while nobody cares for them.” These tokai feel loneliness and a sense that something is missing from their life.

Marriage is clearly a critical decision for tokai, however in most cases, the marriage process itself is very short, without the usual engagement period. In this pre-marital time period, all the attention is focused on the role of the husband’s family in the decision-making process. The marriage process, as described by Fatema, is often hasty and unilateral, with little to no engagement period and dominated by the preferences and decisions of the husband's family. Tokai brides frequently have scant opportunity to object to or influence these decisions, leading to forced marriages at an uncomfortably young age, as in Fatema's case. The structural pressures exerted by family and societal norms pressure tokai into early marriages, where liberty and security are hoped for but not always realised. Post-marriage, the dream of autonomy is often eclipsed by the reality of male domination and domestic violence.

The following section explores the dynamics of how polygamy among tokai men is not just a marital practice but also a means of economic exploitation through dowry and a mechanism for lifelong control over women, perpetuating their subjugation and abuse. This analysis aims to uncover the multiple layers of oppression that define the marital experiences of many tokai.

Marriage in Muslim Society and its Influence on Tokai

In the context of Bangladesh, *mehr*, also known as *mahr* or *dower*, is an integral part of Islamic marriage that serves as a form of financial protection for the bride. According to the principles established by Muslim law, *mehr* is an obligatory payment which can be in the form of money or goods that the groom's family is required to give to the bride during the marriage ceremony. This payment is not only a pivotal element of the marriage contract but also a symbol of the groom's commitment and responsibility towards the bride. It is intended to provide the bride with a sense of economic security as she transitions into her new life and to support her in the unfortunate event of her husband's death, ensuring that she has a means of sustenance. However, as Chowdhury et al. (2020) indicate, the theoretical and legal framework surrounding *mehr* often

diverges from its practical application. While it is designed to safeguard the bride's financial interests, the reality can be quite different. In some cases, the agreed upon *mehr* is not fully paid, or it is delayed, diminishing the security it is meant to provide. Additionally, societal pressures and negotiations between families can sometimes reduce the effectiveness of *mehr* in fulfilling its intended purpose of ensuring economic stability for the wife and the next generation. The disparity between the law and its enforcement or the cultural practices surrounding *mehr* raises important questions about the efficacy of such measures in protecting women's rights and the need for adequate mechanisms to ensure that the provisions of *mehr* are honoured. The challenge lies in reconciling the legal stipulations with the actual practices, ensuring that *mehr* remains a robust form of economic security for women in marriage.

Nasrin shared that her husband was unable to pay the full *mehr* during the bridal marriage ceremony, but his family promised that they would provide the *mehr* later. They paid a symbolic amount, about one-third of the agreement, to maintain the religious rituals and to complete the marriage ceremony. After this she asked her husband to give her the rest of the *mehr*, but he assaulted and tortured her. Whenever she asked for the *mehr* she was also tortured by the groom's family. Similarly, when Rahima demanded her *mehr* from her husband, he refused to pay it and she could not force him due to fear because he threatened her with divorce. Many tokai, like Nasrin and Rahima, are subject to domestic and sexual violence by a groom and/or his family due to the *mehr* system. In many cases the husband's family forget that the primary aim of marriage is security for the wives.

Many participants emphasised the influence of *mehr* in their daily life. *Mehr* is not only a religious law but has become a cultural practice and an economic rule surrounding payments from the groom to the bride family during the marriage. *Mehr* can also be called bride wealth as it is paid directly to the wife but not her family (Carroll, 2017).

The experiences of Nasrin and Rahima are poignant examples of the dissonance between the intended purpose of *mehr* and its actual implementation within certain segments of tokai. *Mehr*, designed as a protective economic provision for the bride, is often compromised, with only a fraction of the agreed amount being paid upfront under the guise of upholding religious rites and completing the marriage ceremony. The shortfall in payment not only undermines the bride's financial security but also, as Nasrin's case illustrates, can become a catalyst for domestic abuse. The groom's family's delay or refusal to fulfil the *mehr* agreement can place the bride in a vulnerable position where her rightful demands are met with violence instead of compliance.

Rahima's daughter's marriage ceremony was repeatedly postponed until she paid the full dowry. Her daughter remained in her parent's house, although she was technically married, because the groom's family refused to take her into their house until she had paid the full dowry. The groom's family promised one lakh (100 000) BDT for the *mehr* but they did not give it to her daughter. Rahima felt like she was under enormous pressure and mental stress at the time and was constantly thinking about how to manage this money.

The testimonies of these participants highlight how *mehr* has transcended its religious origins to become a cultural and economic norm, with significant influence on the day-to-day lives of these women. It is seen not only as a religious obligation but also as bride wealth (Carroll, 2017), providing the wife with direct economic benefit rather than her family. The payment of *mehr* directly to the wife is a crucial distinction that reinforces the principle that it is intended for the wife's security and autonomy, not as a transaction between families. The challenge for tokai and broader society is to ensure that the provisions of *mehr* are respected and enforced, to fulfil its role as a safeguard for the bride's economic well-being.

Addressing the systemic issues that allow for the misuse of the *mehr* system requires both legal enforcement and cultural shifts within the community to uphold the dignity and rights of Rahima's ordeal with her daughter's marriage highlights a distressing aspect of marital negotiations that can have debilitating effects on families, particularly those of brides in Bangladesh. The postponement of the marriage ceremony and the groom's family's refusal to accept the bride into their home until the full dowry is paid is a stark deviation from the legal and ethical principles that are supposed to govern marriage practices.

The dowry, different to the *mehr*, is a payment made from the bride's family to the groom's family. It is a practice that has been officially outlawed in Bangladesh due to its oppressive nature and the financial burden it imposes on the bride's family. However, as Rahima's case shows, the practice persists unofficially in many communities, where it can be exploited to exert control and apply pressure on the bride's family. Simultaneously, when the *mehr*, which should be a security provided by the groom's family to the bride, is promised but not delivered, it creates a one-sided financial expectation that places the entire economic burden on the bride's family. The situation placed Rahima in an extremely vulnerable position, causing significant mental stress as she scrambles to gather a substantial amount of money to satisfy the groom's family's demands. Dowry not only puts undue pressure on the bride's family but also reinforces gender inequality by treating marriage as a transaction where the bride's value is measured in financial terms. It perpetuates a cycle of economic exploitation and emotional distress, underscoring the need for

effective measures to combat such practices and protect the rights and well-being of women and their families.

Razia was promised *mehr*, but her husband and his family refused to pay it:

আমার স্বামী আমার বিয়ের সময় ৫০,০০০ টাকা জুতুক নিয়েছিল কিন্তু সে প্রতিজ্ঞা করছিল ৭০,০০৫ টাকা নিকানামা আমাকে দিবে। এখন যদি আমি ওই নিকানামা চাই, সে খালি নানা উজুহাত দেখায়। আমি জানি সে ওটা আমাকে কক্ষনই দিবে না, বেশির ভাগ সময় পুরুষ মানুষ এটা করে কারন এটা ধর্মের ব্যাপার আর এটা একটা আমাদের সংস্কৃতি, তারা এটা কক্ষনই ফেরত দেয় না তাদের স্ত্রীকে

My husband received 50,000-taka cash during my wedding, but he promised to give 70,005 taka as mehr to me. If I ask for my mehr now, he avoids this. He will not pay this, I know, because in most cases men just do it for a religious and cultural show, they never actually give it to their wife. (Razia)

Razia's experience adds another layer to the complex narrative surrounding *mehr* and dowry practices in Bangladesh. It illustrates a harsh reality where the concept of *mehr*, ostensibly a form of financial protection for the bride, is overshadowed by the prevalent and persistent demand for dowries by the groom's family. This inversion of the intended purpose of *mehr* subverts its role as a safeguard, turning it into a mere formality that grooms and their families seek to evade. Razia's account also reflects a common misconception that perpetuates the dowry system: the belief by the groom's family that the dowry is their rightful and traditional due. This expectation not only contravenes the legal provisions that outlaw dowry demands but also places an undue financial burden on the bride's family. The non-payment of the fixed *mehr* further exacerbates the bride's vulnerability, as she is left without the promised economic assurance and subject to additional demands for money from her husband post-marriage. The stress and anxiety Razia endured due to the non-fulfilment of *mehr* and the additional dowry pressure are indicative of the broader systemic issues at play. The dowry system, in practice, often functions as an instrument of economic coercion and emotional blackmail, compelling families to acquiesce to financial demands out of fear of social stigma or concern for their daughter's marital prospects.

This challenge calls for a concerted effort to address the cultural norms and legal loopholes that allow such practices to continue. It is imperative to reassert the original purpose of *mehr* as a protective measure and to reinforce the legal prohibitions against dowry demands to safeguard women's rights and ensure their financial and emotional well-being in marriage. Razia said:

এটা অনেক কষ্টকর মা বাবা কে বারবার বলা যে তুমার জামাই আবার কিছু টাকা লাগবে। আমি যদি আমার নিকানামা পুরাপুরি পেতাম, তাইলে আমি কিছু টাকা তাকে দিতে পারতাম। যেহেতু সে আমাকে দেয় নাই, তাইলে আমি কেন তাকে আবার জুতুক দিতে যাব

It was difficult to ask my parents again to pay more money and some gifts to the groom's family. If I got my mehr money fully, I can give him some; if he is not paying this then why should my family pay more after my marriage? (Razia)

Razia's account sheds light on the grim reality where the principles of Islamic marriage are distorted by cultural practices, resulting in the subjugation and exploitation of women. The dowry system, which has been legally banned but continues to operate under the guise of tradition, becomes a means of perpetuating male dominance and a tool for abuse. Her family's inability to meet the escalating dowry demands led to violence and abuse, illustrating a severe breach of the ethical and legal standards that are meant to protect women. The disregard for the *mehr* by the groom's family is not an isolated occasion, but seems to be part of a broader pattern of gender discrimination that also manifests in the preference for male offspring. This preference stems from deep-seated cultural beliefs about the roles and values of men and women in society. The birth of a son is often celebrated as it is believed to continue the family lineage and provide support for parents in old age, whereas the birth of a daughter is viewed in terms of the future financial burden of her dowry. The participants' emphasis on the strong preference for sons further highlights the patriarchal mindset that places a higher social and economic value on male children. This preference not only affects the status and treatment of tokai within their families but also has dire implications for their daughters, who may grow up to face the same cycle of discrimination and demands for dowry.

Such entrenched gender biases contribute to a spectrum of oppression against women, from financial exploitation to physical and mental abuse, and even influence the aspirations and expectations parents have for their children from birth. Addressing these issues requires challenging the patriarchal structures that support them, promoting gender equality, and enforcing laws that protect women from such abuses. Razia said:

আমার স্বামী সবসময় ছেলে প্রত্যাশা করে আমার কাছ থেকে কারন আমার শসুর মনে করে ছেলে হলে সে পরা লেখা করতে পারবে, ভাল চাকরি করতে পারবে, আর পরিবারকে দেখতে পারবে ভবিষ্যতে। আমার স্বামী আমাকে প্রশ্ন করে মেয়েদের পরা লেখা করে কি লাভ, তারা তু আর ডাক্তার, ইঞ্জিনার, উকিল হতে পারবে না। তাদের ওই প্রথাগত ভাবে ভাল স্ত্রী আর মা ই হতে হবে

My husband always expects a son because my father-in-law feels that boys have a greater claim to education in our society and they can have a better job in the future to support the family. My husband asks me what the benefit is to educate a girl! They are not going to become a doctor, engineer, lawyer. Traditionally and culturally, they will be wives and mothers. (Razia)

Life Decisions and Influence of Early Marriage

The practice of early marriage among tokai is deeply rooted in socio-economic and cultural factors. The participants' experiences, as documented by Talukder et al. (2020), reveal that early

marriage is not solely a byproduct of religious or caste affiliations but also a strategic response to vulnerability and financial hardship. For many families, marrying off a daughter at a young age is seen as a means to reduce economic strain and ensure some form of social security for her.

Asma's personal account of being married at 13 is a stark example of this practice. It reflects a prevalent trend within tokai communities where the fear for a daughter's future — particularly concerning her social and financial security — compels parents to arrange their children's marriages during early adolescence. This period, from 13 to 16 years old, is a critical developmental stage when girls are still navigating their formative years, yet within these communities, it often marks the transition into marital life. The implications of such early unions are multifaceted, affecting the educational, health, and psychological well-being of young girls. The practice underscores the need for interventions that address the underlying causes prompting families to resort to early marriage, such as poverty, lack of education, and societal pressures. By creating conditions that enhance the security and autonomy of tokai families — such as through education, economic opportunities, and social support — there may be a shift away from early marriage as a fallback option, allowing girls to pursue a broader range of life choices. She shared:

আমি ছোট বেলা থেকেই প্রশিক্ষণ নিচ্ছি কিভাবে ভাল মা আর শাশুড়ি হওয়া যায় আর কিভাবে আমার পরিবারকে গর্বিত করা যায়। আমার মা আমাকে বিয়ে দিবে তার পসন্দ অনুযায়ী কারণ সে মনে করে বিবাহ হল মেয়েদের সব থেকে নিরাপদ আশ্রয় আর নিরাপদ জীবন। আমার কুন উধিকার নাই উন্য কাওকে বিয়ে করার। এটা আমাদের প্রাচীন প্রথা। আমার মা আমাকে কখন মুবাইল ব্যবহার করতে দেয় নায় যদি আমি কুন খারাপ কাজ করে ফেলি কারও সাথে প্রেম করে ফেলি এটা আমাদের পরিবারের জন্য অনেক লজ্যাকর

Since my childhood, I started thinking about and practicing how to be a good mother and daughter-in-law and make my family proud. My mother will get me married to a man by her choice. My parents believe that marriage is the best place for girls to ensure security and livelihood. I have no choice or option to get married to another man. This is our traditional and cultural practice. My mother never gives me a mobile phone because if I do something wrong it will be shameful for our family. (Asma)

Tania and Morsedha's testimonies provide further insight into the motivations driving early marriage within tokai community. The fear that children may engage in romantic relationships outside the accepted social norms — potentially eloping and thereby tarnishing the family's honor — is a significant factor that prompts parents to arrange marriages for their daughters at a young age.

For these families, the concept of honour is intimately linked with their children's behaviour, particularly their daughters'. Early marriage is seen as a pre-emptive measure to guard against any

action that might be perceived as dishonourable or that could lead to social stigma. It is a protective strategy, aiming to preserve the family's reputation within the community.

Morsedha's experience of an arranged marriage at 15, despite being acquainted with her husband through work, highlights the parental control over marital decisions. The choice of her husband's family and the timing of the marriage were determined by her parents, underscoring the limited agency she had in the process. This scenario is typical within the community, where the emphasis on family honour and the urgency to adhere to cultural practices override the personal preferences and readiness of the young individuals involved.

These narratives underscore the complex interplay between cultural honor, social pressure, and the individual lives of tokai. They reveal the urgent need for community education and social reforms that can alleviate the pressures leading to early marriage and instead support more empowering choices for young women and their families.

Many tokai experience a lot of health issues due to unhealthy marriage relationships. Morsedha was born in in a very conservative, Muslim family, which shaped her world view and influenced the decisions she made in her life. She shared:

মেয়েদের জন্ম ই হয় ভাল স্ত্রী হওয়ার জন্য, তাদের দায়িত্বশীল হতে হয়, কুন ব্যাপারে উভিজুক থাকবে না আর শুধু বাড়ির ভিতর থেকে বাড়ির কাজ করবে। আমি যদি বাড়ির বাইরে কাজ করতে চাই, আমাকে শহরে আসতে হবে আর আমি এখানে কাজ করতে পারব। কেউ আমাকে বাধা দিবে না। গ্রামের মানুষ অনেক নিচু মনের, তারা খালি ধর্মের দুহাই দেয় আর খালি আমাদের দুঃ খুজে বেড়ায়

Girls are born to be a good wife, and they are to be an obedient, uncomplaining person who can work household tasks. If I want to work outside the home, it is better to come to the city and work, whatever we want to do. People in villages are religiously conservative and always try to investigate our faults. (Morsedha)

Morsedha's perspective is a window into the stark realities faced by poor women and the defensive strategies they employ in response to these challenges. The intersection of poverty with gender exposes women and girls to various forms of harassment and violence, prompting parents like Morsedha to view early marriage as a lesser evil — a refuge from the predatory behavior of men. It is seen as a protective measure, providing a semblance of security and stability.

Her acceptance and support of the dowry system, despite its financial burden, reflects the deeply ingrained cultural norms that dictate parental responsibilities, including financial contributions to the groom's family at the time of marriage. This acceptance also hints at a perceived end of parental responsibility after marriage, as the control over the woman's life decisively shifts to her husband.

The notion that early marriage is a parental duty aimed at controlling and securing a child's future is poignant. It shows that these decisions are not made in isolation but are deeply embedded in social and cultural fabric that values control over individual autonomy. This mindset, where the husband's authority over his wife is anticipated and normalized, perpetuates a cycle of gendered power imbalances.

The implications of early marriage extend beyond the loss of autonomy. As the participants in the study have indicated, early marriage often leads to school dropout, which limits future employment opportunities and perpetuates cycles of poverty and discrimination. The resulting confinement to informal sectors like waste picking is a testament to the socio-economic barriers that young married women face.

Alisa's statement captures the collective resignation to these cultural practices, where the societal impulse to marry off girls early is reinforced by the narrative of security, despite the attendant risks and limitations. The study sheds light on the need for systemic changes that can offer tokai alternative paths that do not force them into premature marriages and the restrictive lives that often follow. It highlights the critical role of education, legal reforms, and societal transformation in empowering women and giving them agency over their life decisions.

Tania was pushed into working at the landfill after an early, unsupportive marriage:

আমার যখন বিয়ে হয়, আমি জানতাম না আসলে পরিবার কি জিনিস। আমার কুন রক্তের গারজেন্ট ছিল না যে আমাকে সঠিক বয়সে বিয়ে দিবে। আমার বিয়ের সময় আমার খালাতু ভাই ২০০০০ টাকা দিয়েছিল বিয়ের পণ হিসাবে। বিয়ের ছয় মাস পরে আমি প্রেগন্যান্ট হলাম আর মা হয়ে গেলাম ১৫ বছর বয়সে। এরপর আমার দুশ্চিন্তা শুরু হয়ে গেল কিভাবে সন্তানকে খাওয়াব কারন আমার জামায়ের আয় কম ছিল। সে একজন কৃষক ছিল একদিন কাজ করত উন্য দিন বসে থাকত। আমি এরপর ঢাকা আসার সিধান্ত নিলাম আর এই কাজ শুরু করলাম।

When I got married, I did not have any idea what family is! I do not have proper blood guardian [elder brother] who helped me to get married... During my wedding, my cousin provided 50,000 taka as a dowry. Six months after my marriage, I got pregnant and become a mother at an early age. Then my anxiety started about how to feed my daughter, because my husband did not earn well. He is a farmer: one day he is working, but another three days he is taking rest at home. Then I decided to go to Dhaka for my income and I started this work. (Tania)

Dowry and its Influence among Tokai

The study underscores the entrenched nature of dowry practices among tokai, revealing how deeply interwoven it is with the cultural fabric of their society. Despite its legal prohibition, the dowry persists as a traditional and cultural fixture, with expectations set by the groom's family that often place a significant financial obligation on the bride's family. This tradition of dowry acts as a gatekeeper to marriage, where the transactional element overshadows the union's emotional and relational aspects.

The anticipation of dowry by the groom's family, where a specific amount is expected for the husband's support, highlights the transactional nature of these marriages. This expectation sets a precedent that marriage is as much a financial negotiation as a personal relationship, adding to the burden on the bride's family who must acquiesce to these demands to secure their daughter's future.

Furthermore, the study illustrates how dowry and early marriage practices are interlinked, with the latter often seen as a means to ensure social security and lessen the financial load on a family. These practices, however, do more than just reflect religious adherence; they establish a complex set of rules that govern the behaviour and life choices of tokai. These rules reinforce control over women's mobility, autonomy, and their very sense of self, perpetuating a cycle of dependency and subjugation.

The implication is that these cultural norms act as a form of social governance, dictating the terms under which tokai live their lives. The practice of dowry, therefore, is not merely a financial transaction but also a mechanism that perpetuates gender inequality and limits women's opportunities to participate fully and equally in society.

The findings of the study point to the necessity for cultural change, legal enforcement, and educational initiatives to dismantle these oppressive practices. By challenging the cultural norms that uphold the dowry system and promoting gender equality, there is potential to create a more equitable society where marriages are partnerships rather than transactions, and where women's value is not determined by a dowry price.

For example, Kajol stated:

আমার খুব খারাপ লাগে কারন আমাদের সমাজে পুরুষ মানুষ সবসময় মেয়েদের কাপড় পড়া আর চলা ফেরা নিয়ে আজো বাজে কথা বলে। আমরা সকল মেয়েরা ছুট বেলা থেকেই কারও না কারও উপর নির্ভর করি। আমাদের সবসময় বলা হয় তুমি একটা মেয়ে, তুমি গরীব, তুমার সম্মান আমাদের পরিবারের সম্মান, আমরা তুমাকে বেশিদিন পালতে পারব না। আমাদের বাবা মা তাই ছুট বেলায় বিয়ে দিয়ে দেয় কিছু টাকা পয়সা দিয়ে

I feel bad because in our society men always comment badly on how girls dress and their mobility. All girls are dependent on someone since infancy. There is a consistent message from the family - you are a girl, you are poor, your respect is family dignity, we cannot afford you your entire life. Our parents want to marry us off early by providing dowry. (Kajol)

Kajol's experience encapsulates the financial pressures and societal expectations placed upon tokai families regarding marriage. The dowry, ranging from a substantial sum of 20,000 BDT to over 1 lakh taka, reflects the economic burden placed on the bride's family to secure what they perceive as a 'good husband'. The dowry's scope, extending beyond cash to include various

properties and goods, demonstrates the extensive financial investment expected of the bride's family.

Kajol's personal narrative highlights a systemic issue within tokai communities: the rise in dowry amounts and the consequential financial strain on families. The fact that her earnings and savings from waste picking—a job that is already indicative of her vulnerable economic status—are primarily reserved for her daughter's dowry, illustrates the entrenched nature of this practice and the sacrifices made to adhere to it. Her statement regarding affairs suggests a nuanced aspect of marriage negotiations, where personal relationships might reduce the expected dowry. This observation hints at the complexity of marital arrangements and the interplay of personal choices within traditional frameworks. The dowry system not only imposes financial hardship but also reinforces male privilege, as men and their families often benefit directly from these transactions. It creates a perverse incentive for men to enter into multiple marriages if they can reap the financial benefits of dowries from each union, thereby exploiting the system for personal gain.

Kulsom's comment on arranged marriages further paints a picture of the challenges faced by tokai. These marriages, often the result of financial and social compulsion rather than personal choice, can lead to unhappiness and difficulty in adjusting to new family dynamics. The harassment and hardship Kajol endure both within the household and in her work, environment point to the multifaceted oppression that tokai may face—economically, socially, and personally.

The stories of Kajol and Kulsom illustrate the need for cultural shifts and policy interventions to alleviate the burdens of dowry and arranged marriages on tokai. Empowering women through education, economic opportunities, and legal support can challenge the patriarchal norms that underpin these practices, potentially leading to more equitable marital relationships and a reduction in the gender disparities that currently exist. Kulsom said:

আমি বলব না ভালবাসার বিয়ে অনেক ভাল কারণ আমি জানি না অথবা বুজি না যদি স্বামী আবার কারও প্রেমে পড়ে। আমি বলব পুরুষ মানুষ অনেকটা প্রাণীর মত আর তারা বিয়ের পড়ে তাদের মন মানসিকতা পরিবর্তন করতেই পারে

I do not say that a love marriage is good enough because I do not know or understand if the husband falls in love again with other girls. I will say that all men are animals and can change their mind after marriage. (Kulsom)

The narratives from Kajol and Kohinor reveal the stark gender inequities rooted in the dowry system and the resulting societal attitudes towards daughters and sons within tokai communities. Kajol's preference for sons is based on a harsh economic reality: sons are perceived as financial assets who will bring in money through marriage, while daughters are seen as liabilities, with their

marriages necessitating substantial dowry payments. This dichotomy underscores the commodification of women in these transactions, where their worth is measured in terms of the financial burden or benefit, they bring to their families. Kohinor's story adds another dimension to the issue, showing how the dowry's size can fluctuate based on subjective attributes like a girl's youth and beauty, and the perceived ability to contribute financially after marriage. The notion that a young, attractive girl has a higher market value in the waste picking profession is deeply troubling, reflecting a commoditization of women that extends into their work lives.

The study's findings about tokai husbands benefiting doubly from the dowry system — both from the dowry itself and from control over their wives' incomes post-marriage — point to a systemic exploitation under the guise of marriage. While Islamic laws in Bangladesh do allow a man to have up to four wives, provided he treats them all equally, the study indicates that this stipulation is not being met. The inequality in treatment among wives suggests that cultural practices, rather than religious doctrines, are driving these behaviours.

The misuse of Islamic marital laws to justify polygamy, without adhering to the stipulated conditions of fairness and equality, highlights a misapplication of religious principles to perpetuate male-dominated cultural norms. The fear of being unjust to non-married orphan girls, mentioned in the context of Islamic law, is overshadowed by the prevailing unequal treatment of wives.

This study illuminates the complex interplay between cultural customs and religious laws, revealing how cultural practices can distort and overshadow the original intentions of religious teachings. It underscores the need for a critical examination of these practices and for advocacy that promotes gender equality, both within marriage and in society at large. The findings suggest that empowerment initiatives, legal reforms, and educational campaigns are essential to address these entrenched issues, protect women's rights, and foster a culture that values women beyond their economic implications in the marriage market. For example, Rina stated:

আমি জানতাম না আমার জামাই আগে একটা বিয়া করছে, সে আমার কাছে সব কিছু লুকাইছে। এটা সত্যি যে, পুরুষ মানুষ সবসময় আগের বিয়ার কথা লুকায়, তারা প্রথম বউয়ের কাছে কুন উনুমতি নেওয়ার প্রয়জন মনে করে না। এটা আমাদের সংস্কৃতি হয়ে গেছে। পুরুষ মানুষ খালি জানে কেমনে চারটা বিয়ে করতে হয়, তারা তু জানে না এত গুলা বিয়ের কি কি সর্ত আছে ইসলামে

I did not know that my husband got another wife before our marriage. He concealed it from me. In most cases, men keep it a secret and do not get permission from the first wife. It is now our culture. Men only know how to get four wives according to Muslim norms, but he does not know the condition of getting married. (Rina)

Rina's situation reflects a broader societal issue where the principles of Islamic marriage, which include duties of fairness and support, are not being upheld. Instead, her husband's behavior is indicative of a patriarchal system that exploits religious and cultural practices to maintain male dominance and control over women.

The misuse of Islamic teachings on marriage to justify such control and inequality is a significant deviation from the intended spirit of the laws, which emphasize justice and equitable treatment of wives. In Islam, the practice of polygamy is tightly regulated and comes with the caveat that a man must treat all his wives with equal respect, care, and financial support. However, as seen in Rina's case, these stipulations are often ignored, and the cultural practice of male domination prevails.

This misalignment between religious tenets and cultural practices creates a space where women, like Rina, suffer the consequences of an oppressive system that uses the veneer of religious sanction to perpetuate gender inequality. Addressing this discrepancy is crucial for the advancement of women's rights and the establishment of truly equitable marital relationships. It calls for religious leaders, community advocates, and policymakers to work together to educate and enforce the true principles of marital fairness as prescribed in Islam, and to challenge the cultural norms that undermine these principles.

Sriti pointed out how the dowry system originated among tokai communities:

আমি ছোট বেলা থেকে জানি যে, জুতুক হিন্দু মহিলাদের বিয়েতে দেওয়া হয় কারণ তাদের ধর্মে বলা আছে মেয়েরা কুন বাপের বাড়ির সম্পদ পাবে না বিয়ের পরে। যার কারণে মেয়েদের পরিবার সব সম্পদ আর টাকা পয়সা একবারে দিয়ে দেয় বিয়ের সময়। আমার কিছু হিন্দু বান্ধবি ছিল ওরা এটাকে কন্যাদান বলে যার মানে হচ্ছে কন্যাকে উপহার দেওয়া। এটা এক ধরনের জুতুক যা দেওয়া হয় স্বামীর পরিবারকে কারণ স্বামী তার কন্যার দায়িত্ব নিচ্ছে। কিন্তু এখন দেখেন এই প্রথা আমাদের টুকাই দেব মাজে চলে আসছে। টুকাই দেব বিয়ে এখন টাকা ছাড়া হওয়া প্রায় সম্ভব ই না।

I knew, since my childhood, that dowry is only applicable for a Hindu woman's marriage because in their religion girls do not get any property from her parents after the marriage, that is why the bride's family transfer all the wealth and other things to the groom's family. I had some Hindu friends, they called it kanyadan, which means the giving away gifts of the daughter. It is a dowry for the groom because the husband is taking the responsibility of their daughter, thus providing the husband with resources. Now you see it is a common cultural practice among tokai to provide cash money and other resources to a groom's family. (Sriti)

The practice of adjusting dowry expectations based on a bride's perceived beauty and youth is a reflection of deeply entrenched gender biases and the commodification of women. In these communities, a woman's value in the marriage market is assessed based on her physical appearance and age, with those deemed more desirable requiring their families to pay less.

This system not only devalues women, reducing them to their aesthetic attributes but also perpetuates discriminatory practices that can have lasting impacts on a woman's self-esteem and her family's financial situation. It reinforces the notion that a woman's worth is tied to her ability to marry well, and in this context, "well" is often synonymous with providing financial or material gain to her family.

Such practices are discriminatory and objectifying, and they contribute to a cycle of social inequality where a woman's life choices and opportunities can be severely limited by her physical attributes. This system can lead to numerous social issues, including financial strain on the bride's family, early marriage, and pressure on young women to conform to certain standards of beauty.

Combating these deep-seated cultural norms requires a multi-faceted approach, including education, legal reforms, and community engagement programs that promote the value of women beyond their roles in marriage. Advocacy and empowerment initiatives are also crucial in helping women and families recognize and claim their rights, and in fostering societal attitudes that value women's contributions beyond the dowry they bring. Sriti stated:

আমি আমার ছোট মেয়েকে নিয়ে চিন্তা করি কারণ সে বেশ সুন্দরী আর ভাল কোম্পানিতে কাজ করে। আমি শুধু আমার বড় মেয়েকে বিদায় দিছি কুনভাবে টাকা পয়সা দিয়ে কারণ সে তু আমার ছোট মেয়ের মত সুন্দরী না। আমি জানি আমার ছোট মেয়ের বিয়েতে আমাকে অনেক কম টাকা পয়সা দিতে হবে। এখনি অনেক ছেলের পরিবার আসে বিয়ের প্রস্তাব নিয়ে তারা আবার কিছু চায় না

I am not thinking about my younger daughter because she is beautiful and works in a good company. I have just released my elder daughter with more money because she was not like my younger daughter. So, I must pay less for my younger daughter's marriage, I think I do not need to pay anything because I am getting many proposals from different families. (Sriti)

Sriti's perspective points to a nuanced dimension of the dowry system where the bride's education also becomes a part of the transactional nature of marriage. Her daughter's education is seen as an asset that can contribute to the financial betterment of her future husband's family, either through direct income or through the skills she brings into the marriage. This underscores the fact that the qualities valued in a bride extend beyond physical appearance to include her potential for economic contribution.

The participants' likening of multiple marriages to a business transaction where men can reap multiple benefits is telling of the commodification of marriage within these communities. It suggests that for some men, the practice of taking multiple wives is not solely about personal or family life but is instead approached as an economic strategy. By marrying multiple women and collecting dowries, these men effectively increase their wealth and economic standing, often at the expense of the women involved.

This economic exploitation is compounded when the wives are also expected to engage in income-generating activities, further contributing to the husband's wealth. The women's economic contributions, instead of empowering them, often become another means by which they are controlled and their value is measured in financial terms.

The subsequent section on Muslim marriage and its influence on tokai life would likely explore deeper into how religious interpretations and cultural practices influence the lived experiences of these women. It is crucial for such discussions to not only describe the current state of affairs but also to consider the implications for women's rights, autonomy, and well-being. This understanding can then inform the development of targeted interventions to address these issues, such as educational programs, legal support, and economic empowerment initiatives, all aimed at dismantling the structures that enable such exploitation and promoting a more equitable society.

Experiences of Tokai Widows and Single Mothers

The findings from this study highlight the precarious situation of widowed, separated, or divorced tokai, who often become the sole providers for their households while also bearing the brunt of social stigmatization. The death or departure of a husband in these communities does not merely signify a personal loss; it also signals the onset of a multitude of challenges that affect various aspects of these women's lives.

The role of primary breadwinner for these women is fraught with difficulties. They must navigate the workforce in a context that often offers limited opportunities, particularly for unskilled or semi-skilled labourers. The fact that many of these women are also responsible for the care of young children further exacerbates their predicament, stretching their limited resources and time. Social stigma is a significant barrier for widowed and divorced women in South Asia. They often face isolation and discrimination, which can lead to emotional burdens such as anxiety and depression. This stigma can limit their social support networks, which are crucial for coping with economic and emotional hardships. The impact of this stigma can also extend to their children, affecting their social standing and access to resources.

The economic barriers for these women are multifaceted. They may encounter gender discrimination in the labour market, have insufficient skills or education for better-paying jobs, and lack access to credit and other financial services. This lack of economic opportunity can perpetuate a cycle of poverty and dependency.

This study's revelation that widowed and divorced tokai experience socio-economic restrictions and stigma aligns with previous research, underscoring the need for targeted interventions. These

could include social welfare programs, skills training, and education to improve employment prospects, legal reforms to protect the rights of widows and divorced women, and community-based initiatives to combat stigma and build supportive networks.

Addressing these issues requires a multi-pronged approach that considers the cultural, economic, and social factors that contribute to the marginalization of widowed and divorced women. By creating a more supportive environment, it is possible to help these women overcome the challenges they face and lead more secure, empowered lives.

Morsedha's family poverty was exacerbated when her husband fell ill, forcing her to take on debt to pay for his hospitalisation. Not only did she have to cope with this financial shock, but she soon became a widow:

আমার স্বামী অনেক দিন ধরে হার্টের সমস্যায় ভুগতেছিল, সে আমাকে বলত তার নাকি শরীর ব্যথা করে, লিবাবের মধ্যে কি যেন কামরায়। সবাই বলছিল এটা নাকি হার্টের সমস্যা না, এটা অন্য রুগ। আমি এরপর ডাক্তার আর কাছে গেছিলাম, কিন্তু আমার স্বামী আমাকে বলে আমি নাকি তারে মারার জন্য চেষ্টা করতেছি ডাক্তার দিয়ে ইনজেকশন দিয়ে। এরপর কিছু দিন পরে সে মারা যায় বিনা চিকিৎসায়

My husband had a heart problem, and he would tell me that something pained his body, liver, and kidney. Everyone told me this is not heart disease; it may be some other disease. Then I asked the doctor for a consultation, but my husband accused me, saying that I was going to kill him by injecting him and consulting with a doctor. After a few weeks, he died without treatment.

(Morsedha)

Morsedha's experience sheds light on a harsh reality faced by many widowed women in tokai communities. The financial strain imposed by the dowry system is significant for all within this community, but for a widow like Morsedha, the burden is magnified. Without the support of a spouse, and often with limited economic opportunities, widowed women must bear the full weight of societal expectations and financial obligations alone. Taking out a loan to pay for a daughter's dowry puts Morsedha in a precarious financial position, one that is compounded by the loss of her husband and the associated stigma. This stigma can manifest in various ways, including social ostracism and diminished access to financial services or employment opportunities, further entrenching widows in poverty and insecurity. The stories of Morsedha and Jahanara highlight the resilience of tokai in the face of adversity. They take on the dual role of breadwinner and caregiver, managing households and supporting their families against all odds. Their experiences call attention to the need for more comprehensive social support systems that can provide widowed and divorced women with the assistance they need to navigate their financial burdens, overcome societal stigma, and secure a stable future for themselves and their children.

Waste picking emerges as a vital survival strategy for many widowed or divorced tokai. It is a means of providing for their families when other opportunities are scarce or non-existent. The physical and emotional toll of this work, especially for those already coping with serious injuries or diseases, can be substantial, but the necessity of meeting daily needs drives these women to persist. Programs focused on financial literacy, microfinance, vocational training, and healthcare could be instrumental in helping these women build sustainable livelihoods. Moreover, policy reforms to address the dowry system and provide social safety nets for the vulnerable could significantly alleviate the hardships faced by widowed and divorced tokai.

Tokai widows experience multiple challenges, as Jahanara shared:

আমাদের দুঃখ কষ্ট আল্লাহ্ ছাড়া কেও জানে না। আমরা রুদে, বৃষ্টিতে ভিজে, শীতে মধ্যে কাজ করি বাধ্য হয়ে। এখানে কুন ছায়া নাই যে একটু বিশ্রাম নিব। আমি এখানে কাজ করি আমার ছোট বাচ্চা আছে তাই। আমি লজ্জা পাব না বলতে যে আমি অন্যের বাসা থেকে ভাত নিয়ে আসে আমার পরিবারকে খাওয়াছি। আমাকে অনেক সময় কাজ করতে হইছে, আমার সন্তানরা একজন উন্য জনকে দেখছে। আমি আগে উন্যের বাসায় কাজ করতাম এরপর আমার বিয়ে হল সেই গরিবের ঘরে। আমার কক্ষনই সুখ ছিল না জিবনে না স্বামীর বাড়িতে না বাপের বাড়িতে। আমি সবসময় সংগ্রাম করেই গেলাম। এখন আমার স্বামী আমাকে দেখে না, সে আরেকটা বিবাহ করছে।

Our sorrow nobody knows except Allah. We are forced to work in the winter, summer, and rainy seasons. There is no shade to take rest in a landfill. I am forced to work because of my little child. I am not ashamed to share that I collected rice from another house then feed to my family. I had to work long hours. My children are looking after each other. I used to work in another house as a maidservant since childhood, and then my family married me again to a poor family. I never had a peach in my own home, and in my husband's house I always worked and struggled. Now my husband does not look after my family, and he got another wife.

(Jahanara)

The contrast in experiences between widowed or divorced women and men within the same community is stark. Women like Jahanara, who face widowhood or divorce, often find themselves in a vulnerable position, lacking the financial and social resources that could help them cope with their new circumstances. For these women, the loss of a male partner can result in a sudden severance of the social and mental support systems that are often tied to marital status. This can lead to isolation and can compound the financial stress they already face, especially if they have been dependent on their husband's income. The impact on health is multifaceted: the stress of financial insecurity can exacerbate existing health problems, and the lack of a partner may mean there is no one to assist them when they are ill or in need of care. In contrast, men in these communities do not face the same level of vulnerability. Cultural norms allow men to remarry relatively easily, providing them with an avenue to regain financial and social support, and ensure care in their old age. This imbalance highlights the gendered disparities in social security and the protections afforded by marriage.

The findings suggest that there is a pressing need for community and policy interventions to address these disparities. Social security systems that support widowed and divorced women, access to information and resources that can empower them, and networks that can provide human support are all critical in helping to mitigate the negative effects of widowhood and divorce. Creating support systems requires an understanding of the cultural context and the challenges unique to these women. Efforts could include the establishment of community groups for mutual support, legal aid to ensure women's rights are protected, and health services that are sensitive to the needs of women who have lost their partners. Additionally, advocating for policy changes that promote gender equality and protect the rights of widowed and divorced women is essential to create a more equitable society.

Mahfuja shared the economic challenges she experienced as a widow:

আমার স্বামী গাড়ি চাপায় মারা যায়, আমি তিন সন্তান নিয়ে এখন ঢাকায় আছি। আমি চাইলেই অন্য কোম্পানিতে কাজ করতে পারি না কারণ আমার ২ বছরের মেয়ে আছে, আমি এখানে কাজ করি শুধু বেচে থাকার জন্য। আমি আমার বড় মেয়েকে বিয়ে দিছি কিছু টাকা পয়সা আত্মীয় স্বজন দেব কাছ থেকে ধার নিয়ে। এখন আমি ওই টাকা ই পরিশোধ করতেছি অনেক পরিশ্রম করে। এই লকডাউনের সময় আমি অনেক সময় না খেয়ে কাটাইছি, আমার ঘরে ছিল না। আমি আমার এই অবস্থার জন্য আমি কাওকে দায়ি করি না কারণ আমার আর কুন জায়গা নাই যাওয়ার

My husband died in a car accident and my family consists of three children. I do not work in other factories because of my two-year-old daughter, so I just work in waste picking to survive. I married off my elder daughter by borrowing some money from my relatives. Now I am paying my debts by working hard. During lockdown periods I had to starve because there was little food in my home. I cannot blame anyone for my miseries because I do not have any other options.
(Mahfuja)

The plight of widowed women in South Asian patriarchal societies such as India and Bangladesh is a stark testament to the deeply entrenched gender biases interwoven with cultural norms and practices. Widows in these regions are often subjected to discriminatory practices that may include restrictions on remarriage, social isolation, and the imposition of ascetic lifestyles, which starkly underline the systemic devaluation of women who are no longer associated with a husband. These entrenched practices not only exacerbate the marginalization of widowed women but also mirror the broader societal expectations placed on women's roles within these communities. Unlike their female counterparts, widowed men face few, if any, socio-cultural barriers to remarrying, illustrating a clear gender disparity in social norms (Murshed, 2022). In Bangladesh, the traditional role of a woman has been primarily to take care of her husband and children through domestic responsibilities. Upon the death of her husband, a widow is expected to remain in her husband's home; however, she is often regarded as a financial liability

by the family (Chen & Bhaduri, 2000). In similar traditional cultures, especially in India, the prescriptive norms for widowed women are even more austere, mandating practices such as shaving their heads, wearing white clothing, consuming minimal food, and severing most social ties (Chen & Bhaduri, 2000). These practices serve to emphasize the degree to which a woman's worth is intertwined with her status as a wife. Further, the contrasting experiences of widowhood between genders, where men are afforded the freedom to remarry and move forward with their lives, starkly underline the gender disparities within these societies (Ranjan, 2001). While the extreme forms of widow mistreatment, such as being pressured to commit sati—the historical practice where a widow would commit suicide upon her husband's death—are no longer legal or socially sanctioned, the persistence of these practices within certain lower socioeconomic groups or castes remains deeply concerning. This underscores the importance of ongoing vigilance and advocacy to safeguard the rights and dignity of all women, with a particular focus on those who are most vulnerable. Although such practices are no longer widely accepted, studies indicate that vestiges of these traditions may still occur within the lower socioeconomic strata and among specific castes, posing a grave human rights issue (Ahmad, 2009).

Tokai develop survival skills and take on the responsibility of loans and expenses post-separation from their husbands. This highlights the resilience and agency of these women in the face of adversity. It also points to the potential for empowerment that comes with economic independence and decision-making autonomy. However, such resilience is not an adequate substitute for systemic change. Policies and interventions that focus on the protection and empowerment of widows and divorced women are crucial. These could include legal reform to ensure their rights, economic support programs to help them become financially independent, and social campaigns to change the cultural perceptions of widows. By providing these women with the tools and resources they need to thrive independently, societies can begin to rectify the injustices that have long been imposed on them due to their gender and marital status. Shriti stated:

আমি অনেকবার ধার টাকা নিছি আমার মাহাজনের কাজ থেকে। একবার নিলাম আমার জামায় যখন চলে গেল আমাকে ছেড়ে এরপর আবার নিলাম যখন আমার ছেলের বউ হস্পিটালে ভর্তি ছিল তার বাচ্চার হওয়ার সময়। মাহাজন সবসময় আমাদের টাকা দিয়া সাহায্য করে, তারা আবার টাকা কেটে রাখে যখন আমি তাকে মাল দিই বিক্রির জন্য। প্রতি মাসে আমার এখন ১,০০০ টাকা কেটে রাখে মাহাজন। আমি আবার ধার নিছিলাম আমার আত্মীয় কাছ থেকে যখন আমার স্বামী হসপিটালে ভর্তি ছিল। আমার স্বামী একবার ৪৫,০০০ টাকা ধার নিছিল এখন আমি ওই টাকা পরিশোধ করতেছি অনেক পরিশ্রম করে।

I borrowed money several times from waste dealers, once after my husband left and a second time while my son's wife was in the hospital for the delivery of her son. Waste dealers are happy to give me advance money to start waste picking and sorting from the landfill. Waster dealers

cut our money while I provide them with my collected scraps. Every month I pay almost 1,000 taka to cover my debts. Again, I received a loan from relatives because I had to pay the medical cost of my husband's accident. My husband earlier also took a loan for 45,000 taka, now I am paying this extra money by working hard. (Sriti)

Sroti's financial exigency often compels her to engage in a perpetual cycle of borrowing and labour, particularly in informal economies. For instance, a woman might find herself repeatedly indebted to waste dealers, a reality stemming from life's unpredictability and the scarcity of formal financial support systems. Initially, borrowing may arise from the need to sustain livelihoods, such as when a husband abandons his family or during the costs incurred from childbirth. Waste dealers, operating within this informal economy, provide the necessary advances, yet the terms are such that the debt becomes a monthly burden, as seen with repayments that can reach up to 1,000 BDT (equivalent to about \$12 USD). This cycle is further compounded by emergencies, like medical expenses due to an accident, which necessitate additional loans from relatives. Even the debts of others, such as a significant 45,000 BDT loan taken by her husband, fall upon her shoulders, necessitating increased labour to manage these accumulating financial obligations.

Similarly, participant Nasrin's circumstances also illustrate the difficulties faced by many women in economically vulnerable positions. The decision to take out a loan for her husband's medical treatment is indicative of the lack of accessible healthcare and the financial strains that unexpected health issues can impose on families, particularly in lower-income areas. Her transition into waste picking as a means of income following her husband's illness underscores a few critical points.

Previously, she had worked as a maidservant in other people's houses, but she said:

আমি যদি কারও বাসায় কাজ করতে চাই, আমাকে সময়মত যেতে হবে, কাজ করতে হবে। বাড়ীওয়ালা সব সময় আসতে বলবে, এই কাজে কুন স্বাধীনতা নাই। ময়লার কাজে কুন সময় নাই, যখন মনে চায় কাজ করি, যখন মনে চায় যাই। সব নিজের ইচ্ছা। কেউ আমাদের সমস্যা করে না, মনে চাইলে যাই, নাইলে বাসায় বসে থাকি। এখানে কুন বাধা নাই যে আমাকে আমার দায়িত্ব পালন করতে হবে, কাজের কুন টার্গেট নাই। আমাকে আমার উপস্থিতি দেখাতে হয় না। আমাকে কুন ম্যানাজার কাছে কৈফত দিতে হয় না।

If I work in a house as a servant, I need to work in time-to-time, the houseowner asks me to come daily; there is no freedom. There is no timetable for waste picking work, so I am working whenever I wish. Nobody will disturb my work and if I wish I can either go to work or I can sit in my home. There is no restriction that I have to complete my duties and no target for the task. I do not need to show my attendance and I am not controlled by a manager. (Nasrin)

The fact that Nasrin was advised that waste picking was an "easy way to start work" highlights the limited options available to her. While the entry barriers to waste picking might be low, the

work itself is far from easy, often involving long hours in unsanitary conditions, exposure to hazardous materials, and physical toll on her body. Nasrin's experience reflects broader gender dynamics where women often bear the brunt of caregiving responsibilities, both for children and sick family members. When these caregiving roles translate into economic responsibility, women are frequently pushed into low-wage, unstable jobs that offer little security or protection.

Taking on debt for healthcare can plunge families into poverty, creating a cycle that is difficult to break. For Nasrin, waste picking became not just a job but a means of survival, likely offering her the flexibility to care for her husband while attempting to manage her debt. Her story is a testament to the resilience of individuals in the face of systemic challenges. It also signals the need for more robust social safety nets, including accessible healthcare and financial services, that can prevent families from falling into such precarious situations. Additionally, it speaks to the need for better employment opportunities that offer dignity, fair wages, and safe working conditions to those who find themselves with limited options.

Single tokai mothers, much like single mothers worldwide, often face significant challenges that stem from social, economic, and cultural factors. The experiences of tokai single mothers can be particularly acute due to the interplay of poverty and the rigid social structures within which they live. They may be stigmatized for raising children without a male partner. This can result in social ostracism and a lack of support from the community, which in many cultures is vital for both emotional and practical survival. Without the financial support of a partner, single tokai mothers may struggle to provide for their children. In a community where waste picking is a common means of survival, the income earned is often insufficient for a family's needs. They may have less access to resources such as education, healthcare, and social services. This can be due to both systemic barriers and the day-to-day realities of raising children alone, which leaves little time or energy for seeking out these resources. The burden of being the sole caregiver and provider means that single tokai mothers must juggle multiple roles, often without any respite. This can lead to physical and emotional exhaustion, impacting their health and well-being. Single tokai mothers may be more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. They might find themselves in situations where they have to compromise on their safety and dignity to make ends meet.

The children of single mothers may also face exclusion and limited opportunities. They might suffer from the lack of a stable economic base, which can affect their education and future prospects. Understanding and addressing the exclusion of tokai single mothers requires a multifaceted approach:

For example, Laboni, a single mother, shared:

আমি বাসায় আর ময়লার প্রোজেক্ট এ অনেক পরিশ্রম করতেনি কিন্তু আমার বাসার কাজে কুন মূল্য নাই। আমি আমার বাচ্চার যত্ন নিচ্ছি, আমাকে কেও সাহায্য করে না। আমি অনেক কম খাচ্ছি কারন আমি একজন গরীব মানুষ আর আমি একজন অপরিষ্কার মহিলা যে কিনা ময়লায় কাজ করে

I am working hard both in my household and waste project, but my domestic work is not valued. I am taking care of my child alone, no one supports me. I am earning less than others [men] because I am a poor woman, and I am dirty [untouchable] due to working in landfill project. (Laboni)

Laboni's statement about social exclusion leading to individual alienation illustrates how societal attitudes and structures can internalize feelings of isolation and worthlessness in individuals. This alienation is not just from society at large but can also manifest in a disconnection from one's sense of self and community. The experience of single tokai mothers, as outlined, indeed reflects systemic social issues rather than individual failings. The statement that their marginalized status is political is an acknowledgment that social structures, policies, and cultural norms contribute to their exclusion. It points to the need for societal change to address these injustices, rather than placing the onus on the individuals to overcome these barriers on their own.

The strong religious beliefs and cultural practices that ascribe divine or superior status to husbands reinforce gender hierarchies and can perpetuate the dependence of women on male figures throughout their lives. Such beliefs can make it even more challenging for single mothers to find acceptance and support within their communities, as their very existence challenges these deep-seated norms. This reliance on male figures is compounded by a cultural narrative that a woman's value is intrinsically linked to her relationship with men — first her father, then her husband. This narrative not only undermines the agency of women but also leaves them particularly vulnerable if those relationships end or are absent.

Belief in Rumours

The challenges faced by tokai in Dhaka City extend beyond socio-economic hardships to include significant health risks, exacerbated by misinformation. Razaaque, for example, highlighted a concerning trend: prevalent rumours within tokai led to a distrust of personal protective equipment (PPE), such as masks and gloves. This misinformation propagates the belief that PPE could actually contribute to the spread of Covid-19, despite its intended use for protection against the virus. For instance, Rina stated:

আমার জামাই আমাকে পিপিই পরতে নিষেধ করেছিল লক দাওনের সময়, সে আমাকে উপদেশ দিয়েছিল এগুলো ফেলে দিতে কারন এগুলো পরা শরীরের জন্য নাকি ভাল না। আমরা পরে এগুলো সব পুকুরে ফেলে দিয়েছিলাম।

My husband prevented me from using PPE during the pandemic. My husband advised me to throw away all the PPE because it is not good for my health, and finally we have disposed of all of it into the local pond. (Rina)

The adherence to rumours and informal advice over formal health advice has had tangible consequences. Many tokai workers experience a range of health issues, including allergies, respiratory problems, and skin conditions, which are likely exacerbated by their reluctance to use PPE consistently during their waste picking activities. This situation is indicative of the need for targeted public health interventions that not only provide access to proper protective gear but also engage in community-based education to dispel myths and encourage the adoption of PPE. By aligning health practices with the cultural context and communication strategies of tokai, there is potential to improve their work conditions and overall well-being significantly. Rina's perspective on the use of personal protective equipment (PPE) sheds light on a deeper issue of distrust and insecurity among tokai. Her concern that accepting PPE might lead to her exclusion from the landfill project illustrates the complex interplay between lack of education, poverty, and the fear of being replaced. This fear is not baseless in her eyes; she perceives it as a tactic potentially used by private companies to justify the hiring of more educated workers, thereby marginalizing those like her further. Her situation is emblematic of a broader sentiment among many tokai who are sceptical of the motives behind the distribution of PPE. Their reluctance is not merely a matter of rejecting safety equipment but is rooted in the fear of losing their livelihoods. The challenges here are multifaceted, involving the need to address the misinformation about PPE, provide education on its proper use, and most importantly, reassure tokai that measures to protect their health are not veiled attempts to displace them from their jobs. This underscores the need for initiatives that not only educate but also build trust within the community, ensuring that tokai feel secure in their roles and understand that health and safety improvements are meant to enhance their working conditions, not threaten their jobs.

Experiences of Violence, Harassment, and Discrimination

Tokai in Dhaka City, as revealed by the study, face an array of violence and discrimination that seeps from their domestic environments into the broader societal context. Roksana shared the violence she experienced:

আমার স্বামী এক বছর শুধু আমার সাথে ছিল। আমি তাকে বলেছিলাম বাচ্চা নেওয়ার জন্য সেটা নিতে চায় না। এরপর আমি তাকে বাধ্য করেছিলাম বাচ্চা নেওয়ার জন্য কিন্তু সে আমাকে ছেড়ে পরে পালিয়ে গেছিল। আমি যখন প্রেগন্যান্ট ছিলাম। সে আসলে আমার বাচ্চার দায়িত্ব নিতে চায় না। সে আসলে একজন মাগির দালাল ছিল, সে খারাপ কাজ করতু আর মেয়েদের সাপ্লাই দিল বিভিন্ন জায়গায়। সে আমাকেও ব্যবহার করতে চেয়েছিল।

তার এই ব্যবসায়। তার ব্যবসা মাগিদের ব্যবসা ছিল। একদিন আমি তাকে হাতে নাতে ধরি যখন সে আমার এক বান্ধবীর সাথে খারাপ করতে গেল, সে তাকেও বিক্রি করায় ধান্দা করছিল। কিন্তু আমার জন্য পারে না। আমি যখন তাকে বাধা দিতাম এসব কাজে সে আমাকে ধরে মার ধর করত, কারেন্ট এর স্ট দিত। সে মাজে মাজে আমাকে ব্যাস দিতে আগাত করত, চুখের সামনে যা পাইতু তাই দিয়ে মারত টাকার জন্য। সে আমাকে বাধা করেছিল জাতে আমি তার আসল চরিএ কাওকে না বলি

My husband was with me for only one year. I told him, I want a baby, he would avoid it. Then I forced him to have a baby but after my pregnancy, he refused to take responsibility for my child because he used to meet with other bad women [sex workers]. He was involved with a prostitution business in the city. He tried to use me for his business. He was the supplier of women from the village to the city. Once I caught him red-handed; he was trying to have sexual relations with my friend and trying to sell her in the hotel. While I stopped him from doing this bad job, then he started torturing me, for example using electric shocks. He used to kick and beat me with bamboo because of money. He forced me not to share his real character with others.
(Roksana)

The convergence of illiteracy, child marriage, dowry demands, and premature motherhood forms a nexus of oppression, subjecting these women to a cycle of violence, financial hardship, and societal subjugation. These conditions are not isolated to their private lives but are exacerbated by their public roles as informal workers, where they encounter heightened stigma and physical danger—an issue that is increasingly recognized in the literature addressing the gender-segregated labour markets and the rising influx of women into the workforce.

Predominantly poor, often widowed or divorced, tokai are particularly susceptible to sexual harassment and domestic violence. The very nature of their work—waste picking—subjects them to additional layers of social stigma, rooted in class and caste biases that are prevalent in urban areas. The increased public visibility and economic activity of tokai have also indirectly led to familial tensions, as traditional household dynamics are challenged. This shift, while a step towards financial independence, exposes them to greater risks of assault and harassment, both physically and psychologically. The literature corroborates these findings, noting that women who are marginalized by poverty, widowhood, and divorce are more frequently targets of sexual aggression and other forms of violence (Ganguly, 2020; Niaz, 2003).

This complex web of socio-economic and cultural factors calls for a holistic approach to intervention, one that targets not just the symptoms of such disparities but their root causes. Measures need to include educational programs to reduce illiteracy, legal reforms to protect against child marriage and dowry exploitation, and initiatives aimed at empowering women economically. There is a critical need for societal transformation, where the dignity and safety of every worker, regardless of gender, is upheld and where cultural practices no longer perpetuate the marginalization of women. Only through such comprehensive efforts can the cycle of

violence and discrimination faced by tokai —and indeed all women in similar conditions—be broken. Efforts to address these issues must be multi-pronged, encompassing legal reform to offer greater protection to women; economic initiatives to foster independence; educational programs to challenge and shift entrenched gender norms; and the establishment of accessible support services for abuse survivors. Furthermore, there needs to be a concerted push to improve workplace safety for informal workers and to empower women through the support of collective groups. Collectively, these measures can pave the way for a society where tokai, and women in similar circumstances, can live and work with dignity, free from the threat of violence and the burden of discrimination.

Razia's spoke about how domestic violence and assault exacerbate the vulnerabilities associated with poverty and low social status.

সাধারণ মানুষ আমাকে গ্রিনা করে আমি ময়লায় কাজ করি বলে। তারা আমাকে রাস্তার কুকুরের মত মনে করে, বলে আমি নাকি খারাপ পরবেশে কাজ করি, খারাপ কাজ করে বেড়াই। আমি নাকি পরিবেশ নষ্ট করি ময়লার গন্ধ ছড়িয়ে আসে পাশে। মানুষ আমাদের আসলে স্নেহ এর মত দেখে কারন আমরা বড় বড় ব্যাগ কাধে নিয়ে কাজ করি

Local people avoid me due to working in dirty places. They treat me like a street dog and tell me that I am working in a nasty environment, and I spread bad smell to our environment. People consider tokai to be like slaves because we are carrying large bags. (Razia)

Her inability to seek refuge or assistance due to her socioeconomic position underscores the systemic barriers that many women face in similar situations. The lack of a support system, compounded by her marginalized status in society, leaves her with few avenues for escape or recourse. Her situation reflects a broader societal issue where individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds often have limited access to justice or support services. The absence of guardians or a reliable support network to confide in or seek help from compounds the isolation and helplessness felt by victims of domestic abuse. Razia's testimony brings to the forefront the critical need for accessible and empathetic support systems that can provide protection, legal aid, and emotional support to those trapped in cycles of violence and oppression, regardless of their socio-economic status.

Similarly, Kulsom described how she was discriminated against by landlords and other people, because she worked in a dirty workplace:

আমি যদি তাদের সত্যটা বলি তারা আমাকে বাসা ভাড়া দিবে না। আমি চাইলেও সাধারণ মানুষের সাথে ভাল বাসায় থাকতে পারি না। কিছু মানুষ আছে যারা সবসময় আমাদের অবজ্ঞা করে এর বলে আমরা নাকি নুংরা আর আসাস্থ্যকর, আমাদের শরীর থেকে নাকি ময়লার গন্ধ আসে। আমি তু আর চুরি করে খাচ্ছি না, খারাপ পথে টাকা

উপার্জন করতেছি না। আমি কাজ করি আর টাকা কামাই। কেও যদি আমকে অবহেলা করে আমি তার কাছে যায় না দূরে দূরে থাকি

If I tell the truth, they never rent me a house to me. I cannot live with general people in an apartment. Some people in the road and shopping mall, they avoid me and consider that I am dirty and unhygienic and smell bad in public places. I am not earning money through illegal ways, I am working and earning. If one avoids me, I usually keep a distance from them... They are wealthy people, but I am poor, I am nothing regarding them. Due to poverty, profession and discrimination, my miseries are not understood by anyone. (Kulsom)

The study reveals a precarious balance that participants must maintain while engaging in their daily work of collecting and sorting waste from landfills. On the one hand, there is a palpable fear of handling medical waste, likely due to the inherent health risks and the potential for disease transmission. On the other hand, there is an equally strong fear of being misidentified as thieves should they collect items that could be perceived as having been discarded from roadside or household sources. This fear of wrongful accusation and the subsequent harassment by local wealthier individuals places the participants in a vulnerable position, highlighting the stigmatization and suspicion they face as waste pickers. The participants' experiences reflect the societal challenges that come with their occupation, where they are often treated with disdain and suspicion, further marginalizing them and exacerbating their social exclusion.

Interventions in this area could focus on community education to reduce the stigma associated with waste picking, as well as the implementation of clear guidelines and protections for those who work in this essential yet undervalued sector. For example, Fatema stated:

আমি ময়লাতে কাজ করি কারণ আমি অন্যের বাসায় বা কারখানায় গিয়ে ময়লা তুকাইতে পারি না। বেশির ভাগ বড় লোক মানুষ আমাকে সন্দেহ করে যে আমি মনে হয় তাদের কুন দামি জিনিস নিয়ে চলে যাচ্ছি। আমি চাই না কারও দ্বারা দুসারূপ হতে বা খারাপ কথা শুনতে যে আমি একজন চুরা। তারা সবসময় আমাদের কে দুষ দেয় যদি তাদের কিছু হারিয়ে যায় বা খুজে না পায়। আমি সবসময় তাই এখানে কাজ করি উন্য কুখাও যাই না ময়লা টুকাতে।

I work in an open landfill because I cannot go to other houses or commercial places to collect scraps. Most of the rich people suspect that I take some valuable things from them. I do not want to be blamed or harassed as a thief by these people. They always blame us if they cannot find any of their stuff. I always avoid going to another place for waste picking. (Fatema)

Fatema's and other participants' experiences in the study paint a picture of the discrimination and risks faced by women waste pickers in public spaces. The constant threat of verbal abuse, harassment, and violence from individuals of higher social classes, including house owners, businessmen, and government officials, underscores a deep-seated societal disdain for those working in waste management, especially women. The perception of waste pickers as dirty and of

a lower caste is not only dehumanising but also contributes to their social exclusion and vulnerability. The mistrust they encounter, as seen in Fatema's hesitation to accept work inside houses or restaurants due to fear of being trapped or harassed, restricts their opportunities for safer employment and better income. Additionally, the participants' anxiety about inadequate storage facilities for sorted waste highlights the lack of infrastructure and support from local authorities. The actions of city officials, who blame the waste pickers for creating open fires and disrupt their work by spraying water, further exacerbate the challenges they face. The verbal harassment by security guards and locals is indicative of a broader societal failure to recognize the essential service waste pickers provide and the need for their protection and dignity in their labour.

This study illuminates the need for policy reforms that safeguard the rights and welfare of waste pickers, provide them with proper facilities, and foster a societal shift in the perception of this important yet marginalised group. What is required is a concerted effort to create a safe and respectful environment for waste pickers, ensuring that they can perform their duties without the constant fear of abuse and violence.

It is also common for tokai to experience domestic violence. Asma shared her situation:

স্বামী তার বউ কে তখনই পসন্দ করে যখন বউ তাকে টাকা দিয়ে পরিবারে সাহায্য করে। কিন্তু আমি এখন আয় করি আর আমি আমার জামাইকে খাওয়াই। এটা কি পুরুষ মানুষের কাজ না। আমি যদি তাকে টাকা না দেই, তাকে জুয়া খেলতে না দিই, সে আমাকে মার ধর শুরু করে যা আমার শরীরে জন্য খারাপ। আমি তাকে অনেক বার দেখছি উন্য মেয়ের সাথে খারাপ কাজ করতে, একবার তু আমার চাচাত বুনের সাথে এটা করে আমার কাছে ধরা খাইছিল, আপনি বলেন কিভাবে আমি সব মেনে নিব, কিভাবে নিজেকে চুপ রাখব। আমি অনেক চেষ্টা করছি উন্য সবাইকে নিতে তাকে বুজাইতে, সে বুজে না, আমি বলছি এখন ছেলে মেয়ে বড় হইছে এসব খারাপ কাজ ছেড়ে দিতে। সে কারও কথা সুনো না মানেও না।

Each husband looks after his wife particularly if she will work for the financial solvency of his family. But I am earning and feeding my husband. Is it not the male responsibility? If I refuse to give him money and stop him from gambling, he just starts doing physical violence to me and it affects my health. I found him several times while he was doing something wrong [sexually abusing] with my younger cousin. Just tell me how I can control myself that time! If I protest, he beat me. Who will accept these physical sufferings, so the best is to be silent? I, along with other people, have tried to tell my husband that our children have grown up so please stop this behaviour. He does not care anymore. (Asma)

The use of religious texts to justify domestic abuse is a complex and deeply problematic issue. Asma's experience, where her husband cites religious teachings to rationalize his violent behavior, is a stark example of the misinterpretation and misuse of religious scripture to maintain control and assert dominance within the household. The specific reference to Surat an-Nisa (the

fourth chapter of the Qur'an) highlights a contentious interpretation of verse 34, which has been the subject of much debate among Islamic scholars. While some have taken it to mean that men have a divinely sanctioned authority to discipline their wives physically, this interpretation has been widely contested. Many scholars argue for a contextual and holistic reading of the scriptures, emphasizing the overall spirit of kindness, mutual respect, and the protection of women that pervades Islamic teachings. The problematic invocation of religious doctrine as a means to justify abuse reflects a broader issue of patriarchal structures within societies, where religion is sometimes weaponized to sustain gender hierarchies. This is not unique to Islam or any single religion but is a phenomenon observed across various cultures and faiths.

Addressing this issue requires a multifaceted approach, including theological engagement to challenge harmful interpretations, education to promote a correct understanding of religious texts, and robust legal systems to protect the rights and well-being of all individuals, irrespective of gender. Communities and religious leaders play a critical role in countering these misinterpretations and in fostering environments where the dignity and safety of women are upheld as paramount.

As a wife, most tokai surrender their rights and privileges and accept domestic abuse. Alisa stated:

মানুষ বলে শিক্ষিত জামাই নাকি বউ কে মারে না, অবজ্ঞা করে না। আমি মনে করি এটা সত্যি না সবার ক্ষেত্রে। আমার ক্ষেত্রে শিক্ষা কক্ষনই পুরুষের নির্যাতন বন্ধ করতে পারে না, আমার জামাই তু অনেক শিক্ষিত তাইলে সে কেন আমাকে নির্যাতন করে। বরং এটা অনেক কাজে লাগে যদি কার ভাল জুগাজুক আর সম্পর্ক থাকে কুন দরকারি সাহায্য পাওয়ার জন্য

People say that educated husbands never insult or beat their wives, but I think it is not true for everyone. In my case, education is not important to stop violence and any oppression because my husband was educated but he used to beat me. But it is important to know how to make a connection and communicate with others for urgent support. (Alisa)

The lived experiences of Alisa and other tokai highlight the intersection of gender, economic vulnerability, and social stigma that characterizes the lives of many informal workers, particularly in the context of waste picking. Alisa's lack of formal education, a consequence of her father's death and the economic hardship that followed, underscores the systemic issues that perpetuate cycles of poverty and limit opportunities for women in similar situations. Alisa's insight into the importance of autonomy and communication skills speaks to the resilience and adaptive strategies developed by tokai to navigate the harsh realities they face. These skills serve as a buffer against the harassment and diminished self-esteem that can arise from their marginalized status. Her perspective also suggests that social skills and networking can be empowering tools

for women in oppressive circumstances, helping them to negotiate better conditions and maintain a sense of dignity.

The experiences shared by Kohinor offer a profound insight into the social dynamics of marriage and the associated challenges faced by tokai, a term that often refers to waste pickers in South Asian contexts. Kohinor's revelations elucidate the complex fabric of marriage within certain societies, underscoring that it is not merely a bond between two individuals but a union orchestrated by their families, entwining two familial legacies. She sheds light on the silent tribulations of tokai, who frequently endure domestic violence in obscurity, compelled by the heavy weight of familial and religious conventions. This silence masks the grim reality that violence in these communities is not restricted to dowry disputes but is also prevalent in arranged marriages, often rationalized by the involvement of monetary transactions. Kohinor's observations are poignant, revealing that such financial considerations can be exploited to justify a lifetime of domestic abuse, physical torment, and even murder.

The study further investigates into the emotional turmoil borne by the victims, highlighting a culture steeped in the silence of suffering. The interviews lay bare the shame and isolation felt by the tokai, leading to a deep-seated sense of failure in their roles as wives, mothers, and workers. Such emotional distress is born from a pervasive culture that demands their subjugation to husbands and enforces a sacrificial allegiance to them, anchored in the dominant patriarchal construction of gender roles. The findings are unequivocal in portraying the oppression of tokai, often culminating in physical abuse by their spouses or other family members—a stark testament to the normalization of violence within the confines of arranged marriages.

Kulsom's testimony reveals the entrenched societal and religious challenges faced by women contemplating the prospect of divorce. Her personal struggle is emblematic of a broader issue where cultural and religious doctrines inextricably link the sanctity of marriage with personal virtue, thereby rendering divorce not just a social stigma but a perceived religious transgression. Kulsom's resolve to reform her husband's behaviour through 'surpassing tolerance' rather than pursuing divorce underscores the profound pressure to conform to the expectations of her family and community within the Muslim faith. The fear of ostracization, both socially and religiously, looms large, illustrating the formidable barriers to seeking autonomy in the face of marital discord.

The study further uncovers systemic inequalities that marginalize tokai, particularly in the realm of social welfare. Despite their status as legal voters engaged in the democratic process, tokai find themselves with limited leverage in local politics and, consequently, are often excluded from

social safety net programs like elderly or widow's allowances. This exclusion is a reflection of their occupational and social standing, which evidently diminishes their influence and access to support systems that are otherwise available to other citizens.

The political disenfranchisement of tokai, despite their legal rights as voters, emphasises the need for more inclusive and effective social safety nets. These women are often excluded from programs designed to provide support to the elderly and widowed, further marginalizing them from the socio-economic fabric of the country. This indicates a gap between legal rights and actual empowerment, where formal citizenship does not necessarily translate into substantive representation or leverage in local governance and decision-making processes.

For example, Mafuja stated “My aunty wanted to be a female local member during the Union Parishad election, but she did not nominate herself because she was a tokai in the landfill. After that I learnt if I want to win during an election, I can never share my real occupation in my village”. Mafuja's insights delve deeper into the paradoxical nature of the tokai's involvement in local politics. She points out that while tokai are often mobilized as a vote bank during elections, their reliance on the government for support is minimal. This seeming contradiction arises from an awareness among the tokai that their autonomy is largely dependent on their individual strategies and skills, rather than on government intervention. There is a palpable ambivalence toward the local government; on one hand, there is a lack of formal recognition and support for their rights as workers, including limited access to benefits, education, and healthcare. On the other hand, this very absence of governmental involvement inadvertently fosters a sense of independence among the tokai. The limited acknowledgment from both the local authorities and the broader society not only diminishes their productive capabilities but paradoxically, strengthens their self-reliance.

Also Mafuja's story is a vivid example of the stigma attached to the profession of waste picking and how it can impede the political aspirations and societal acceptance of individuals within tokai community. Her aunt's decision not to run for local office because of her occupation as a tokai underscores the deep-rooted societal prejudices that equate certain forms of labour with a lack of respectability. This reveals the societal barriers that prevent individuals from fully participating in civic life and accessing the political process.

The fact that tokai use their votes strategically but are reluctant to seek support from the government reflects a complex relationship with authority. On one hand, there is a recognition of the power of their collective vote, but on the other hand, there is a lack of trust in the system that has consistently marginalized them. Tokai 's reliance on personal strategies and skills for

survival, rather than on government support, speaks to a fierce independence born from necessity but also highlights their exclusion from mainstream social and economic networks.

Similarly, Momotaj protested the harassment she endured by one van driver and complained to the waste dealer. She said, “I asked to Mahajan, have you recruited me for waste picking or something else. I am not a magi or bajarer meya [sex workers]. I am working daytime not at night.”. Momotaj's protest against harassment represents the assertiveness and agency that tokai are forced to develop in response to the regular indignities they face. By directly challenging the van driver and clarifying her role as a waste picker, Momotaj rejects the sexualization and objectification that women in her position often endure. This assertiveness is a form of resistance against the societal norms that permit such harassment.

Mafuja, Momotaj, and Nasrin, highlight the resilience of tokai in the face of systemic oppression, their navigational strategies to counteract societal prejudice, and their struggle for dignity within a context that frequently denies them their basic rights.

Religious and Spiritual Issues

The intersection of religion, belief, and the lived experiences of tokai community in Bangladesh presents a complex tapestry of socio-economic and cultural dynamics. The role of faith in shaping the lives and coping mechanisms of these individuals is profound and multifaceted. Here I will explore how religious beliefs and practices influence tokai, against a backdrop of broader religious tensions in the country.

Tokai participants, found themselves at the crossroads of their faith and their daily struggle for survival. Their work, though stigmatised and challenging, is often imbued with spiritual significance. Many tokai see their ability to find recyclables and scraps as a form of divine blessing, a sentiment that underscores their resilience and the solace they find in their faith amidst hardship. This belief in divine providence not only provides spiritual comfort but also a sense of purpose and hope. However, the recent events of communal violence illustrate the precarious nature of religious coexistence in Bangladesh.

This study was written at a time when, recently, religious tensions arose when a copy of the Quran was placed at Durga Puja pandal in Nanua Dighir Par in Comilla City on October 13, 2021. It was intentionally insulting to the Quran and Muslim people to generate a religious clash. The Bangladesh police identified a 35-year-old Muslim man, Iqbal Hossain, through CCTV footage. His family claimed that someone might have taken advantage of his state of mind as he was a drug addict and spent most of his time at various local shrines. He had been mentally

unstable since an accident in his childhood, according to his mother. This incident led to communal violence in the entire country. In the end, according to Bangladesh police, 71 cases were filed in various regions of the country and 476 people detained in the last 6 days in connection with the attacks on Hindus and disseminating rumours on social media. This violence claimed the lives of four innocent people while several received critical injuries. Two days after this, some people attacked Hindu temples in Naokhali, which took another two people's lives. Police said the attacks on Durga Puja arcades were pre-planned and aimed at destroying communal harmony in the country (Ahmad, 2022). As a result, religious beliefs, freedom, and practices seem to be a hot topic in Bangladesh at this time.

The incident in Comilla and its aftermath not only sparked violence but also deepened religious divides, highlighting how religious sentiment can be manipulated to foment discord. For tokai, whose lives are already marked by vulnerability, such tensions add another layer of instability and fear, potentially impacting their safety and their ability to work peacefully. This social and religious upheaval has implications for religious freedom and practices for tokai. It raises concerns about their well-being in a society where communal harmony is disrupted, and where minority groups, be they religious or occupational like tokai, can become targets. For tokai, religion is not just a private matter of faith; it is a public and collective experience that intersects with their identity and work. As waste pickers, they navigate a space where their religious identity can both uplift and, during times of tension, potentially endanger them.

Understanding the life experiences of tokai thus requires an appreciation of how their religious beliefs sustain them, how they interpret their work within a spiritual framework, and how external religious conflicts might impact their community dynamics and personal safety. It is clear that for tokai, faith is both a refuge and a complexity in their lives as they strive for well-being and survival in a society rife with challenges. Kohinur described her belief in Allah to solve her problems:

সমস্যা তু আল্লাহ্ দেয়, আবার সমস্যার সমাধান আল্লাহ্ ই করে। ধরেন এক সময় অনেক কষ্ট করেছি, আবার নিজে একজনের কাজ থেকে ধার নেই টাকা তারপর সমাধান করেছি। বা হাত কাটা গেল পা কাটা গেল, ওষুধ এনে খেয়েছি এভাবে সমাধান করেছি এছাড়া আর কি করব।

Problems come from Allah; He will solve this. Suppose I suffered financially once, then I borrowed some money and solved this problem. I had cut my hand while I was working then again, I had brought medicine and recovered this. Allah save me every time. (Kohinur)

Similarly, Rahima stated:

আমার জীবন অনেক কষ্টকর, কিন্তু আমাকে সব কিছু সহ্য করতে হয় আর বেচে থাকতে হয় কারণ আল্লাহ্ গরীব মানুষকে পছন্দ করে। আমি আল্লাহ্ কে বিশ্বাস করি। আল্লাহ্ আমাকে সাহায্য করবে যেকোন বিপদে আপদে। আপনি দেখেন কত মানুষ মারা গেল এই ভাইরাসের সময়, কিন্তু একটা টুকাই ও ভাইরাসে আক্রান্ত হল না কেও মারা ও গেল না। কারণ এই ভাইরাস শুধু বড় লুকের জন্য, আল্লাহ্ আমাদের মত গরিবকে বাচাইয়ে রাখছে। আমি শুধু সকাল বেলা কাজ করি আর আল্লাহ্ আমাকে যত্ন নেয় এছাড়া আল্লাহ্ নিজেই আমার জমা করা মালের আর টাকার যত্ন নেয়

My life is full of sufferings and challenging, but I have to tolerate and survive because Allah loves poor people and I trust in Allah. Allah will help me during any emergencies even you see there are a lot people who have been affected by corona virus and also died, you cannot find any tokai who were affected by corona virus because this virus is only for wealthy people and Allah will save us. I just start working – picking waste in the morning and Allah will take care of me and my family, Allah will even take care of my collected waste and money - everything. (Rahima)

Rahima believes that religious beliefs and practices are an essential survival strategy for many tokai. She stated, “it is a part of my lifestyle, experiences, and wellbeing.” These religious beliefs and practices have helped her manage her unhappiness, pain, stress, and discomfort.

Likewise, Laizo stated her beliefs about the way Allah has worked in her life:

আমার তের বছর বয়সে বিয়ে হয়। বিয়ের সাত মাস পর চেষ্টা করি সন্তান নেওয়ার কিন্তু কুন সন্তান হয় নাই কারণ আমার অনেক ব্যাথা ছিল পিরিয়ড সময়। মানুষ বলে পিরিয়ড আর সময় বেশি ব্যাথা হলে এটা নাকি এক ধরনের রুগ, এটা নাকি বাচ্চা না হওয়ার কারণ। আমার শাশুড়ি মা আমাকে কবিরাজি ওষুধ এনে দিচ্ছিল একজন হজুরের কাছ থেকে ওটা খেয়ে আমি প্রথম প্রেগন্যান্ট হই। কবিরাজি ওষুধ ছিল পানি পরা যা হজুর সুরা পরে দিয়েছিল আমাকে খাওয়ার জন্য। আমি আসলে কুন ধরনের ডাক্তার রের ওষুধ নেই নাই আমার বাচ্চা হওয়ার জন্য। আমি কিছু গাছের পাতা খেয়েছিলাম আর কিছু তেল পরা নিয়েছিলাম আমার বাচ্চা হওয়ার জন্য। এটা আসলে আমার জন্য এক ধরনের আল্লাহ্ তালার পা ছুয়ার মত। ঠিক তেমনি ময়লার কাজ ওর আল্লাহ্ তালার আশীর্বাদ

I got married at an early age (13 years old) but after seven months trying to get pregnant there was no baby because I faced a lot of pain during my period time. People say that pain during period is a disease, so it hampers childbirth. My mother in law provided me with a local natural medicine called কবিরাজি ওষুধ [kobiraji oshuth] to eat, then I became pregnant. This medicine was given by our religious leaders. It is like a water that religious person made by reciting Sura from Quran. I did not take any doctor's medicine for my childbirth. I also eat tree leaves and took oil from a religious leader for the baby's birth. For me this medicine is like touching the feet of Allah every time... It is also like waste picking as Allah's blessing. (Laizo)

Laizo's describes the deeply ingrained societal and familial structures that impact tokai, particularly how religious beliefs and practices intersect with issues of education, social status, and discrimination.

For many tokai, religion offers solace and a way to make sense of their hardships. They rely on their faith as a coping mechanism to endure the physical and emotional strains of their

marginalization. In a context where structural inequalities are pervasive, individual spiritual practices become a crucial means of opposition to the suffering imposed by these inequalities. The act of finding recyclables and thanking Allah is not just about gratitude for sustenance but also about reaffirming their worth and humanity in a society that often overlooks them.

However, Laizo's situation highlights the other side of this religious coin. The humiliation she faces at the hands of her mother-in-law for not being able to read the Qur'an or engage in religious activities due to her lack of education is a stark example of how religious expectations can exacerbate feelings of inadequacy and exclusion. Her mother-in-law's comments about the food Laizo prepares reflect a prejudice that ties religious purity to literacy and education, further marginalizing her within her own family. The belief that touching food can affect the religious observance of others not only imposes an additional burden on Laizo but also isolates her from communal and family practices that could provide support and connection. This illustrates a cruel irony where religion, which provides a sense of community and resilience for many tokai, can also be a source of pain and isolation for those who are deemed to fall short of its practices due to circumstances beyond their control, like poverty and lack of education. The story of Laizo emphasises the need for a more compassionate understanding of religious practice, one that embraces individuals regardless of their literacy or educational background and recognizes the dignity and spirituality inherent in the lives of tokai.

Similarly, Asma pointed out that:

আমি কখনই আমার স্বামী সম্পর্কে খারাপ বলব না, যদিও সে তার মা বাবা কে বেশি দেখত, সে আমার পরিবারকে তেমন কুন সাহায্য করে না। সে কখনই প্রতিদিনের বাজার যেমন তেল, সাবান, কাপড়, খাবার কিনত না আমার সন্তাদের জন্য। সে আমাকে অনেক নির্যাতন করছে, আমি কখন ই তাকে মারি নাই বা কিছু বলি নাই, আমি শুধু সহ্যে যেতাম কারণ আমি বিশ্বাস করি স্বামীর পায়ের নিচে স্ত্রী বেহেশত। স্বামী হচ্ছে অনেকটা সৃষ্টিকর্তা মত, আমি তাকে কিছু বলতে পারব না।

I never say anything wrong about my husband although he cares for his parents and never supports my family. For example, he did not buy daily necessities such as soap, oil, cloths, food, etc. for my children. He tortured me physically and mentally several times, but I never bite him, I always tolerate all oppression because I believe my heaven is under the feet of husband. Husband is like a god, I cannot say anything until my death. (Asma)

Asma's experience underscores how religion and spiritual practices serve not only as a refuge from the hardships of daily life but also as a cornerstone for maintaining social connections and mental well-being for tokai. Despite the social stigma attached to their occupation, which often results in marginalization and discrimination, religious festivals like Eid provide a respite and an opportunity for tokai to reconnect with their roots, families, and communities.

Religious festivals are crucial for tokai like Asma, who face routine exclusion in urban spaces due to their association with waste and pollution. These gatherings allow them to step away from the societal labels imposed on them and to reclaim their identity beyond their work. They can immerse themselves in the communal joy and solidarity that religious celebrations offer, reinforcing their sense of belonging and community. However, the fact that Asma only visits her village during Eid highlights the isolation that tokai often experience. Their social interactions are limited to specific times when the collective spirit of a religious festival temporarily overrides the prejudices they regularly encounter. This points to the deep-seated nature of caste-like discrimination in society, which can deem individual's untouchable based on their occupation. Asma's reliance on religious practices to cope with mental illness also points to the lack of accessible mental health support for marginalized communities. In the absence of such services, religion fills the gap, offering a way for individuals to find peace and solace. This further emphasises the need for inclusive health and social services that address the needs of all societal members, including the most marginalized like tokai.

Saleha shared how she maintained her Muslim religious practices as best as she was able while working in the dump site.:

আমি মুসলিম, আমি প্রতিদিন নামাজ পড়ি। আমি পাচ ওয়াক্ত নামাজ পরতে পারি না উন্য সবাইয়ের মত। আমি জুহুরের নামাজ প্রায় সময় পরতে পারি না কারণ আমি তখন কাজে থাকি। মাজে মাজে ফজর আর নামাজ ও পরতে পারি না। আমি আমার আল্লাহ্ কে ভুলে যাই নাই, যদিও আমি ময়লায় কাজ করি। আমি রমজান মাসে রুজাও রাখি

I am Muslim, I take my regular prayers. I cannot perform five-time prayers like others. I miss my Zubr prayer most times because I am working at that time. Sometimes I cannot take Fajr prayer because I am sleeping. I do not forget Allah despite working in a dirty place. I used to fast in the Ramadhan month. (Saleha)

Tania shared her beliefs about religious education and its importance for tokai. She stated:

আমি আমার ছেলেকে ক্লাস থ্রী পর্যন্ত জেনারাল লাইন এ পরাব তারপর ওকে মাদ্রাসায় ভর্তি করে দিব। মাদ্রাসা পরায় অনেক সম্মান আর শ্রদ্ধা আছে। মানুষ আমাদের সম্মান করবে। আমি আমার ছেলেকে হাফেজ বা মাওলানা বানাতে চাই। আমি জানি সে যদি বাংলায় পড়ে অনেক চাকরি পাবে, আমি তাকে আরবি পরতে বলব। মানুষ তাও বলবে আমি অনেক কষ্ট হইলেও ছেলেক পরাইছি। আল্লাহ্ অনেক খুশি হবে। সে একজন মাওলানা হলে এটা আমার পরিবারের জন্য অনেক সম্মানের ব্যাপার। মানুষ আমাকে অনেক শ্রদ্ধা করবে। আমার ওর কামাই খাওয়ার কুন ইচ্ছা নাই।

I will teach my son general education up to class three then I will admit him to a madrasa education. Madrasa education has some respect and dignity, people will respect us. I want to see him be a kuran hafej or maulana [religious leader]. I know if he studies Bangla, he will get a job but I will encourage him to study Arabic. People will say at least I can continue

my son's education and Allah will save us. Being a religious leader is a prestige for a family, people will respect me. I do not have any interest to take financial support from him. (Tania)

The narratives of Tania, Marium, and Kulsom provide a poignant look into the complex interplay between religious faith and the daily realities of tokai community. Their experiences highlight how religious beliefs and cultural practices can serve as a source of identity and guidance, yet simultaneously present practical challenges given the nature of their work. For Tania, the maintenance of religious traditions is crucial, but the demands of long working hours impinge upon her ability to fully engage with these practices. This tension reflects a broader struggle to balance spiritual commitments with the economic necessities of survival. The madrasa education system, while providing religious and cultural education, seems to limit the scope of learning, particularly for women, reinforcing traditional roles without equipping them with broader educational skills. Marium's remark, "Islam is not only my religion but also my identity", underscores the central role religion plays in the lives of tokai. However, her inability to practice her faith as she desires, due to the conditions of her work, points to a painful compromise. The need to adapt religious attire for practicality while working in the landfill illustrates the concessions that tokai make to their faith in order to earn a living. Kulsom's practice of wearing a long saree or scarf in public spaces, and sometimes a purdah, reflects a strategic adaptation to societal expectations around modesty. By conforming to these norms during her commute, she navigates the public gaze and potential harassment. Yet, the removal of the purdah at the worksite is a pragmatic decision, prioritizing function and safety over religious and social expectations.

These stories reveal that, for tokai women, religious attire and practices are not merely about faith but are also tools for navigating the social complexities of their environment. They must constantly negotiate their religious identity with the practical demands of their work and the societal pressures they face. The reliance on male religious leaders for the interpretation of religious texts further complicates this dynamic, potentially restricting their autonomy to engage critically with their faith. This reliance on interpretation from others can perpetuate a cycle of dependency and limit the empowerment of women within the community.

Summary

In the exploration presented in this chapter, the lived experiences of widow and single mother tokai in Bangladeshi society are brought to the forefront, revealing a tapestry of challenges shaped by societal expectations and rigid gender roles. These women, marginalized by their status, face not just economic hardships but also the psychological toll of their stigmatization. The narratives underscore the mental health struggles that accompany their daily battles, as they

navigate loneliness, shame, and the psychological aftermath of persistent violence—both within domestic walls and from societal interactions. Their stories reveal the insidious impact of such violence on their well-being, often sanctioned subtly by religious doctrines that they find themselves bound to. Religion emerges as a double-edged sword, providing solace and community while simultaneously justifying or perpetuating their subjugation and suffering. This multifaceted examination sheds light on the stark reality of these women's resilience and their quest for autonomy, as they reconcile their faith with their circumstance, and their desire for independence with the constraints imposed upon them. Through their eyes, we witness the intersection of cultural, religious, and gendered forces that dictate the contours of their lives, often at the cost of their mental and physical health.

The upcoming chapters explore more deeply into the implications of tokai choices to engage in waste picking. It aims to address the third research question, which focuses on the consequences of their occupational choice. These consequences are multifaceted, encompassing social and political barriers that further entrench their marginalization, health risks that arise from the hazardous nature of their work, and the limitations they face in accessing healthcare, which is critical for their wellbeing.

Chapter Seven: Findings – Social Barriers, Risks, and Health Care Services

In the current chapter, the focus is on elucidating the socio-political constraints that adversely affect the livelihood and healthcare access of tokai, aligning with the investigation of Research Question Three. The essence of understanding these social impediments is underscored by the concerns expressed by many respondents regarding the unpredictability of their earnings and the potential for abrupt dislocation owing to landfill initiatives. The discussion commences by exploring into the multifaceted identities of the tokai and their propensity to conceal their profession, and considering the underlying reasons for such behaviour. Subsequently, the narrative shifts to examine an array of socio-political hurdles. These include economic challenges such as the influx of new workers, competitive pressures from landfill operations, the impact of weather and natural disasters, along with the societal issues of untouchability, stigma, and the gender-specific obstacles affect access to health and hygiene. Following this, the chapter proceeds to articulate the daily health hazards faced by the tokai and examines the obstacles they encounter in accessing health care services.

Multiple and Hidden Identities

As stated previously, this research investigates the intricate fabric of the lived experiences of tokai by examining their personal narratives through the prisms of caste, class, religion, gender, and capitalism. These intersecting lenses provide a nuanced understanding of their unique circumstances. The study reveals that tokai constitute a diverse cohort in the context of Dhaka City. While tokai include both Hindu and Muslim individuals, the focus of this study has been exclusively on Muslim participants. The findings suggest that tokai epitomize a *de facto* Muslim lower caste, highlighting class and caste struggles within a societal framework where the Muslim caste system tends to be overlooked.

The class and caste affiliation of the participants often resulted in marginalisation and oppression by the more dominant groups, anchored in the prevailing concepts of purity and impurity. This marginalization is not only systemic but also profoundly personal, as many tokai choose not to reveal their true occupation even to close friends and relatives. The growing number of people participating in informal waste picking has led to a culture of secrecy among tokai, prompting them to maintain multiple identities to conceal their primary occupation. Such findings underscore the complex socio-economic and cultural dynamics that shape the lives of tokai, shedding light on the broader implications of societal structures on marginalised groups.

For example, the following statement illustrates why participant Morsedha was reluctant to visit her village and hid her occupation:

আমি আমার গ্রামের বাড়িতে বেশি যাই না কারণ আমি আমার আসল পেশা সবাইকে বলে বেড়াতে চাই না। আমার অনেক আত্মীয় আছে যারা আমাকে জিজ্ঞাসা করে আমি কুথায় কাজ করি। আমি তাদের মিথ্যা বলি। এছাড়া গ্রামে যাওয়া অনেক জামেলা অনেক টাকা খরচ হয়। আমি যদি গ্রামে যেতে চাই, এটা শুধু শুধু টাকা নষ্ট করা আর কিছু না। আমি চিন্তা করছি একবারে ঈদের ছুটিতে যাব, গিয়ে কয়দিন থাকব। আমি আমার আত্মীয় বা বন্ধু বান্দব কে বলি না যে আমি ময়লায় কাজ করি। তাদেরকে এটা বলা শরমের ব্যাপার। কেউ জানে না ঢাকা শহরে আসলে আমি কি কাজ করি। তাদেরকে বললে তারা তু আমাকে তুচ্ছ তাহিল্ল করবে, আমার থেকে দূরে থাকবে। আমি আসলে তাদের বলি আমি জুতার কারখানায় কাজ করি।

I am not going to my village because I do not want to disclose my occupation to them. My relatives always ask me where I am working. Also, it is expensive to visit the village. It is just a waste of money if I go to the village. I am thinking that I will go back after the Eid vacation and stay some days. I never share my project work with my relatives or friends in the village. It would be shameful to inform them. Nobody knows what I am doing in the city. If they know they will avoid my family and stay away from me. I usually tell them I am working in a shoe factory. (Morsedha)

Morsedha sheds light on the deeply entrenched social stigma associated with waste picking, which permeates her personal relationships and sense of self. The discomfort she experiences in disclosing her occupation to friends and relatives in her village is palpable. Her work, which she deems necessary for financial support, is met with derision and disrespect, as evidenced by the severing of ties with her cousin following the revelation of her true profession. This ostracization is further exacerbated by outright insults from her cousin's husband, underscoring the societal disdain for her means of livelihood. The shame and disrespect she anticipates, reflected in her belief that "people will look down upon me", has driven her to fabricate a more socially acceptable employment narrative, such as working in a shoe factory, especially when communicating with her daughters-in-law. This lie is a protective shield to spare her daughter from the societal humiliation associated with waste picking.

Despite these challenges, her resolve remains unshaken. Her migration to the city has afforded her a degree of anonymity, making it easier for her to work at dumpsites, away from the judgmental eyes of those who knew her in her hometown. In the face of adversity, she finds a sense of pride in her ability to financially support her family and even harbours ambitions of entrepreneurship within the waste industry. Her story is one of resilience and pragmatism,

demonstrating a complex interplay between societal perceptions, personal dignity, and economic necessity.

Similarly, participant Saleha stated:

আমি দেশের বাড়িতে সবাইকে জানাই না আমি কি কাজ করি। এটা একটা শরমের ব্যাপার। সবারই একটা শরম আছে। তাদের বলি যে আমি কারখানায় কাজ করি। কিন্তু বলি না আমি ময়লায় কাজ করি। তারা জানলে ভাববে উমুকের মেয়ে, উমুকের বউ ময়লায় কাজ করে এটা একটা মান সম্মানের ব্যাপার। আমি গরীব হতে পারি তাই বলে মান সম্মান নাই টা না, আমার ও শরম আছে। মানুষ আমাকে অবহেলা করুক এটা আমি চাই না।

I do not tell my relatives and friends what I am doing in the city. It is dishonourable to share with them that I am working in the landfill project. I tell them that I am working in the factory. I lie to them about my job, people do not know. I am poor: that does not mean I have no shame, no honour. I have my own honour and people will neglect me if they know I am collecting rubbish. (Saleha)

Saleha's narrative elaborates the dichotomy between the reality of her work and the perception she wishes to project to her family and society. The concealment of her occupation as a tokai and the subsequent fabrication of employment in a glass factory is a testament to the lengths she goes to in order to maintain respect and a semblance of social status within her community. Her choice to reveal her work to only a select few is indicative of the social stigma attached to waste picking, which she perceives as a mark of disgrace that could tarnish her family's reputation and affect their position in village society. This deliberate obfuscation of her true source of income is not merely a shield against potential shame but also a strategic move to secure and enhance her family's societal standing. By marrying her daughter into a family unaware of her landfill work, she safeguards her daughter's social prospects, illustrating the complex interplay between personal dignity, social perception, and the imperative to provide for her family. Saleha's story, therefore, is one of strategic navigation through the rigid structures of societal judgment. It highlights the personal sacrifices and the often-invisible labour that goes into managing one's identity in the face of socio-political challenges.

The next section aims to delve deeper into these challenges, discussing the socio-political barriers that individuals like Saleha encounter in the realm of waste picking, and how these barriers shape their experiences and strategies for survival and social mobility.

Barriers to Tokai Income

Emerging New City Waste Workers

Tokai participants navigate a precarious economic landscape, one where their daily income is perpetually threatened by the competitive dynamics of the waste picking sector. Their anxiety is

rooted in the fear of displacement by the rising tide of private waste business companies and an increasing cohort of formally employed city waste workers. These changes represent a significant disruption to the status quo, where tokai have traditionally eked out a living. The entrance of private companies into the waste management arena brings with it a new workforce—individuals employed by private entities or appointed by local ward councillors—who are not only entering the occupational territory of tokai but are also receiving training on efficient waste separation techniques right from the source, i.e., household waste. This professionalisation of waste collection, which perhaps comes with better tools and organizational support, poses a direct threat to the informal, unstructured methods, and consequently the livelihoods of tokai. The tokai community's income is being squeezed as these new players start to dominate the economic landscape of waste management. The participants' testimonies shed light on the stark income disparities emerging from this shift—a vivid portrayal of how the tokai are being marginalized and finding themselves at the lower end of the earning spectrum.

Participant Alisa Akhter stated the reasons behind her low income and job insecurity:

আগে ত কামাই ছিল এখন মনে করেন লোকজন বেশি এখন আগের মত কামাই নাই, একদম কম। ময়লার দাম এখন অনেক কম। লোকজন এখন বাসা বারির মইলা নিজের বাসা থাকে আলাদা করে তাই আমরা এখন দামি ময়লা পাই না। সরকারি লোকেরা বাসা বারির ময়লা নিয়া আসে আলাদা করে আমাণ্ড কপাল পুড়সে। লোকজন এখন পানির বতুল খায় না, শীতকালে আমার কামায় অনেক কম। এখন ছয় মাস আমার ঘরে কামায় নাই। এখন অনেক পরিবর্তন। আমরা ময়লা অনেক কম পাই। এখন অনেক মেট্রিক পাশ করা ছেলে মেয়ে এই কাজে আসছে।

It was a good income earlier, but it is getting lower and lower because many people are entering into waste picking works. My income is quite reduced the prices of materials are getting lower day by day. Inhabitants are sorting their household rubbish in their own houses so we are not finding valuable waste. These city waste collectors are separating household waste, which makes an adverse situation... people are not drinking bottles of Coke during winter so my income is getting lower. I do not have much income in the last six months... I am not collecting much recycling waste nowadays. I am afraid! (Alisa)

Alisa's story is emblematic of the struggles faced by many tokai in the rapidly evolving landscape of waste management. The introduction of systematic household waste sorting has significantly reduced the quantity and quality of materials available to her in the open landfill, directly impacting her income. The waste that once provided a dependable source of earnings, albeit modest, is now pre-sorted, leaving her with scraps that are less valuable and harder to sell. Her livelihood, previously sustained by the recovery and sale of recyclable materials from both household and industrial waste, is now under threat. Alisa's concern is compounded by seasonal fluctuations, with her noting that the summer or dry season traditionally offered the most

lucrative period for her waste business. This seasonality adds another layer of unpredictability to her already unstable income.

The disparity in earnings between city waste workers and tokai like Alisa is a growing concern. City waste workers, with their official identification cards and uniforms, are allowed to collect waste directly from households. This privilege, authorized by both the central city council and local ward councillors, has effectively side-lined tokai from a significant portion of their potential earnings. The situation is further exacerbated by local council staff who prevent her and other tokai from collecting waste door to door, a practice now reserved for the officially recognized city waste collectors. The formalization of waste collection not only legitimizes these workers but also translates into higher earnings, as they can sort and sell valuable waste directly from the source—households and city bins.

Through the experiences of Alisa and her fellow tokai, it is evident that the socio-economic gap between informal waste pickers and formal city waste workers is widening. With the formal sector increasingly monopolizing the more lucrative aspects of waste collection and recycling, the tokai find themselves grappling with diminishing returns, heightening their financial insecurity and underscoring the urgent need for policy interventions that acknowledge and address their plight.

Participant Asma stated:

এখানে সিটি করপোরেশনের অনেক পরিচ্ছন্ন কর্মী আছে যারা বাসা বাড়ি আর কারখানার ময়লা নিয়ে আসে। তারা প্রতি মাসে ১০,০০০ টাকা থেকে ১২,০০০ টাকা আয় করছে। তারা অতিরিক্ত টাকা পায় অনেক সময় বাসা বাড়ির ময়লা থেকে আগেই ভাল জিনিস আলাদা করে। আমরা এখন অনেক দামি জিনিস কম পাচ্ছি কারণ এই পরিচ্ছন্ন কর্মীরা আগেই সব পেয়ে যাচ্ছে ময়লা বাচাই করে।

There are City Corporation employed waste workers who pick up rubbish from household and industry and they are paid 10,000 to 12,000 taka per month. They are also earning additional taka by sorting recycling items from the household waste. We are not getting more valuable and reusable rubbish to sell because city waste workers are sorting most of the valuable waste firstly.
(Asma)

Asma's narrative brings to light the stark income disparities between tokai and city waste workers. Her observation that city waste workers effectively receive a dual income—one from their stable salary and the other from the sale of recyclables—is particularly telling. With the ability to earn around 400 BDT a day, these formally employed workers enjoy a significant financial advantage over tokai like Asma, who can only manage to earn 200 to 300 BDT despite a full day's labour. Asma's attempts to transition into the more stable and profitable door-to-door waste collection were met with indifference by city officials, further marginalizing her due to her gender and her

status as a tokai. The lack of a waste van, a seemingly simple logistical barrier, has kept her from accessing better economic opportunities within the waste collection system. Her struggle is emblematic of the broader issues of systemic inequality, where those already disadvantaged by their socio-economic status are further impeded by institutional neglect and lack of resources. The potential for better earnings and working conditions, Asma suggests, lies in the opportunity to work across different sectors of the waste management system, such as combining household waste collection with landfill operations. However, her aspirations are stifled by market dynamics and fluctuating policies of waste dealers, which affect the pricing of recyclable materials.

Like Asma, other tokai face similar restrictions, with several participants reporting being barred from handling city waste bins. This restriction not only limits their access to potentially valuable recyclables but also reinforces their exclusion from the formal waste management system. The challenges faced by Asma and her peers reflect the urgent need for inclusive waste management policies that consider the welfare of informal workers and provide them with opportunities for economic advancement and social integration.

The involvement of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in addressing the socio-economic conditions of tokai seems to be limited, as Asma notes. The lack of support from such entities further exacerbates the income inequality, as they often lack the necessary information and access to improve their situation.

Marriam, a single mother tokai, reported that:

আমি মাজে মাজে পরিছন্ন কর্মীদের সাথে জগরা করি কিন্তু তারা আসলে বেশি সহজুগিতা পায় সাধারণ মানুষের কাছ থেকে। এখানে একটা নতুন ব্যাপার কাজ করে যে পরিছন্ন কর্মীরা বেশি সুবিধা পাবে, তাদের কাজের আলাদা জায়গা থাকবে। তারা সিটি করপোরেশনের কর্মী, তাদের সম্মান ও বেশি। এছাড়া আমাদের মাহাজন ও কিছু বলতে পারে না তাদের বিরুদ্ধে। আমাদের মাহাজন জামেলা করে না যদি সে আবার সিটি করপোরেশনের সাহায্য না পায়।

I sometimes quarrelled with other collectors, but city waste collectors get the most support from local people. There was a new perception that new waste collectors will get rights to work in these areas because they are employed by city council. Even waste dealers revealed their unwillingness to claim tokai access to work in every area because city waste workers have a good social status and waste dealers do not wish to lose support from the city council officials.
(Marium)

Marriam's experiences amplify a poignant reality for many tokai—property ownership in urban areas remains an elusive dream, impeded not just by prohibitive costs but also by the social status and stigma attached to their occupation. The sense of helplessness she describes is compounded by her limited social connections, which could otherwise offer support or avenues for better opportunities. The sentiment of displacement and encroachment on their livelihoods is a

common thread among the tokai, as Alisa's account also indicates. They find themselves increasingly marginalized by the privatization of waste sorting and processing, which systematically excludes them from a sector they have long relied upon for survival.

Masuda's perspective, given her proximity to the waste dealing business as the second wife of a dealer, reinforces these concerns. She highlights the impact of city waste buyers (ফেরিয়াল) who, by purchasing recyclables directly from households, bypass the tokai entirely. This new dynamic introduces an additional layer of competition and threatens the already precarious income of local tokai. Moreover, the fear of displacement is not unfounded as new waste workers (পরিবেশ কর্মী) employed by private companies and contractors enter the market. These workers, often better equipped and supported by formal infrastructures, pose a direct threat to the subsistence-based livelihoods of tokai.

The narratives of Marriam, Alisa, Masuda, and others speak to the broader issues of economic vulnerability and social injustice faced by tokai. Their stories underscore the need for inclusive economic policies and social support systems that can mitigate these insecurities and ensure that the rights and dignities of all workers in the waste management ecosystem are upheld.

Similarly, participant Jahanara was the wife of a waste dealer, who had worked for eight years in landfill. She describes this situation clearly. She stated that:

আমার টু গত চার মাস জাবত কুন আয় নাই কারন সবাই এখন জানে প্লাস্টিক বৃতল বা কাগজ বিক্রি করে টাকা পাওয়া যায়। তারা এটা স্থানীয় দুকানে বা ফেরিওয়ালার কাছে বিক্রি করছে। আমাকে তু বাড়ি বা দুকানের ময়লা আনতে দেয় না। এটা আমাদের হাতে নাই কারন আগে মানুষ ময়লা বাসার সামনে রাখতু এখন আর রাখে না। আমি এখন আগের মত ময়লা টুকাইয়া পাই না। আবার সুনলাম অনেক মানুষ নাকি ময়লা এখন ইনটারনেটে বিক্রি করছে। আমি এখন টাকা ধার নেওয়ার চেষ্টা করছি নিজে বেঁচে থাকার জন্য।

I have not had much income in the last four months because everyone knows plastic bottles and paper are reusable and you can make money selling them. People sell these to local street hawkers or shopkeepers now. I am not allowed to pick up household and industry rubbish. It is out of my hands because previously all rubbish was outside houses or on roads. I do not get enough materials to sell. I heard some people are selling these online. I am planning to take a loan to survive now. (Jahanara)

Jahanara's experience reflects a growing sense of abandonment among the tokai community as they confront the realities of a changing waste management landscape. The rise of online waste businesses signifies a shift towards more organized and possibly corporate models of waste collection and recycling, which increasingly edge out informal workers like the tokai from their traditional roles and income opportunities. The digitization and formalization of waste collection

services not only shrink the tokai' share of the market but also diminish their social standing. As waste becomes a more recognized and managed resource, the tokai find themselves deprived of access to what was once freely available in public spaces, thereby threatening their means of subsistence. Jahanara's observation that city residents are altering their waste disposal habits further complicates the situation for tokai. With increased awareness and implementation of hygiene standards, more people are using local bins to dispose of their rubbish, which, while beneficial for public cleanliness and health, inadvertently reduces the amount of waste that tokai can collect. The risk of government fines for improper waste disposal reinforces this behavioural change among the public, leading to a cleaner environment but also to a reduction in the informal waste collection opportunities that many tokai rely on for their daily bread.

The collective voices of Jahanara and her peers articulate a pressing concern: as the formal waste sector expands and public habits evolve, there is a crucial need for strategies that integrate informal waste workers into the new systems. Without such integration, the risk of exacerbating poverty and social exclusion for this already vulnerable group looms large, and the sustainability of their livelihoods remains in jeopardy.

Similarly, Marium talked about her biggest challenges to earning:

মানুষ এখন আর আগের মত নাই। তারা এখন তাদের বাড়ির মইলার জায়গা পরিষ্কার করে রাখছে। আমার বড় বাধা হল আমি এখন আগের মত মইলা পাই না এবং মইলার ওখানে যাওয়া যায় না। এই শহর অনেক পরিষ্কার হয়ে যাচ্ছে আর আমার আয় ও কমে যাচ্ছে। আমি ময়লা টুকাতে পারছি না, পাব কই এখন আর মইলা নাই শহরে। অনেক কম আয়! এভাবে চলতে থাকলে আমাকে এই কাজ ছেড়ে দিতে হবে। আর সরকার যদি সবাইকে নিয়ম মানতে বলে তাহলে টু আমরা অনেক অসহায় হয়ে যাব। আমি জানি না কি হবে আমার ভবিসং, আমি এখন অনেক বুড়ী, কেও টু আমাকে একটা চাকরি ও দিবে না।

Now people are not the same as previously. They are keeping their house and bins clean. My biggest challenges are to get access to those materials. This city is getting clean. I am not earning well, and I do not get enough materials. Very low income! If government forces people to behave like this, I have to leave this work. I feel helpless and vulnerable. What will be my future? I am old now, and no one will employ me now. (Marium)

Marium's frustration is a reflection of the broader impact that urban environmental awareness and cleanliness initiatives have on individuals in informal waste collection. As urban residents become more engaged in practices aimed at maintaining cleanliness, the unintended consequence is a reduction in the volume of waste that ends up in accessible areas for tokai to collect. These community efforts towards a cleaner city, while positive in their environmental impact, inadvertently diminish the tokai ability to earn a living, constricting their already limited access to waste materials. The hopelessness Marium expresses is shared by her peers, who are similarly

affected by these changes. The situation is exacerbated by the entry of more educated individuals into the waste picking sector. These new entrants, seeking self-employment and entrepreneurial opportunities, are perceived as a direct threat to the livelihoods of longstanding tokai like Marium. With better education and possibly more resources to invest in their waste collection activities, these newcomers are seen as competitors who could potentially ‘steal’ jobs from traditional tokai.

The convergence of increased civic involvement in maintaining cleanliness and the entrance of educated individuals into the informal waste sector represents a significant shift in the dynamics of waste collection and recycling. For tokai, who have long operated on the margins of the economy, these developments threaten not just their income but their very role in the urban ecosystem. Marium's account underscores the urgent need for policies and programs that can reconcile the goals of urban cleanliness and environmental management with the economic and social needs of informal waste workers.

Influence of Weather and Calamity

The testimonies from the tokai participants shed light on the precarious nature of their earnings, which are not only influenced by the socio-economic shifts and policy changes but also by the elemental forces of nature. The weather, as they describe, plays a significant role in their financial stability, with reduced earnings during adverse conditions such as the rainy and summer seasons. The challenges they face are multifaceted—during the rainy season, the practical difficulties of waste collection are compounded by the wet conditions, which make it harder to sort and sell the waste materials. These conditions can be especially challenging for tokai with disabilities, like Saleha, who find the physical aspects of their work significantly hindered by the mud and sludge that the rain brings. The summer season brings its own set of challenges, with extreme heat exacerbating the already difficult working conditions, and the spread of methane gas and the risk of fires in the landfill presenting serious health and safety concerns. These natural phenomena not only disrupt the ability of tokai to work but also pose threats to their health and well-being.

These environmental factors highlight the vulnerability of the tokai community, whose livelihoods are heavily dependent on external conditions that are beyond their control. There is a need for comprehensive support systems that can mitigate the impact of such natural phenomena on the earnings and safety of tokai. It is a stark reminder that any interventions aimed at improving the lives of informal waste workers must consider the full spectrum of challenges they face, including those posed by the very environment in which they work. She stated:

আমি বৃষ্টির সময় কাজ করতে পারি না, এ সময় আমাকে না খায়ে থাকতে হয়। কিছু মহিলা আছে যারা কাজ করে এই সময় কারন তাদের বাসায় ছুট বাচ্চা আছে, কাজ না করলে খাবে কি। তারা পলিসিনের ব্যাগ মাথায় করে কাজে চলে যায়। আমি পারি না এগুলো করতে কারন আমার বৃষ্টিতে ভিজলে ঠাণ্ডা লাগে জ্বর আসে। আমি মনে করি বৃষ্টিতে কাজ করা অনেক কঠিন, রুদে কাজ করা সহজ। রুদের সময় আমরা গাছের নিচে ছায়ায় বিশ্রাম নিতে পারি কিন্তু বৃষ্টির সময় আমরা বেশি মাল পাই না, শুধু শুধু বসে থাকা লাগে যে কখন বৃষ্টি কমবে মাথায় কাগজ মুড়ি দিয়ে। আমি বলব আমাদের আয় অনেক কম হয় এই বৃষ্টির সময় উন্য সময়ের থেকে। এটা অনেকটা অনিরাপত্তা আছে এই বৃষ্টির সময় কাজ করা কারন তখন কম মহিলা তখন কাজ করে প্রোজেক্ট এ।

I cannot work during the rainy season, I have to stay hungry during that time. Some tokai work during that time because they have children to feed at home. They use polybags on their head and go to work. I cannot work like them because I feel cold and fever after working in the rain all day. I think that rainy days are more difficult to work in than working on sunny days because we can take rest under the trees' shadow on sunny days. But rainy time we cannot collect much material and have to wait for when the rain will stop. I will say that our income is low in the rainy season, and it is risky to work in the rainy time because few tokai are working on the project. (Saleha)

Untouchability, Stigma, and Isolation

Participants paint a poignant picture of the social challenges faced by tokai, highlighting how their occupation intersects with deeply rooted cultural notions of purity and pollution. The stigma attached to their work is not merely an external imposition but often internalised, leading to a form of self-stigmatisation that exacerbates their social isolation. The harassment they face from both officials and the public serves to reinforce this stigma, further entrenching the social boundaries that isolate them.

The concepts of purity and pollution, embedded in cultural and religious practices, significantly affect the lives of tokai, often relegating them to the fringes of society. This segregation is particularly pronounced with higher-class individuals who actively avoid contact with tokai, reinforcing existing hierarchies and perpetuating the marginal status of tokai. Interestingly, despite the stigma and the challenges it brings, some tokai are not interested in pursuing employment outside of waste picking. This preference could stem from various factors, including the independence the work provides, the lack of alternative employment opportunities, or a sense of community and identity within their line of work. The impact of their occupation on their social lives is profound. Tokai often abstain from public festivals and occasions, and in some cases, they are outright barred from participating in local events. Saleha's reluctance to enter restaurants for fear of being denied service if her identity is known is a telling example of how the stigma can penetrate every aspect of daily life, limiting basic social interactions and access to public spaces.

This finding underscores the complex interplay between occupation, social status, and cultural norms, and how these factors collectively contribute to the social exclusion of tokai. It calls attention to the need for societal change that addresses not only the economic aspects of waste picking but also the stigmatization that denies tokai the dignity and social inclusion they deserve. Saleha said:

আমি একবার আমার আত্মীয়ের ছেলের জন্মদিন খেতে গেছিলাম। আমি আমার রাতের খাবার খাওয়ার জন্য টেবিলে বসেছিলাম, কিন্তু একজন বেটা মানুষ আমাকে দেখে টেবিল থেকে উঠে গিয়েছিল। সে গিয়ে আর এক টেবিলে বসেছিল। কারণ সে আমাকে চিনত আর সে জানে আমি ময়লায় কাজ করি। এটা অনেক অসম্মানের ব্যাপার, মানুষ আমাকে নিচু চোখে দেখে। এখন আমি এসব জায়গায় জাওয়া বন্ধ কর দিছি।

Once I went to my relative's son's birthday party. I was sitting at one table to eat my dinner with others, but one man left that table and sat down in another place because he knows my occupation. It was shameful and disrespectful. People look down upon me. I stopped going now.
(Saleha)

The mental health implications for tokai are a serious concern. The persistent social stigma and experiences of untouchability, particularly for those working in landfill projects, can lead to significant psychological distress. The stress associated with their work and social standing may erode their willingness to seek out medical treatment, either due to feelings of resignation or fear of discrimination within the healthcare system. Saleha's account of untouchability is a stark example of the dehumanizing treatment that can result from societal prejudices against certain occupations. Such treatment not only affects physical well-being but can also inflict deep psychological wounds. The stress of being marginalized can lead to a sense of hopelessness and a belief that seeking help is futile, further compounding their health issues. This situation points to the need for interventions that not only tackle the structural and economic inequalities faced by tokai but also address the social and psychological barriers that impede their access to healthcare and other essential services. It underscores the importance of creating supportive and inclusive environments that uphold the dignity of all individuals, regardless of occupation, and ensure that they receive the care and respect they deserve. Saleha continued:

আমরা মানুষের কাছ দিয়ে হাটতে পারি না কারণ আমাদের শরীর থেকে ময়লার গন্ধ আসে। আমরা যারা কাজ করি তারা তারা মিশতে পারি। আমরা কখন ও অন্যের সাথে যাই না বা কারও বাসায় যাই না। আমরা এখন দশটা পরিবার একসাথে এক বাসায় থাকি, সবাই ময়লায় কাজ করে। আমরা অন্য ভাড়াটিয়ার ভিতর থাকি না বা অন্য লোকের বাসায় ভাড়া নেই না।

We are not allowed to walk beside other people because our body smells filthy. We can meet each other, but only those are working in the project. We only meet with other tokai. We never visit other places because of our bad smell. We [ten families] live in the same place and

everybody works in the same project. We do not live with other people's houses, apartments, or flats. (Saleha)

Saleha's experiences encapsulate the multifaceted adversities faced by tokai, which extend far beyond the financial insecurities tied to their occupation. Social exclusion—a by-product of the stigma associated with waste picking—has profound implications on her overall well-being, instilling a sense of anxiety about her future. This isolation not only affects her economic stability due to the irregular nature of her job but also impinges on her health, as it diminishes her ability and willingness to seek medical attention. Saleha's narrative is a sobering reminder of the complex interplay between social, economic, and health-related vulnerabilities that tokai face. The closure of landfill projects, whether due to fires, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, or additional financial demands from waste dealers, presents yet another layer of vulnerability. Such interruptions not only disrupt her income but also signify a loss of access to what constitutes her primary workspace, further exacerbating her sense of insecurity. The precariousness of their work, compounded by societal marginalisation, calls for a holistic approach to addressing the challenges of informal waste workers—one that integrates social support, stable employment opportunities, and accessible healthcare to mitigate the profound uncertainties that characterize their lives. Similarly, Asma, stated:

আমরা যদি কারও পাস দিয়ে হেটে যাই, মানুষ আমাদেরকে অবজ্ঞা করে। আমাদেরকে খারাপ চুখে দেখে, আমাদের দেখলে ঘরের দরজা বন্ধ করে দেয়। মানুষ আমাদের দেখলে ভয় পায়, অনেক মানুষতু আমাদের কাছে আসে নাই ভয়ে করুণা ভাইরাসের সময়। হ্যা, আমরা ময়লায় কাজ করি, আমরা ময়লা জিনিস ধরি, আমাদের শরীর থেকে গন্ধ আসে সবই মানলাম। কিন্তু আমরা সবাই তু মানুষ, সবাই তু সমান। সবাই বলে এই ময়লার কাজ নাকি ভাল না, মানুষ আমাদের খালি গিন্মা করে। আমি কারও বাসায় যাই না, কারন মানুষ আমাদের দেখলে দূরে দূরে থাকে, নাকে কাপড় দেয়, দেখলেই দরজা বন্ধ করে বসে থাকে।

If we walk in public places, most people avoid us. They look down on us as dirty women and they close their house doors because they are afraid of our presence, especially during the pandemic situation. Yes, we are dirty and working with unclean waste handling. We are all the same, we are human beings. Everybody says this is not good work; people hate us. I do not go to other's houses because they maintain social distance, keep cloths on their noses, and close the door after seeing us. (Asma)

Asma's reflections reveal the layered complexities of life as a tokai and a single mother. Her reluctance to discuss her work with relatives is an indication of the social stigma that continues to shadow waste picking, despite its necessity in urban ecology. The discomfort stems from the dichotomy between the essential nature of her work and the devaluation of it by societal norms. Her internal conflict is somewhat alleviated by the pride she takes in earning an honest living. The notion that her children will appreciate the dignity in her choice to avoid illicit activities is a source of comfort and justifiable pride. This sense of moral correctness in her livelihood choices

is a profound statement against the societal stigma she confronts. The abandonment by her husband adds a dimension of personal struggle to her narrative. The contrast between the past, when she had support, and her current situation as the sole provider is palpable. However, Asma's resilience shines through her adversity, highlighting her independence and resourcefulness. Her acknowledgment of other job opportunities, such as working in a shoe factory, reflects a pragmatic understanding of her limitations as a caregiver to her young daughter. The societal pressure of preparing for her daughter's marriage further exacerbates her financial burden. Yet, despite these challenges, Asma's assertion of self-reliance is powerful. Her belief that she does not require government aid, but rather relies on her own developed skills to survive, speaks to a strong sense of agency.

The broader context in which Asma and her peers operate is one where the concept of pollution and untouchability still exerts a powerful influence, leading to enforced social boundaries and isolation. The refusal of others to engage with them, even to the extent of rejecting food they have prepared, is a stark illustration of the painful ostracism they face due to their occupation. These narratives underscore the resilience of the tokai community in the face of deep-rooted social barriers. They also highlight the necessity for societal change that not only respects the dignity of all forms of labour but also provides avenues for social inclusion and economic stability for marginalized groups like the tokai. For example, participant Roksana said:

আমি আমার ভাঙ্গুরের পরিবারকে বাসায় দাওয়াত দিয়েছিলাম, তারা কেও আসে নাই। আমি তাদের ফোন দিলাম বলার জন্য যে রান্না করা খাবার তাদের বাসায় পাঠিয়ে দিই। কিন্তু তারা খাবার নিতেও অস্বীকার করল। কারণ আমি বুজেছিলাম আমার ভাঙ্গুরের বউ জানে যে আমি ময়লার বাগারে কাজ করি। আমার মনে হয় উনি আমাকে নুংরা আর ছুট জাতের মহিলা ভাবে।

I invited my brother-in-law's family to my house; they did not come. I phoned them to send all prepared foods, but they refused everything because I understood his wife knows that I am working in the landfill project, and I think she treated me as a dirty and lower-class woman.

(Roksana)

The account from Roksana further highlights the stringent social boundaries and exclusion faced by tokai due to prevailing social norms around untouchability and pollution. The incident with her daughter's teacher, who refused to accept food and water and avoided touching anything in her house, is a clear demonstration of the social ostracism that extends beyond the tokai themselves and affects their families. This practice of disconnection and avoidance is not just a matter of personal prejudice but a manifestation of systemic and entrenched societal attitudes towards those engaged in waste picking. Such behaviour not only reinforces feelings of isolation among the tokai but also instils a sense of inherited stigma in their children, affecting their social

interactions and opportunities for integration. The teacher's refusal to engage with Roksana's home environment is particularly disheartening because educators play a crucial role in shaping societal attitudes and breaking down barriers of discrimination. When teachers, who are often looked up to as role models and leaders in the community, exhibit such behaviours, it can perpetuate the cycle of stigma and marginalization.

This form of social discrimination underscores the need for broader educational and awareness campaigns to challenge and transform perceptions around waste picking. By fostering an understanding of the essential role tokai play in managing urban waste and recycling, there can be a shift towards greater acceptance and inclusion, ultimately ensuring that all members of society are treated with dignity and respect.

Gendered Barriers

The gender dimension adds another layer of complexity to the challenges faced by tokai. The participants' discussions around gender barriers illuminate how women in waste picking are doubly disadvantaged due to their gender on top of the already existing class and caste hierarchies. The inequality in waste collection often manifests in the form of reduced opportunities for women, limiting their participation and access to lucrative waste materials. This gender-based discrimination further narrows the already constrained space for tokai in the waste economy. Women tokai may be relegated to less profitable areas of waste collection or find themselves excluded from certain activities reserved for their male counterparts, exacerbating the income disparities within the community.

The lack of access to basic amenities like sanitation, clean drinking water, transportation, and toilet facilities for female tokai is particularly concerning. Such inadequacies not only impact their health and safety but also their dignity and comfort while at work. The absence of these fundamental services can also discourage women from participating in waste picking, thereby limiting their economic independence and perpetuating gender inequities. These insights suggest that any intervention aiming to improve the conditions for tokai must adopt a gender-sensitive approach, acknowledging and addressing the specific challenges faced by women. This could involve the provision of gender-specific facilities, the implementation of policies that promote equal opportunities for women in waste collection, and broader efforts to challenge the societal norms that underpin gender discrimination in this sector. For instance, Sriti said:

আমি সকাল ৫ টার সময় কাজে যাই যখন সবাই ঘুমে থাকে। এটা অনেক সকাল। আমরা একদল মহিলা একসাথে হেটে হেটে যাই। মইলার গাড়ি আসে রাতে ১১ টার পর থেকে এটা মধ্য রাত্রি। আমি এত রাতে মইলা আনতে

যেতে পারি না কারন কেও যদি আমাকে লাঞ্ছিত করে এখানে অনেক খারাপ মানুষ আছে। আমি ভয় পায়, না জানি কি ক্ষতি হয়ে যাই। আমি এখন অনেক কম মইলা খুজে পাই।

I go to pick up rubbish at 5am while people are sleeping. It is early in the morning. We are a group of women who walk together. The waste trucks start to come at 11pm in the middle of the night. I cannot go to pick up at night because I feel afraid of the drunken people and harassment at that time. I am not getting as many materials as others. (Sriti)

Sriti's experiences underscore the intersectional challenges that women tokai face, combining the perils associated with their profession with the broader societal issues of gender safety and childcare responsibilities. Her decision to work early in the morning is a strategic response to the multiple risks she navigates—both the tangible threat of harassment and violence, and the implicit expectations of her domestic role.

The landfill street's reputation as unsafe for women illustrates a reality where the threat of gender-based violence restricts their mobility and working hours, leading to a potential loss of income. This sense of insecurity is a barrier to consistent work, as women like Sriti are compelled to limit their hours for their safety, thus diminishing their earnings. The vulnerability of widows or unmarried tokai is particularly acute, as they may lack the social protection a family structure can sometimes provide. The threat of violence or harassment from husbands, or in the absence of one, from other men in their community, is a severe adversity they must contend with.

The introduction of male private contractors, truck drivers, and waste workers, especially at night, has exacerbated these challenges. Sriti's complaint about the city council's decision to assign waste collection and disposal to private companies at night highlights a broader trend of the masculinisation of waste work. This shift not only marginalizes female tokai but also raises questions about the inclusivity and safety of public spaces for women. The overnight waste collection system effectively excludes many women tokai from participating in potentially lucrative work opportunities. This exclusion is a reflection of the broader issue of gender inequity in access to public spaces and economic opportunities. For tokai, and especially for women, these barriers are not just about income but also about their right to occupy and navigate public spaces without fear. From the view of Fatema, a married woman working as a tokai for nine years, men were getting all the advantages in waste picking:

আমি ৪৩ বছরের একজন বিবাহিত মহিলা। আমার পক্ষে ভ্যান গাড়ি চালানু সম্ভব না কারন ইটা লজ্যাজনক একজন মেয়ের জন্য। আমি এটা করতি পারি না কারন আমার মেয়েকে তু বিয়ে দিতে হবে পরো। আমি যখন ছোট ছিলাম তখন আমার মার সাথে আসতাম এর ভ্যান গাড়ি চালাতাম। আমার মা ময়লা টুকাতু আর আমি গাড়ি হেন্ডেল ধরে রাখতাম। এখন আমি সব বাদ দিছি আমার বিয়ের পরো। ছেলে মানুষ ভ্যান গাড়ি চালাতে পারে

সহজভাবে এবং তারা অনেক দামি ও ওজন আলা ময়লাও টুকাতে পারো আমি পারি না তাদের সাথে পাল্লাপাল্লি করতে, আমি শুধু যা পাই তাই টুকাই।

I am a 38-year-old married woman. It is impossible to drive a waste vehicle (van gari) now because it is shameful. I will not do this because I need to get my daughter married. I used to come with my mother and drive a van gari while I was young. My mother picked the rubbish, and I started driving. I stopped driving after my marriage. Men are driving these vehicles easily and they are collecting many valuable and heavy materials. I cannot compete with them; I pick only the rest of things. I have to carry my bag on my head. (Fatema)

Fatema's perspective illuminates the gendered dynamics of waste work and the shifting landscape that increasingly marginalizes female tokai. The masculinization of the sector, characterized by the dominance of male contractors and entrepreneurs, creates a barrier to the entry and success of women in this field. This transition, from what was once an informal occupation for women to a more formalized one for men, is a significant shift that adversely affects the livelihoods of female tokai. She points out a critical advantage that men have in this evolving scenario—the ability to drive, which affords them greater flexibility and access to various locations for waste collection at any time. This skill not only provides them with an edge over their female counterparts but also changes the dynamics of access and control within the waste collection ecosystem. The changing regulations and structures imposed by city officials further complicate Fatema's ability to maintain her income. Restrictions on household rubbish collection and the prohibition from entering shopping centres limit her access to valuable waste materials. These regulatory changes are not merely logistical hurdles but also carry the risk of criminalizing her activities, as entering homes could lead to accusations of theft. Rahima's experiences parallel those of Fatema, as she too reported facing reduced access to waste materials and consequently, a diminished income. The reluctance to enter shops for collection due to the risk of harassment or theft allegations is a significant barrier. For Rahima and many other female tokai, working in open spaces is not just a practical choice but a means to retain their independence and dignity.

Addressing these challenges will require multifaceted interventions that consider the unique vulnerabilities of female tokai. Policies and practices must be inclusive, ensuring safety and equal access to opportunities for all genders, while also respecting their domestic roles and responsibilities. It is crucial for the city council and other stakeholders to recognize and address these gender-based disparities to foster a safer, more equitable working environment for all waste workers. The recognition of tokai work as a stress factor due to limited social engagement in urban areas suggests a broader societal issue—where the work of tokai is undervalued, and their ability to integrate into urban social structures is hindered.

These accounts highlight the need for interventions that specifically address the gender disparities in the waste sector. Ensuring the safety of women in both indoor and outdoor waste collection environments, promoting equal opportunities, and providing support for women to acquire skills such as driving could help mitigate some of the challenges they face. Moreover, changing societal perceptions to value the work of tokai and safeguard their rights is essential for creating a more inclusive and equitable waste economy.

Rahima described the wage inequality in the dumpsite project:

ভ্যানগাড়ির চালক আর পুরুষ ময়লাওয়ালা প্রতিদিন ৪০০ টাকা আয় করে, আমরা একই কাজ করি কিন্তু আমি মাত্র ২০০ থেকে ২৫০ টাকা আয় করি। আমি অনেক কম টাকা পাই এখান থেকে, আমার মাজে মাজে খারাপ লাগে, কিন্তু আমি তু উন্যদের মত আর দরকষাকষি করতে পারি না। এটা করলে যদি আমি মাল বিক্রি করতে না পারি।

Van drivers and men waste collectors earn 400 taka a day, doing the same work that I am earning 200 to 250 taka a day for. I am getting less, and I feel bad, but I cannot bargain for anything if I cannot sell my materials. (Rahima)

Rahima's observations point to the gender stereotypes and biases that are pervasive in the waste industry, reflecting a broader societal pattern of structural male dominance. The excuses provided by waste dealers, suggesting that men are more suited for the physical demands of the job, are indicative of traditional gender roles that privilege men's work over women's, even in professions where women have been historically present. The social dynamics Rahima describes, where men forge connections over shared activities like smoking, drinking, or gambling, speak to the informal networks that often influence job opportunities and advancements. These social bonds can lead to preferential treatment and better job prospects for men, further entrenching the gender divide in employment. Her statement about the work patterns of men, who take breaks and socialize, contrasts sharply with the non-stop nature of women's work, which does not end with the job but extends into the realm of household responsibilities. This double burden for women tokai — the expectation to be economically productive and then to fulfil domestic duties without rest — underscores the inequality in the division of labour and leisure. Rahima's insights highlight the need for a more egalitarian approach within the waste picking industry that acknowledges the contributions of women and offers them equal opportunities. It also underscores the importance of social support systems that can alleviate the double burden faced by women, allowing them equal rest and recreation, and fostering an environment where their economic contributions are recognized and valued both at work and at home.

The change in attitudes and behaviours of husbands as women begin to earn money is a significant observation. It suggests that economic contributions by women can alter the power dynamics within a household, potentially leading to more respect and influence for women. However, this shift might also introduce new tensions as traditional gender roles are challenged. For example, participant Nasrin stated:

আমি এখন আমার পরিবারের জন্য অনেক কিছু কিনতে পারি, আমি নতুন জামা, জুতা এগুলো সব কিনতে পারি। আমাকে এখন আর ওনার উপর নির্ভর করতে হয় না। আমি ওনার সকল খারাপ আচরণ আর সহ্য করতে পারি না। উনি এখন আমাকে মারা বন্ধ করছে। মাজে মাজে আমার খারাপ লাগে যে আমার একটা স্বামী আছে। যদি আমার মা বাবা বেচে থাকত, তারা আমাকে এই কাজ জিবনেও করতে দিত না।

I can buy many things for my family now; I can wear new clothes and shoes. I do not depend on him [husband]. I do not tolerate all of his bad attitudes toward me. He just stopped beating me. Sometimes I feel bad that I have a husband. If my parents were still alive, they would never let me do this work. (Nasrin)

Nasrin's reflection on the sense of liberation that economic independence brings is a poignant testament to the transformative power of paid work for women in traditionally patriarchal societies. Her commentary on the persistence of dependent female roles within families, despite this newfound economic agency, reveals the intricate balance tokai must navigate between societal expectations and personal autonomy.

Alisa stated "... as I have access to earn money, my husband and other relatives seem to care for me. My husband gives me sarees and cosmetics and has started to consult with me about many things in day-to-day matters". Alisa's experience further illustrates the potential for women's economic contribution to shift relational dynamics within the household. The care and consultation she receive from her husband in response to her earning capacity signifies a positive change in her status and influence. This empowerment is echoed in the broader sense of increased self-esteem and autonomy reported by the tokai in the study.

Yet, despite these advances, the entrenched gender inequalities and the risk of backlash inhibit direct confrontation against male dominance. For example, participant Mafuja stated "I have watched on TV that men and women have equal rights and access to resources. I should get equal rights and payment like men, but I do not get the same as men. If I speak up it will create another problem." Instead, as Mafuja's statement highlights, women tokai choose to cultivate their resilience and adaptability, developing survival skills that allow them to navigate their challenging environment.

The gender segregation of work in waste management is stark, with tasks traditionally performed by men seen as higher skilled and therefore better compensated. This perception devalues the contributions of tokai and reinforces the gender wage gap. Morium stated “Driving a van will create more problems, people will look badly at me. Have a bad look at me. I cannot find my daughter a good husband. I rely on drivers and waste dealers”. The stigma attached to women performing certain roles, such as driving, as expressed by Morium, is indicative of the societal pressures that restrict women's opportunities to enhance their skills and earnings. At the same time, some tokai, like Laizo, have adapted by forging strategic relationships with male colleagues, framing them as fraternal bonds to secure better working conditions. For example, Laizo stated “I call them brothers, although they are not my blood brothers. We have no competition”. However, these relationships are not without their own set of risks, as they can blur boundaries and potentially lead to sexual violence, harassment, or exploitation. The impact of these dynamics extends beyond the workplace, influencing family structures and societal norms. The reference to the breakdown of family relationships and the increased opportunities for men to remarry or engage in extramarital relationships speaks to the shifting contours of personal lives influenced by the economic and social changes occurring within the tokai community.

Overall, the experiences shared by these tokai highlight the complex interplay between economic empowerment, societal norms, and gender dynamics. While paid work outside the home offers women greater autonomy and respect, it also necessitates a cautious navigation of entrenched gender roles and societal expectations. The path to true equality and empowerment for tokai is multifaceted, requiring not only economic opportunities but also societal change that acknowledges and values the work of women equally to that of men. Participant Rina stated:

আমরা পুরুষ মানুষের সাথে একসাথে কাজ করি, দিনের বেলা একসাথে থাকি, কিন্তু তারা আমাদের বাসায় যাওয়ার উন্মুতি পায় না। আমরা তাদের সাথে সারাদিন থাকি, কাজ করি একসাথে, আমরা অনেকটা ভাল বন্ধুর থেকেও বেশি কিন্তু তাদের আমাদের বাসায় জখন তখন যাওয়ার আধিকার নাই। আমার দিনের বেলা অনেক জামাই আছে, কিন্তু রাতের বেলার আমার কুন জামাই নাই।

We mingle with men more freely in the workplace, but they do not have permission to enter my home. We spend the whole day together like more than friends but in my home, they have no access. I have many husbands during the daytime, but I do not have any at night. (Rina)

This section has provided a comprehensive overview of the challenges faced by tokai in their professional and personal lives. The concealment of their occupation is a coping mechanism in response to the socio-cultural stigma associated with waste picking, underpinned by deeply rooted notions of purity and impurity. The marginalization and oppression by dominant groups

are a daily reality for tokai, affecting their self-identity and social interactions. The privatisation of waste collection and disposal systems has significant repercussions for the tokai community. It has not only restricted their access to waste in public spaces but also intensified competition in the sector, favouring new workers who are often employed by private entities or local authorities. These changes are pushing tokai to the periphery of the waste economy, a space they have traditionally occupied and relied upon for their livelihood. The discussion on gender inequalities sheds light on the additional layers of discrimination that female tokai face. Their participation and opportunities in waste work are limited by systemic gender biases, which assign lower value to their labour and restrict their access to more profitable aspects of waste collection.

In the following section, the focus will shift to the health risks associated with waste picking and the healthcare services available to tokai. Given the hazardous nature of their work, understanding the health implications and the adequacy of healthcare provision is crucial for addressing the well-being of tokai and improving their quality of life. This analysis will likely explore occupational health hazards, access to medical care, and the broader health impacts of socio-economic conditions on the tokai community.

Health Risks, Health Inequalities, and Health Care Services

The section on occupational health risks and health care services is crucial for understanding the physical and mental challenges faced by tokai as part of their daily work routine. This exploration is aligned with Research Question-3, which seeks to delve into the various health-related barriers and risks associated with waste picking.

The high incidence of occupational injuries among tokai is a pressing concern. These injuries can be attributed to several factors, including the improper or inconsistent use of PPE. The reasons behind the PPE negligence may range from a lack of awareness, to the unavailability or discomfort of PPE, and—as explored in the previous chapter, rumour and hearsay—all of which needs to be investigated and addressed. Another significant health hazard for tokai is the handling of medical waste, which can expose them to infectious diseases, toxic substances, and injuries from sharps. Understanding the extent of this risk and the measures in place to mitigate it is essential for safeguarding the health of tokai.

Mental health challenges like frustration, insecurity, fear, anxiety, and stress are also prevalent among tokai. These issues are often accepted as part of their lives, reflecting a resignation to the harsh realities of their work environment. Addressing these mental health challenges requires not only better occupational conditions but also access to mental health services and support. Discrimination in mental health and medical services due to untouchability, low status, poverty,

and lack of education exacerbates the health risks for tokai by hindering their access to care. Such discrimination can lead tokai to disengage from seeking health care information and services, further entrenching their vulnerabilities.

Finally, the Covid-19 pandemic has had a dual impact on the tokai community. While the lockdown measures created additional vulnerabilities due to loss of income and increased health risks, they may also have opened up opportunities. These could include greater recognition of the importance of sanitation and waste management services, leading to improved working conditions for tokai. Understanding how the pandemic has affected tokai and the responses to it can provide insights into how such crises impact marginalized communities and what can be done to support them in similar situations in the future.

Daily Risks and Challenges for Tokai

The definition of a happy life for tokai, as articulated by Rina and Asma, underscores the intrinsic link between their well-being and their ability to work, earn, and achieve financial security. Rina stated, “a happy life for me is working, earning, and financial security so I do not need ask anyone to support me”. Asma said, “A happy life means having enough money, good housing, good family, food security, good people around me, and good health”. These elements form the foundation of their happiness and sense of stability in life.

For tokai, the daily grind is not just about making a living; it is about creating a life that offers a semblance of normalcy and comfort amidst their challenging circumstances. Financial security is a crucial aspect, as it reduces dependence on others and provides a buffer against the uncertainties of their occupation. Having a supportive social environment, access to adequate food, and maintaining good health are also integral components of their perception of a happy life.

Health risks are a significant concern for tokai, impacting their ability to work and, by extension, their happiness. The occupational hazards they identify, such as body pain, headaches, fever, and cough, are likely a direct result of their work environment. Moreover, the risk of accidents from cuts, injuries from sharp objects, and exposure to poisonous materials highlights the need for better safety measures and health care access for tokai. The acknowledgment of these health risks not only reflects the physical toll of their occupation but also points to the broader health implications of their socioeconomic status. The absence of financial security can exacerbate health issues, as it often means limited access to medical care, proper nutrition, and the ability to take time off to recover from illnesses or injuries. Addressing these health risks is crucial for improving the quality of life for tokai. It involves a multi-faceted approach that includes

providing comprehensive health services, ensuring the availability and use of proper PPE, and creating safer working conditions. Additionally, social interventions that promote financial stability, food security, and supportive community structures are necessary to help tokai achieve the happy life they envision. For example, Kajol stated:

আমি নানা সমস্যায় ভুগতেছি যেমন শরীর ব্যথা, মাথা ব্যথা, জ্বর আর শরীরের চামড়ায় গাও। আমার সারা শরীর মাজে মাজে ব্যথা করে আমি মনে করি আমি পেরালাইস হয়ে যাব। আমি হাত পা নারাতে পারি না। আমার পা কাটে, হাত কাটে এখানে কাজ করে। আমার মাজে মাজে বিষাক্ত ইনজেকশন বিধে কাজ করে। আমি কাজ বন্ধ করতে পারি না কারণ আমি যদি কাজ বন্ধ করে দেই এরপরও আমার শরীর ব্যথা করে তাই কাজ করা আর উপার্জন করাই ভাল।

I have been suffering multiple health problems such as pains, bad headache, fever, and skin diseases. My whole-body pain is so bad sometimes I feel I am paralysed. I cannot move my hands and legs. I have cut my legs and hands also suffered poisonous injection several times. I cannot stop working because if I stop going, it also pains my body so better to work and earn money. (Kajol)

Kajol's perspective highlights a common sentiment among many individuals engaged in labour-intensive and informal work sectors. For her, work is multifaceted—it is a necessity for economic survival, a source of identity, and paradoxically, a form of physical activity that she perceives as contributing to her fitness. Kajol hardly visited the doctor or hospital because she could not afford to; she said, “If I fall sick, I just buy a pill from the local pharmacy that helps me to release my pain”. This outlook reflects a level of resilience and adaptation to her circumstances, where the harsh realities of waste picking have been normalized to the extent that the odour of rubbish is barely noticeable to her. Her approach to healthcare is indicative of the barriers faced by many tokai. Lack of affordability forces Kajol to rely on self-medication, which might provide temporary relief but can neglect underlying health issues. This situation points to a dire need for accessible and affordable healthcare services for tokai, who are often exposed to a variety of health hazards due to the nature of their work. Kajol's reliance on over-the-counter medication for pain relief is a stopgap that does not address the root causes of her ailments, which may be occupational. Without proper medical attention, such conditions can worsen over time, leading to chronic health issues and even disability. This scenario underscores the importance of community health initiatives and social support systems that can provide preventive care, health education, and medical services to marginalized populations like the tokai. Such support would help individuals like Kajol not just to survive but to live with dignity and a better quality of life. Similarly, Mahfuja identified that her physical risks were related to her occupation and the unhealthy working environment. She described how these risks generated stress, anxiety, depression, and sudden financial crisis for her family:

আমি হার্ডের সমস্যা অনুভব করি। অন্য সমস্যা হচ্ছে হাত পা কাটে, মাজে মাজে আমি এটা সহ্য করতে পারতাম না। আমি মাথা ব্যথা আর লিবারের সমস্যায় ভুঞ্জেছি। খালি পেটে থাকতে থাকতে আমার গ্যাস্ট্রিক হয়ে গেছে এখন আমি খেতে পারি না আগের মতন। আমি শুধু ভয় পাই ইনফেকশন জিনিস দেখে মনে করেন ভাঙ্গা কাঁচ, পুরানা সুই, ময়লা ডায়াপার, রেজার, বিষাক্ত পাওডার আর অন্যান্য ধারালু জিনিস। পেট আছে যখন করে কেটে খেতে হবে

I am experiencing heart issues. Another problem is cut hands and legs, I can not tolerate the pain sometimes. I feel pain moving my head and experience liver problems and gastric issues because my belly stays empty most times. I used to eat less water. I am concerned about being exposed to infectious materials while working, including broken glass, needles, dirty diapers, razors, chemical powder, and various sharp objects. I have to work because I have to feed my family. (Mahfuja)

The health risks that Mahfuja and Nasrin describe paint a stark picture of the hazardous conditions tokai face daily. The prevalence of fires due to methane emissions in landfills is a severe occupational hazard that can lead to chronic health issues and acute crises like Mahfuja's miscarriage. The impact on respiratory, renal, and hepatic health due to exposure to toxic gases and smoke demonstrates the need for urgent intervention to protect tokai' health. Nasrin's account of common diseases among tokai, including skin and stomach diseases, diarrhoea, dysentery, vision problems, and allergies, further highlights the breadth of health challenges associated with waste picking. She stated, “I do not experience corona infection and dengue fever. I only suffer from hazardous syringe and broken glass, which make my leg infected and painful.” Her assertion that she did not experience infections like coronavirus or dengue fever, but rather suffered from injuries caused by syringes and broken glass, underscores the immediate physical dangers of the job. Her experience with a needle puncture wound is a sobering reminder of the risks tokai take with their health. The infection and pain that followed, along with the inadequate medical response, reveal gaps in healthcare that fail to address the specific needs of this population. Nasrin's resort to home remedies such as hot cloths for pain relief is indicative of the barriers to accessing effective medical treatment.

These testimonies underscore the critical need for comprehensive healthcare services tailored to the unique risks of waste picking. This includes preventive measures like vaccinations, regular health check-ups, and education on safe waste handling practices, as well as access to emergency care for injuries and infections. Additionally, providing tokai with effective personal protective equipment could prevent many of these injuries and health issues. Furthermore, the incidents highlighted by Mahfuja and Nasrin emphasize the importance of improving the working conditions in landfills to mitigate the risk of fire and reduce the release of harmful gases. This

could involve better waste management practices, such as regular methane monitoring and venting, as well as infrastructure improvements to prevent the accumulation of flammable gases.

The health and safety of tokai are deeply intertwined with environmental management policies, and thus require a coordinated approach involving public health, labour rights, and environmental protection agencies. Nasrin stated:

আমি যদি কুন ধারালু জিনিস দিয়ে আগাত পাই বা বিধে, আমি কখনও টিটেনাস ইঞ্জেকশান নেই নাই, কারন এটা শরীরের জন্য ভাল না। মানুষ বলে এটা আমার বাচ্চা জন্ম দেওয়া নষ্ট করে দিতে পারে। আমি এখন চুখে কম দেখি, জাঙ্গা জাঙ্গা দেখি, সবসময় চুখে পানি আসে, আর ব্যাথা লাগে অনেক খারাপ অনুভব করি।

If I am injected or have any injuries from sharp materials, I never take a tetanus injection because it has some side effects on the body. People say that it will destroy my reproductive health. Now my vision is not clear, I cannot see everything from a distance, every time water comes from my eyes, and I feel uneasy. (Nasrin)

Nasrin's reliance on chewing betel nut, or quid, during work is a coping mechanism for the difficult conditions she endures while waste picking. She revealed, "Chewing betel nut during work is a kind of medicine for me. It is not an addiction, but I cannot handle the smell of all the rubbish without chewing it". She explained "chewing betel nut helps to reduce thirst and reduces my hunger." Her perception of it being akin to medicine is indicative of the sensory and psychological relief it provides her from the unpleasant odours and the harsh reality of her work environment. However, the habit, which she does not classify as an addiction, has known adverse health effects, including an increased risk of oral cancers and other health issues.

The practice of consuming less food to avoid the need for toilet facilities reflects a dire situation regarding basic sanitation access at the landfill. Nasrin said, "It is good to eat less here because more eating means you need to go to the toilet. Here toilet facilities are so far." It is an example of how inadequate infrastructure can directly impact the health and nutrition of workers. The avoidance of medical waste due to fear of infection is a rational protective response but also emphasizes the risks tokai face without proper safety measures and equipment.

The participants' views on PPE reveal a complex challenge. While PPE is essential for their safety, its utility is compromised if it is uncomfortable, obstructive, or not adapted to the specific conditions of their work. The feeling of unease while wearing PPE suggests that the equipment provided to them may not be designed with an understanding of the physical demands of waste picking. This situation points to the need for better-designed PPE that tokai are more willing to use. Addressing these issues requires a holistic approach that includes the provision of appropriate PPE, health education campaigns to inform tokai of the risks associated with their

habits, and improvements in sanitation infrastructure. Additionally, interventions to address the root causes of their reliance on substances like betel nut, such as improving the work environment and providing mental health support, would be beneficial for the overall well-being of tokai. Morsedha stated:

আমার বুট জুতা, মাস্ক আর হাতে মুজা পরলে গরম লাগে, আমি আরাম পাই না। আমাকে কেন এটা পরতে হবে। আমার বাড়ি থেকে শুরু করে কাজের জায়গা সবই তু ময়লা আর ময়লা। আমি মনে করি এসব পরে আমার কুন লাভ নাই। আমার পুরা জীবন ই তু ময়লায় মধ্যে কেটে গেল, আমার চারপাশে শুধু শুধু ময়লা আর ময়লা। আমি থাকি একটা ময়লা জায়গায়, খাই অস্বস্তিকর খাবার তাইলে কেন আমাকে এটা পরতে হবে বলেন। এটা পরলে কি কুন আমার জীবনের পরিবর্তন আসবে।

I feel hot and uncomfortable wearing boots, gloves, and mask. Why do I have to use these? My entire house, working place - all are dirty and dust-ridden. I think that wearing these gloves and protective equipment will not help me anyway! Our life is in the rubbish dump, here and there it's dirty around me. I live in a dirty place, work in dirt, eat in dirty landfill, why do I need to use that stuff? Does it make any change in my life? (Morsedha)

Morsedha's statement underscores a significant aspect of the tokai experience: the development of personal expertise and knowledge as a survival mechanism in the absence of formal support and adequate protective measures. This expertise is born out of necessity and a deep familiarity with the hazards of their work environment, allowing them to navigate the dangers of waste with a level of informed caution. Her approach to identifying safe materials reflects an informal risk assessment process that tokai have to internalize, given their constant exposure to potentially harmful waste. She said, “We know what good materials are and what are not. If I find anything wrong in dirty bags, I do not touch.” The self-imposed guidelines she follows — such as not touching anything suspicious in dirty bags — are practical strategies that help mitigate the risks associated with her occupation.

The issue of limited access to drinking water at the landfill is yet another challenge that highlights the inadequate provision of basic amenities for tokai. The fact that Morsedha feels compelled to bring water bottles from home is a direct result of this shortfall and speaks to the larger issue of neglect and the lack of infrastructure to support the health and well-being of waste pickers. Moreover, her comment on the gendered aspect of accessing water and toilet facilities touches on the intersection of shame, social norms, and security that disproportionately affects women in public spaces. She said, “Men can go here and there to drink water and use toilet, but I cannot go due to my shame and security”. The lack of privacy and safe, accessible sanitation facilities for women not only violates their dignity but also poses a significant barrier to their ability to work comfortably and safely.

These insights point to the need for systemic changes that go beyond the mere provision of PPE. There is a clear need for improved infrastructure, including safe drinking water and sanitation facilities tailored to the needs of all workers, regardless of gender. Additionally, recognizing and formalizing the knowledge and expertise of tokai can lead to better safety protocols and contribute to a more dignified perception of their work. It also emphasizes the need for gender-sensitive planning and policy-making that acknowledges and addresses the unique challenges faced by women in the waste management sector. Razzaque, the urban corporation informant, highlighted the negligence of not using PPE among tokai, which increased their diverse health risks. He stated:

আমাদের বেশিরভাগ টুকাই রা তাদের কাজের সময় পিপিই ব্যবহার করে না। এরা খালি হাতে কাজ করতে পছন্দ করে, এজন্য এরা বেশি বেশি অসুস্থ হয়। এদের বেশির ভাগ আবার নিজেরা নিজেরা অসুখ থেকে মুক্তির পথ বের করে নেয় এরা খুবই কম ডাক্তারের কাছে গিয়ে চিকিৎসা নেয়। কারন ডাক্তারের ভিজিট দিতে হয়, টাকা খরচ হয়। যার কারনে এরা অন্যান্য মানুষ থেকে বেশি অসুখে ভুগে। অনেক টুকাই আছে যারা প্রতিদিন ই বিষাক্ত ময়লার সাথে কাজ করে।

Many tokai do not use PPE, such as protective masks or gloves and boots, during the waste picking and sorting work. They are used to using their bare hands and are often injured or become sick. Most of them practice home remedies to recover from their illness even if they are not reluctant to visit doctors due to medical cost. That is why they are a highly exposed group indicating frequent possibilities to suffer risks than other communities. Many tokai health risks are highly related to their daily contact with unsafe waste. (Razaaque)

Razzaque's observations shed light on the layered complexities of occupational hazards that tokai face, particularly when juxtaposed with the relatively lower risks for truck drivers and other male workers who do not directly handle the waste. The indiscriminate mixing of household, medical, and industrial waste intensifies the health risks for tokai, who are frequently in direct contact with potentially infectious and hazardous materials without adequate protection. Razaaque stated:

বেশির ভাগ টুকাই খাদ্য বিষক্রিয়ায় আক্রান্ত হয় কারন তারা অনেক খাবার ময়লার বিন থেকে নিয়ে খায়। তাদের অশিক্ষা, স্যানিটেশন অভাব, পরিষ্কার থাকার মানসিকতার অভাব আর দুষিত ময়লার সাথে প্রতিদিন কাজ করায় এরা সব থেকে বেশি সাস্থ্য ঝুঁকিতে থাকে।

Most tokai are considered high risk for food infections because they use waste bins or open landfills as a food source. They are more vulnerable to health risks due to illiteracy, little access to sanitation and hygiene and high contact with polluted waste. (Razaaque)

The Covid-19 pandemic further exacerbated these risks, as many tokai continued to work to meet their daily needs, often without access to necessary protective measures. The lack of PPE, combined with the inherent difficulties in distributing these materials to tokai who work in such

informal and unstructured environments, as well as misinformation about the PP, created a perfect storm for increased vulnerability to infection. Razzaque's comments highlight a critical gap in occupational health and safety for informal workers. The limited supply and access to basic health protective measures such as hand sanitizer and soap during the pandemic is a stark example of the neglect faced by those in the lowest rungs of the socioeconomic ladder.

A responsive strategy could begin with establishing robust supply chains to ensure a steady provision of PPE, critical for their safety. Complementing this, educational programmes tailored to the needs of tokai could raise awareness about occupational hazards and promote effective risk mitigation practices. An essential step towards dignifying their work involves integrating the tokai into formal waste management frameworks, where their labour rights, including health and safety, can be duly enforced. Further, enhancing waste segregation at the source, especially for medical and industrial refuse, would significantly lower the risk tokai face daily. Proactive health measures, including regular medical check-ups and vaccination drives, would serve as a preventive shield against infectious diseases. Mental health, often a neglected facet, should be addressed through counselling services, providing tokai with much-needed psychological support. Legal aid and advocacy would empower them to navigate and assert their rights within the socio-legal landscape. Lastly, investing in skill development and alternative livelihood programs could offer tokai new economic avenues, lessening their dependence on waste picking and paving the way for a more secure future. These measures, rooted in empathy and practicality, would not only enhance the quality of life of tokai but also integrate their indispensable services into the formal economy. By acknowledging the critical role that tokai play in waste management and their right to safe working conditions, it is possible to begin developing sustainable solutions that protect their health and well-being.

Alisa highlighted that there were no specific places for sorting recyclables in the landfills and she had to bring a large bag and collect materials in one bag. Carrying a large and heavy bag from the landfill to the recycling shop created pain in her body. She also felt that working in the bad weather posed further health risks. She stated, "I feel fever and cold because I work during the rainy season. I prefer to work in the dry season because in the rainy season I cannot collect many materials". Alisa, like many tokai, must resort to physical labour that is not only arduous but also harmful to their health, as illustrated by the severe pain she experiences from carrying heavy bags of materials. Her preference for working in the dry season underscores the impact of environmental conditions on her ability to collect materials and, consequently, her earnings.

An incident where Alisa was bitten by a dog and the ensuing medical ordeal not only left her with lingering physical pain but also exposed her to harmful superstitions and an unresponsive healthcare system that failed to provide adequate treatment. Alisa was bitten by a dog in her leg while she was carrying rubbish bags from the landfill to the waste dealer shop. She said, “Everybody made me scared that if I did not get an injection, later it will affect my body, for example I will give birth to a dog in your belly once”. She then spent 5,300 BDT on medical services but “it is not a good service because I still experience some pain in my leg”. She also revealed that after being released from hospital, it was very difficult to maintain her own care because she lives in poor housing with no water supply or gas facilities. She said, “I cannot take rest, cannot eat proper food, and now I feel very weak”. Upon returning home from the hospital, Alisa's recovery was hindered by substandard living conditions, lacking even the most basic utilities necessary for recuperation. Despite these adversities, Alisa's resilience shines through her adaptive strategies for self-protection, such as traveling in groups and carrying objects to defend herself against potential aggressors. Yet, it is poignant that she expresses a reluctance to voice her physical suffering, instead often choosing to share the mental, social, and spiritual burdens she carries. This reluctance could be a reflection of her resigned acceptance of the corporeal toll her job exacts, while still seeking empathy for the psychological and emotional aspects of her hardships. Alisa's situation calls for an urgent and holistic approach to improve the working and living conditions of tokai, one that provides them with safe working environments, accessible healthcare, and social supports to navigate the complexities of their lives with dignity and safety.

Mental Health Issues

The mental health struggles articulated by the participants are an intrinsic part of their everyday reality, with frustration, insecurity, anxiety, and stress being common experiences among the tokai. Despite the intensity of these emotions, there is a prevailing acceptance among them that these mental health challenges are simply a facet of their daily existence, a by-product of the conditions they endure to make a living. This resignation to emotional distress highlights a stark aspect of their resilience; the tokai have normalized the psychological toll of their work as an inextricable element of survival. This coping mechanism, while a testament to their fortitude, also underscores a significant gap in mental health support for marginalized populations. It signifies a need for interventions that not only address the physical dangers of their occupation but also provide them with the mental health resources necessary to navigate the complexities of their profession and improve their overall well-being. Razia noted that:

আমার পরিবারে স্বামী , তিন সন্তান আর আমার শাশুড়ি আছে। একটা বড় পরিবার মানে হচ্ছে আমার জন্য টেনশনের বিষয়। এটা আমার জন্য মানসিক চিন্তার আর চাপের ব্যাপার কারন আমাকে পরিবারের সকল বিষয়ে চিন্তা করতে হয় পরিবারের আয় নিয়ে, ছেলে মেয়ের লেখা পড়া, তাদের বিবাহ সাদি, বাসার সকল কাজ আবার সবার চিকিৎসা ব্যবস্থা নিশ্চিত করা, প্রতিদিনের আয় ব্যয় নিয়ে চিন্তা করা। এগুলো সব একসাথে ব্যবস্থা করা এই অল্প আয় দিয়ে অনেক কঠিন কাজ। যার ফলে আমি সব সময় চিন্তা করি কিভাবে সব কিছু ভাল ভাবে যাবে আর কিভাবে ছেলে মেয়ের সেবা দিতে পারব।

I have a family including my husband, three children, and my mother-in-law. Having a large family is of course a tension for a woman. This is always a mental pressure for me because I need to think about all the family issues such as household earnings, children's education, children's marriage, domestic work, even medical services, and day to day expenses. Managing these situations with low income is hard for me. That is why I think about how to manage everything properly and how to take care of my children. (Razia)

Razia's situation is emblematic of the double burden shouldered by many women in the informal economy, particularly tokai. As the sole breadwinner due to her husband's illness, her work at the landfill is not just a means of income but also a critical lifeline for her family's survival. The long hours she dedicates to her job, combined with the management of household responsibilities, reflect the relentless pace and pressure that defines her life. Razia's acknowledgment of her low income juxtaposed with the inability to cease working captures the desperate predicament of needing to sustain her family despite the meagre earnings. Her story underscores the intertwined nature of physical and emotional labour — the latter being an often invisible and unacknowledged strain that weighs heavily on mental health. The emergency situations she references, which rely solely on her response, add another layer to her ongoing stress. Razia's narrative is a reminder of the systemic issues that perpetuate gender inequality and economic vulnerability, particularly in the informal sector. It also speaks to the resilience and commitment of tokai who, despite the immense challenges, find value and necessity in their work.

This duality of burden and commitment brings to light the complex dynamics of gender identity, societal expectations, and economic survival that shape the experiences of tokai women. For instance, Laboni stated:

আমার এখানে কাজ করতে ভাল লাগে কারন এটা একটা স্বাধীন কাজ। কেউ আমাকে বাধ্য করবে না কাজ করার জন্য। আমার যদি বিশ্রাম নিতে মনে চায় আমি নিয়ে পারি। আমি যদি কোম্পানি কাজ করতাম তাইলে আমাকে সকাল ৮ টায় যেতে হত, আবার সন্কার পরে আস্তে হত। তাই ময়লা কুরানু আমার জন্য একটা ভাল কাজ আমি চাইলে আমার সন্তানদের সময় মত দেখা সূনা করতে পারি।

I feel comfortable working because it is an independent kind of work. Nobody will force me to work. If I need any rest this is my decision. If I work in a factory, I have to go at 8am in the morning and work until midnight. Waste picking is a good choice to take care of children at the same time. (Laboni)

Laboni's perspective provides a glimpse into the multifaceted implications of work beyond its economic function. For her, waste picking transcends the struggle for survival; it is also an escape from the stress and frustration of being confined at home. She said, "If I sit at home, my family members always annoy me. Staying at home is very stressful and frustrating, so it is better to work and keep my mind fresh and healthy". The act of working, regardless of the nature of the job, offers her a sense of purpose and autonomy. It alleviates her mental stress and provides a refreshing counterpoint to domestic pressures, highlighting the psychological and emotional benefits of employment. Her reflections reveal a silver lining in the otherwise grim circumstances of waste picking. Despite being stigmatized and fraught with health hazards, the occupation affords tokai like Laboni a measure of independence and mental solace. This paradoxical situation underscores a critical point: while the physical and social drawbacks of waste picking are apparent, the mental satisfaction derived from self-sufficiency and the dignity of labour cannot be overlooked. It challenges the narrative that work is solely a means to an end, underscoring how it also contributes to one's mental well-being by instilling a sense of accomplishment and contributing to one's identity. Laboni's experience is a testament to the complex role that work plays in shaping self-perception and mental health, particularly among those engaged in the informal economy.

Health Care and Vulnerability

The health care disparities faced by tokai are rooted in a complex interplay of socio-economic and cultural dynamics. The study sheds light on how entrenched social processes and structural factors perpetuate health care inequalities, particularly affecting those at the lower rungs of society, like the tokai. The narrative that emerges is one where the tokai are not just battling the perils of their trade but are also navigating a healthcare system that often side-lines them due to their socio-economic status, occupation, and at times, their gender and ethnicity. Financial constraints not only push the tokai into the informal sector but also severely hamper their access to necessary health care services. The inability to afford care, coupled with the societal stigma attached to their profession, leads to a denial of services that many take for granted. This denial is not just a denial of health care but of dignity and basic human rights.

As some tokai participants articulated, their limited socio-economic participation directly affects their health outcomes. This correlation underscores the need for an inclusive health care system that addresses the needs of all societal members, particularly the most vulnerable. The study points to the urgency of understanding and dismantling the barriers that prevent tokai from accessing the health care they require for their well-being and survival. For instance, Alisa said:

ডাক্তারের ভিজিট অনেক টাকা লাগে। আমাকে দুই বার টাকা দিতে হয় মনে করেন প্রথম বার ডাক্তারের ভিজিট আবার ওষুধ কিনতে হয়। আমি তাই ডাক্তার ভিজিট করি না টাকা জমানুর জন্য, আমি খালি সরাসরি দোকানে গিয়ে ওষুধ কিনি। ঢাকা মেডিকেল আমার বাসা থেকে অনেক দূর, ওখানে যাওয়া অনেক জামেলা, গাড়ীতে করে যেতে হয়, অথবা সিএনজি ভাড়া নিতে হয় যা আমার পক্ষে সম্ভব না টাকা খরচ করা। আমি আমার তিনটা সন্তান নরমালে জন্ম দিছি আমার তু কুন অপারেশন লাগে নাই। আমি অনেক টাকা জমাইতে পারছি।

The doctor's service is very expensive; I have to pay two times – once for a doctor's visit and another for buying medicine. So, I avoid consulting a doctor to save money and I just go to a dispensary and take my medicine... Dhaka Medical Hospital is far from my house, it is difficult to go by public bus, I must hire a CNG or car, which is expensive. I have delivered three children normally without operation, it saves a lot. (Alisa)

Alisa's narrative underscores a multitude of barriers that prevent tokai from accessing adequate health care: economic constraints, gender dynamics, social stigma, and the power imbalance inherent in the patient-doctor relationship. The economic burden of private healthcare, with its additional fees and tests, is a significant obstacle for tokai like Alisa, who are already financially vulnerable. Furthermore, the behaviour of some healthcare professionals, as Alisa experienced, can exacerbate the situation, making it difficult for tokai to trust the healthcare system. The power dynamics between doctors and patients, especially when there is a stark contrast in their socio-economic statuses, can lead to tokai feeling marginalized and disempowered. This is not only a matter of economic inequality but also a reflection of the social hierarchies that persist in urban settings. Gender also plays a crucial role. Alisa's discomfort with male doctors who ask overly personal questions highlights the need for gender-sensitive healthcare services that respect patient privacy and dignity. The stigma attached to their occupation further alienates tokai from health services. Alisa's anger towards being treated as a *methar* reflects the deep historical and social prejudices against sanitation workers in South Asia. The term *methar* carries with it connotations of untouchability and lower caste, underscoring the caste-like hierarchies that exist even within ostensibly casteless communities like Muslims in Bangladesh, and the attribution of lower caste status to waste-pickers. Alisa's experiences illustrate a pressing need for health care systems to become more inclusive, accommodating, and sensitive to the needs of marginalized communities. It is crucial for healthcare providers to address these systemic biases and ensure that all individuals, regardless of occupation, gender, or socio-economic status, have equal access to care.

Like Alisa, some participants shared that they could not attend health related programmes focused on improving nutrition, sanitation, and hygiene. They were also the victims of health-related prejudices and rumours, for example, Roksana stated:

আমাকে সরকারি হাসপাতালে বিছানা দেয় নয়, আমি ফ্লুরে ছিলাম চিকিৎসা নেয়ার সময় কারন আমি গরীব আর একজন টুকাই। একবার তু আমাকে নরমাল ডিলিবারি করতে না করছিল ডাক্তার, সে বলছে আমার সন্তান নাকি নরমালে হবে না আমাকে অপারেশন করতেই হবে। আমি নরমালে ডিলিবারি করছি এখন দেখেন আমার সন্তান সুস্থ আছে। আমি জানি তারা এটা বলছে হসপিটালে টাকা বাড়ানুর জন্য আর আমার কাছ থেকে অতিরিক্ত টাকা নিতে চেয়েছিল।

I was refused a bed in a government hospital, and I was lying on the floor because I am a poor tokai. I once was denied normal delivery for my first baby; the doctor scared me that the baby will not be normal if I have a normal delivery. My baby is healthy now, I know that that doctor just wanted to raise my hospital bills. (Roksana)

Roksana's and Sriti's experiences reflect a troubling reality of healthcare disparities faced by tokai. The perceived indifference of healthcare providers towards tokai is indicative of a larger issue of discrimination based on occupation and socioeconomic status. When doctors seemingly prioritize patients based on these factors, it not only affects the physical health of tokai but also contributes to their social alienation. The lack of attention from healthcare professionals can lead tokai to feel undervalued and ignored, diminishing their trust in the healthcare system and discouraging them from seeking medical help. This can perpetuate a cycle of poor health outcomes and continued marginalization. For Roksana, faith and spirituality become a refuge in the face of such healthcare barriers. Her reliance on divine intervention reflects a coping mechanism for managing health uncertainties and the stresses of their marginalized status.

Sriti related the experience of being turned away by a local doctor without a proper examination.

আমি যখন তাকে বললাম আমি একজন টুকাই, আমি ময়লার বাগারে কাজ করি, সে তার মন পরিবর্তন করে ফেলল আর আমাকে তার সহকারির সাহায্য নিতে বলল। তার সহকারী আমাকে সরকারি হাসপাতালে যেতে বলল। ডাক্তার আমার সাথে আর কুন কথা বলল না, তার সহকারী আমাকে বলল টাকা মেডিকেল গিয়ে কথা বলতে।

When I informed him that I am a tokai working in the landfill project, he just changed his mind and asked his assistant to refer me to the government hospital. He did not speak with me, only his assistant informed me to visit Dhaka Medical Hospital. (Sriti)

This denial of service based on preconceived notions her job or income level is not only unethical but also a violation of her right to healthcare. Sriti's perception of healthcare discrimination illuminates the intersectionality of poverty, occupation, and social stigma. Her experiences reflect a broader social pattern where the most marginalized individuals often face the greatest barriers to health services.

These narratives highlight the need for a healthcare system that is equitable and non-discriminatory, where healthcare professionals are trained to treat all patients with respect and dignity, regardless of their background. Access to healthcare should be based on medical need rather than social hierarchy, ensuring that vulnerable populations, like tokai, receive the care and attention they deserve. The concept of untouchability — a relic of caste-based discrimination — continues to affect people like Sriti, even in healthcare settings where equity is expected. These encounters not only impact her ability to obtain necessary medical care but also affect her daily life, reinforcing social isolation and perpetuating the cycle of poverty and illness. Despite these challenges, Sriti's reliance on faith and the development of coping strategies demonstrate resilience. Her focus on ensuring her children receive better health services than she has is a testament to her strength and determination. The health disparities tokai face are not merely individual issues but systemic ones, rooted in social hierarchies and prejudices. These disparities highlight the need for targeted public health interventions and policy reforms that address the specific needs of marginalized communities, such as tokai. By acknowledging and addressing the social determinants of health, such as housing, employment, and education, alongside combating stigma and discrimination, more inclusive health systems can be established. This approach would help ensure that healthcare access and quality are not dictated by one's social or economic standing but are equitable and accessible to all members of society.

Tania shared her family planning methods and coping strategies:

আমার পরিবার পরিকল্পনা বলতে কিছু নাই। আমি জানিই না কিভাবে এটা (কনডম) ব্যবহার করে। আসলে আমার এটা ব্যবহার করতেও হয় না। আমি জানি যদি আল্লাহ আমাকে অনেক সন্তান দেয়, সে নিজেই সব গুলার যত্ন নিবে। তাছাড়া এটা ব্যবহার করা ঠিক না, শরীর খারাপ হতে পারে, কুন আসুখ বিসুক হতেও তু পারে। আমি জানি, জিনি মুখ দেয় তিনি আবার খাবারের ব্যবস্থা করে দেয়। যদি আমার কুন তথ্য লাগে আমি আমার মাকে বলি, সে আমাকে অনেক রকমের গাছের পাতা এনে দেয় এবং আমি কবিরাজি (একজন ধর্মীয় মানুষ সে পানি পরা, ডিম পরা, দুধ পরা, মিষ্টি পরা, দই পরা, চিনি পরা আর তাবিজ দেয় সকল চিকিৎসার জন্য) চিকিৎসা নেই।

I have no idea about family planning, I do not know how to use condoms to control my baby's birth. Actually, I do not need to use this. I know if Allah gives me more children, He will take care of them because those who He gives a mouth, He will give food also. Otherwise, using condom is harmful for body, condom can create some diseases. If I need sexual and reproductive information (period related, pregnancy etc), my mother supports me by providing some native leaves and koboraji [a religious leader who administers local remedies] treatments.
(Tania)

Tania's and other participants' reliance on কবিরাজি ডাক্তার (*kabiraji daktara*, traditional healers) or local informal হাতুরে ডাক্তার (*baktura daktara*, local informal doctors) indicate a gap in the healthcare

system. It reveals a lack of trust in, or access to, formal medical services, particularly government hospitals, which are often perceived as insufficient or inaccessible to the marginalized. Traditional and informal practitioners play a crucial role in communities where formal healthcare is either physically or financially out of reach, or where cultural and social barriers prevent people from seeking such services. For many tokai, these alternative health providers are more approachable, perhaps because they share similar socio-economic backgrounds or because their services are more aligned with the cultural practices and beliefs of tokai. However, relying on informal healthcare can have significant drawbacks, including the potential for misdiagnosis, ineffective treatment, and the use of unregulated medicines. This not only perpetuates health inequalities but also puts the health of the tokai at further risk.

To address this, healthcare systems need to be more inclusive and sensitive to the needs of marginalized groups. This could involve training and integrating traditional healers into the formal health system, ensuring that government hospitals are more accessible and culturally sensitive, and providing affordable healthcare options that are trusted by the community. Furthermore, health education campaigns can empower tokai with information about their rights to healthcare and knowledge about the importance of seeking timely and professional medical advice. By improving health literacy and ensuring that healthcare services are equitable, tokai could be better served and their overall health outcomes improved.

Gender-based Health Inequalities

The compounding challenges faced by female tokai in accessing healthcare and medical services underscore the deeply entrenched gender inequalities within their socio-economic context. These women navigate a complex web of cultural barriers that often restrict their mobility and interaction with male healthcare providers, exacerbating their marginalization. Financial constraints further entrench their predicament, with limited control over resources constraining their ability to afford necessary healthcare services. The healthcare infrastructure itself frequently fails to address the specific needs of women, particularly in areas of reproductive health, and may lack the requisite privacy and sensitivity. The pervasive social stigma attached to their occupation as waste pickers is intensified by gender biases, leading to instances where healthcare providers are less willing to offer treatment or do so with a lack of respect. Female tokai voices are often missing in the health policy discourse, resulting in a lack of advocacy for their unique health concerns. Their dual burden of work and domestic responsibilities curtails the time available to seek medical attention, while concerns about personal safety during travel to healthcare facilities pose additional barriers.

In light of these barriers, many tokai turn to informal care networks or traditional healers, which, while accessible, may not provide comprehensive care. Low literacy and education levels further diminish their health awareness and their ability to effectively navigate healthcare systems. Occupational health risks specific to women, especially those related to their reproductive health, remain largely unaddressed by the current health services.

To ameliorate these inequities, there is a pressing need for gender-sensitive health services and outreach programs tailored to the unique circumstances of female tokai. Empowering these women through initiatives that enhance their decision-making power regarding health and integrating gender perspectives into health policy planning can ensure a more inclusive approach to their well-being. Such strategies must aim to not only provide immediate healthcare access but also to dismantle the systemic barriers that perpetuate gender disparities in health among the tokai community. Kohinur specified:

আমি একজন টুকাই আবার একজন মহিলা মানুষ, আমি এখানে অসহায় একজন মানুষ। আমি নানা সমস্যায় আছি কারণ আমি চাইলেই সবার সাথে সব কিছু শেয়ার করতে পারি না আমার ব্যক্তিগত ব্যাপার যেমন আমার পিরিওড বা জন্ম নিয়ন্ত্রনের কথা।

I am tokai, I am a woman, and I am homeless in the city. I experience a lot of discriminations because I cannot share my personal issues such as menstruation, contraception with anybody
(Kohinur)

Kohinur's experience is a stark illustration of the multi-layered health challenges faced by many tokai women, compounded by early marriage and the associated risks of early pregnancy. The lack of familiarity with healthcare services, coupled with a reliance on spouses for health advice, reflects a broader issue of limited health literacy within this community. Kohinur's hesitance to seek medical advice or disclose health issues is rooted in a fear of domestic violence and oppression, showcasing the dire consequences of a lack of autonomy over her own health. Her situation underscores the critical need for targeted health education and services that are accessible and sensitive to the unique cultural and social dynamics of tokai women. Interventions are required to break the cycle of ignorance and fear surrounding healthcare, empowering women like Kohinur with the knowledge and confidence to seek professional medical assistance. Addressing domestic violence and the cultural norms that perpetuate the oppression of women is equally imperative, as these are significant barriers to achieving equitable health outcomes.

Community-based health initiatives that engage husbands and family members could help shift attitudes towards women's health and promote supportive environments where women can discuss and manage their health issues without fear of retribution. Additionally, creating safe

spaces for women to access healthcare and receive confidential counselling can mitigate the risks of isolation and helplessness that Kohinur and many others face. These efforts must be part of a larger strategy to empower tokai women, ensuring their health and well-being are prioritized and protected. She stated:

এখানে কেউ নাই যে বলবে মহিলার স্বাস্থ্য একটা জরুরি জিনিস। আমি একবার এবরসন নিছিলাম কারন আমার স্বামী কুন পরিবার পরিকল্পনা নেয় না। সে বলে এটা নাকি তার শরীরের জন্য ক্ষতিকর, এটা কিনাও নাকি অনেক টাকা লাগে। সে বলে এটা কিনা শুধু শুধু টাকা অপচয় করা। আমি একবার বলছিলাম তাকে ইনজেকশন নিতে , সে বলে এটা নাকি পুরুষ মানুষের কাজ না। সে বলে সে নাকি ইনজেকশন নিলে তার নাকি জৈন সমস্যা হবে। সে বলে আমি নাকি তার সরিরের ক্ষতি করতে চাই। আমি এখন আবার ভয়ে আছি কবে আবার বাচ্চা হয়ে যায়।

There is nobody who identifies tokai health needs as an urgent issue. I had an abortion once because my husband refused family planning and contraception use. He says that it is harmful for his health and also expensive to buy things [condom] regularly. He said buying this [condom] is a waste of money. Once I asked my husband to take an injection, but he replied to me, "This is not a man's job. If I take this injection, I will lose my sexual power. Do you want to harm my body?" I am afraid about pregnancy and childbirth again. (Kohinur)

Kohinur's experience is indicative of the complex interplay between economic constraints, social norms, and gender dynamics that shape the lives of tokai women. Her reliance on her husband for health advice, and the consequent neglect of her own health concerns, underscores a broader societal issue where women's health and autonomy are often compromised due to patriarchal control. The situation is exacerbated when women marry young, as they find themselves at the intersection of inexperience and dependency, which can lead to feelings of helplessness and isolation. Moreover, the fear of domestic violence and familial oppression further silences women like Kohinur, preventing them from seeking help or voicing their health needs. This reflects a reality where personal health issues are overshadowed by the dictates of family decision-making, revealing that beyond the challenges of literacy and poverty, entrenched social structures play a significant role in perpetuating health care disparities among tokai women.

Similarly, Razia said that she had a stable partner but she was experiencing a lot of health problems. She said:

একবার তু আমার স্বামী আমার সাথে জুড় করে ওটা করছিল , তখন আমি প্রতি মাসের অসুস্থ ছিলাম। সে ওই সময় মাতাল ছিল। আমি তাকে বাধা দিতে পারি নাই। এখন আমি নানা সমস্যায় ভুগতেছি, আমার তল পেটে খালি ব্যথা করে। অনেকবার আমি চেষ্টা করছি আর যেন সন্তান না হয়, কারন নতুন সন্তান মানে হচ্ছে নতুন করে খাবার এর ব্যবস্থা করা আর অন্য খরচ চালানু। আমি অনেক ভয়ে থাকি আর বিরক্তি লাগে এসব দায়িত্ব নিতে কারন আমার কাছে অনেক টাকা নাই বাচ্চা মানুষ করার।

I once was forced to have sex with my husband during my period time because my husband was drunk. I cannot stop him. Now I am facing a lot of pain in my abdomen. Several times, I tried to avoid pregnancy because a new baby is a demand on food and other costs. I am afraid and getting tired of responsibilities because I do not have enough money to raise children. (Razia)

Razia could not control her pregnancy because no one provided free condoms to her husband and if she needed more, she had to buy them from a local shop. She revealed:

মহিলাদের জন্য কনডম কেনা এত সহজ কাজ না, এটা দুকানদারকেও বলাও তু অনেক লজ্যাকর যে আমার একটা কনডম লাগবে। তাই আমি পিল খাই, কনডম ব্যবহার না করে। আমার স্বামী ভাল অনুভব করে না এটা করার সময়, সে নাকি ব্যথা পায়, উন্য রকম লাগে তার কাছে। এটা অনেক পাতলা, কেমন জানি। আমি যদি তাকে উন্য কুন পরিবার পরিকল্পনার কথা বলি যেমন ধরেন ইঞ্জেকশান নিতে, সে অনেক রাগান্বিত হয়।

Buying a condom for a woman is not an easy task and it is shameful to ask the shopkeeper. It is better to take oral tablet contraceptives other than using condoms. My husband did not feel good, and it hurts him because it is too thick. If I asked to use any type of contraception, my husband became aggressive. (Razia)

Razia would sleep with her husband for his pleasure. She had noticed that using the pill or any contraceptive made other women infertile, and she said, “it looks like I am taking an abortion every month”.

Nasrin articulated that health care and how she was treated depended on the attitude of the health provider:

একবার আমার রক্ত আর প্রসাব পরীক্ষার জন্য গেছিলাম একজন পুরুষ ডাক্তার আমার কাছ থেকে বেশি টাকা নিচ্ছে। হে তু আমার গুপন জাইগায় হাত ও দিছিল আর আমাকে অনেক খারাপ জিনিস প্রস্তাব করেছিল। সে জানতু আমি একজন গরীব মানুষ, আমি ময়লায় কাজ করে খাই। আমি তার খারাপ প্রস্তাবে পাত্তা দেই নাই পরে সে তু আমার লগে খারাপ ব্যবহার করছে।

A male doctor took a lot of money for my blood and urine tests. Once he touched my private parts [breast] intentionally and offered me something bad [a sexual encounter] due to disclosing my real occupational and position in society. I refused the proposal then I received aggressive behaviour from him. (Nasrin)

Participants describe a complex health care reality that lies at the intersection of socio-economic status, gender and access. The limited medical knowledge of tokai, rooted in traditional customs and practices, often leads to their marginalization within the health care system. The dependency on their husbands for decision-making further exacerbates this situation, resulting in discrimination and neglect from health care providers. For tokai like Fatema, geographic isolation compounds the problem. The absence of nearby medical facilities and the challenges of transportation make it difficult for her to obtain the care she needs, especially in emergencies.

The reliance on distant, more affordable medical centres like Dhaka Medical Hospital comes with its own set of hurdles, such as long wait times for appointments and the fear of facing discrimination once there. The anticipation of assault, avoidance, and separation by other patients reflects a deep-seated stigma associated with their occupation and social standing. Fatema's experiences also highlight the significant role of interpersonal interactions in health care. The perception of hospital staff as rude and unsupportive is not just a reflection of individual attitudes but indicates a systemic issue of disrespect and insensitivity towards patients from lower socio-economic backgrounds. The lack of empathy and the dearth of friendly and real doctors who can offer support without judgment are poignant reminders of the barriers that prevent vulnerable populations like the tokai from seeking and receiving adequate health care services. This lack of respect and understanding serves as a formidable obstacle, discouraging tokai from pursuing the medical care they need and are entitled to, further entrenching the disparities in health outcomes. Similarly, Rina complained that health services were limited for tokai:

আমরা তু আমাদের পেশার কথা লুকাই কারন ডাক্তার যদি জানে আমি ময়লায় কাজ করি সে তু আমার ভাল চিকিৎসা দিবে না, সে ভাল ব্যবহার করবে না, আমাদের অবজ্ঞা করবে। ভাল সেবা পেতে আমাদের এই মিথ্যা বলতে হয়। আমাদের যদি কুন অসুখ হয় প্রথম আমরা আল্লাহ্ কাছে দুয়া করি, সে যেন আমাদের সাহায্য করে। আমরা আমাদের পরিবারের বয়স্ক মানুষদের কাছ থেকেও অনেক পরামর্শ পাই। মনে করেন আমরা দুকানের ওষুধ না খেয়ে গাছের পাতা খাই জ্বর বা ঠাণ্ডার বা কুন ব্যথার জন্য। এই সব গাছের পাতা অনেক কাজে লাগে আমাদের।

We are used to hiding our profession to get better health services because if a doctor knows that they will not be helpful to support us, they must ignore us. Usually, if we face any health problems, we first pray to Allah because we believe Allah will save us. We also take some advice from our elderly family members, for example, we take tree leaves for our fever, cough, and body pain instead of prescribed medicine. Tree leaves work very well. (Rina)

The complex social fabric of tokai communities is deeply woven with threads of religious belief and cultural practice, which profoundly shape the experiences of women, particularly those from lower socio-economic classes in South Asia. These communities often turn to their faith as a refuge and guiding principle in the face of persistent challenges such as social stigma and economic marginalization. This religious and cultural adherence is a double-edged sword; while providing a sense of identity and support, it can also reinforce the barriers that keep them from accessing secular social services and healthcare.

To effectively address and support the needs of tokai women, future research must delve into the nuanced interplay between their religious convictions and cultural norms, and how these elements influence their status and treatment in society. Such research should aim to unravel the

narratives that define tokai identities, the influence of religious institutions on their social standing, and how tokai navigate their faith in the context of their work and societal perceptions. Understanding these dynamics is vital for crafting interventions and policies that are sensitive to cultural and religious contexts while promoting the health, economic well-being, and empowerment of tokai women. This balanced approach could bridge the gap between traditional practices and modern health and social welfare systems, paving the way for more inclusive and effective solutions.

Sanitation and Menstrual Care

For tokai the lack of access to basic urban sanitation services poses a significant daily challenge. This is especially true when it comes to the availability of toilets and facilities for managing menstruation, which are crucial for their health and dignity. The absence of proper sanitation facilities not only compromises the hygiene and well-being of tokai but also affects their ability to work efficiently. Without access to toilets, they are often forced to resort to unsanitary practices, which can lead to health risks such as infections and diseases. Menstruation adds another layer of difficulty, as managing menstrual hygiene requires privacy, access to clean water, and proper waste disposal methods. For tokai these needs are often unmet, leaving them to cope with their periods in unsafe and undignified conditions. This not only impacts their physical health but also their mental well-being, as it can lead to stress and anxiety.

The challenges faced by tokai highlight the broader issue of inadequate sanitation infrastructure in many urban areas, particularly for those in informal and low-income occupations. Addressing these challenges requires a concerted effort from urban planners, health services, and community organizations to ensure that all citizens, regardless of their occupation or socio-economic status, have access to the basic services that are essential for a healthy life. For instance, Momotaz shared:

টয়লেট ব্যবস্থা। আমি যদি ময়লায় কাজ করি তাইলে কেমনে চিন্তা করুম যে কেও আমারে এটা করার সুজুগ দিবো। এটা তু প্রাকৃতিক ব্যাপার, আমি এটাকে থামিয়ে রাখতে পারব না। আমার আসল কাজ হচ্ছে প্রতিদিন ৩০০ থেকে ৪০০ টাকার কাজ করা। বেশির ভাগ সময় আমি এটা আয় করতে পারি না কারন আমার হটাত হটাত শরীর খারাপ করে , কাজে যেতে পারি না। ওই সময় আমার পরিবারের মানুষ ও আমার প্রতি খুসি হয় না। আমার সন্তানেরা না খেয়েই গুমাতে যায়।

Toilet access? Why will I think I will get access to a toilet while I pick waste? It is natural that there is no access. I cannot stop it. My main concern is to earn 300 to 400 taka per day. Most of the time, I am not even able to earn half of it because of sudden illness. That is the day when my family members are not happy to support me. My children must sleep with their stomachs half full. (Momotaz)

Momotaz added that Matuail landfill had only one public toilet near to the pump office (council office) but this was far away from where she was working. Tokai were not allowed to use this toilet:

একবার আমি পায়খানা ব্যবহার করতে গিয়েছিলাম কিন্তু এর আবস্থা অনেক নুংরা, ময়লার পানি ভেসে আছে, হাইরে দূর গন্ধ বলে বুজাইতে পারুম না। না আছে পায়খানার পানি, না আছে বদনা, না আছে টিসু না কুন সাবান। কি বলব গুয়ের পানি খালি ভাসতেসে, মাছি উরতেসে আর খালি গন্ধ।

I went to use this toilet once and the toilet was poorly maintained, and it was extremely dirty and full of waste. Poo water was floating. There was no toilet tissue, no container, no hand sanitiser, no soap, and dirty water was not disposed, flies were flying so it included a bad smell.
(Momotaz)

The experiences of Momotaz and other tokai with respect to sanitation facilities highlight a distressing aspect of their daily lives. The lack of access to clean and functional toilets is a fundamental issue that affects their dignity and well-being. For Momotaz, the presence of her husband provides a small measure of security and privacy, but it underscores a deeper issue of systemic neglect that leaves many without basic sanitary provisions. The situation described by Momotaz presents a stark contrast between the intimate care provided by a spouse and the broader societal disregard for the needs of waste pickers. The security provided by her husband holding the broken toilet door is a poignant image of personal support amid public abandonment. It is a sobering reflection on the conditions under which these individuals work, where the fulfilment of such a basic human need is dependent on personal sacrifice and ad-hoc solutions. The mention of open defecation due to inadequate facilities carries with it risks of infection, pollution, and a loss of self-respect, compounded by the monsoon floods that exacerbate these health hazards. The work of tokai, already marred by societal stigma, is further burdened by these unsanitary conditions, affecting not only their health but also their prospects for the future. Tania shared:

আমি অনেক সকাল সকাল কাজে যাই যাতে বেশি ময়লা কুড়াইতে পারি। আমাকে রান্না করে, সব কিছু পরিষ্কার করে, বাচ্চার সব কিছু রেডি করে নিজে রেডি হয়ে কাজে যেতে হয়। আমি প্রায় চেষ্টা করি বাইরে পায়খানা ব্যবহার না করতে, আমি বাসায় আসি তারপর এই কাজ সারি। সারা দিন আমার পায়খানায় না গেলেও হয়। আমি বেশি পানি খাই না যাতে আমার কাজের মাজে পায়খানায় না যেতে হয়। আমি এখন কিছু তলপেটে ব্যথা অনুভব করি, আমার এখন সময় নাই ডাক্তারের কাছে যাওয়ার। আমি মাজে মাজে রাগান্বিত হই, কারন এখন প্রায় প্রতদিন আমার কুন না কুন অসুখ লেগেই থাকে। কেউ আমার সমস্যা বুজে না। কার সাথে আমার সমস্যা নিয়ে কথা বলব তাও জানি না। এখানে পায়খানা ব্যবহার করব তাও তু অনেক অপরিষ্কার, নুংরা। কেও বুজতেসে না আমরা কি অবস্থায় আছি, কিভাবে আমাদের জীবন যাচ্ছে।

I have to go to work early in the morning for picking more recycling items. I am used to cooking, cleaning, getting my children ready for school, and leaving for work. I always decide to skip the public toilet because I come home later and relieve myself. The full day I do not need to go to the toilet. I avoid drinking water during work so that I don't have to use a toilet. I have been having some serious pain in my abdomen, but I do not have time to visit a doctor. I feel very angry. Regular health issues make me feel depressed. And no one around understands me. Whom will I even talk to? You go to the toilets here, even they are unclean. No one in the house understands what I am going through. (Tania)

Many tokai work in the landfill when it is dark, early in the morning around 4.30 am, to collect the best possible materials; then tokai can urinate in open places as there were no other men here. Tania explained, “If it is urgent, some women relieve themselves or urinate behind a tree or dustbin.” While working sorting waste in dealers' shops, many tokai also experienced some sanitation problems. Some dealers provide access to their washroom; however, they ask tokai to clean the toilet in exchange for its use.

This narrative serves as a poignant reminder of the broader social and structural changes that are needed to ensure that all individuals, particularly those in the most vulnerable professions, have access to the basic amenities that support a life of dignity. It calls for urgent attention from municipal authorities, urban planners, and public health officials to provide adequate sanitation facilities that are accessible to all, including the tokai who play a vital role in the city's waste management system, yet are often overlooked

Menstruation is another key issue for tokai working in the landfill. Kulsom reported that it was difficult to change her menstrual pads/cloths in the landfill due to the lack of toilet facilities and limited security. She was unable to change her menstrual cloths for more than eight hours, which generated discomfort and health risks:

আমি পিরিওডের প্রথম দুই বা তিন দিন কাজে যাই না, আমি ওই সময় অনেক অসুস্থ আর দুর্বল থাকি। আমি মানুষের সামনে আমার পিরিওডের কাপড় পরিবর্তন করতে লজ্যা পাই। আমি সাধারণত পুরানা কাপড় আমার জাইঙ্গা সাথে ব্যবহার করি। আমার পেট ব্যথার জন্য কখন ওষুধ খাওয়া লাগে না। আমি নিজে কিছু হাতের তৈরি কাপড়ের প্যাড বানাইছি এগুলো ব্যবহার করি। আমি মাজে মাজে অতিরিক্ত কাপড় আমার সাথে রাখি কিন্তু আমি ওটা চেঞ্জ করার সময় ই পাই না। যখন বাসায় আসি তারপর গুসুল করে, চেঞ্জ করি প্যাড। আমি এই কাপড়গুলো বা প্যাড ধুয়ে পরিষ্কার করে, সুকিয়ে রাখি যাতে আবার ব্যবহার করতে পারি। যদি কাপড় গুলা অনেক পুরানা হয়ে যায় তাইলে মাটিতে পুতে রাখি।

I usually do not go to work for the first two or three days of my period. I feel sick and weak at that time. I feel shy to change my menstrual clothes outside. I used to use old cloths with panties for my period. I never take medicine or injection to decrease my menstrual pains. I have made some handmade pads with cloths. I keep an extra cloth with me in the morning, but I do not

change this. When I come back home then I take a shower and use it. After my period finishes, I wash this cloth and dry it for further use. Sometimes, if the cloths are old, I have buried them in the soil. (Kulsom)

Kulsom's experience sheds light on the intersection of poverty, gender, and access to menstrual hygiene products. The economic barrier to purchasing pads leaves her reliant on cloths, which, while reusable, pose their own set of challenges, particularly in a work environment where privacy and sanitary facilities are scarce. Her anxiety about potential leaks is not just a matter of personal discomfort but also a source of potential public shame, underscoring the stigma surrounding menstruation. The lack of a secure and private place to manage menstrual hygiene not only affects Kulsom's dignity but also her health, as improper menstrual waste management can lead to infections and other health complications. Her resort to disposing of used cloths in dustbins or bushes is indicative of a broader systemic failure to provide adequate menstrual hygiene management (MHM) facilities and education for women, especially those in low-income and informal work settings.

To address these challenges, there is an urgent need for affordable access to menstrual hygiene products and the implementation of safe and dignified MHM facilities. Education campaigns to break the stigma surrounding menstruation, along with proper waste management protocols for menstrual products, are also critical. These measures are essential steps toward ensuring that women like Kulsom can manage their menstruation with dignity and without health risks.

The Covid-19 Pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic and the resulting lockdowns imposed significant disruptions to the lives of waste pickers, many of whom depend on daily income from collecting and selling recyclable materials. The government-imposed measures, including entry restrictions to open landfills and the closure of scrap shops, directly impacted their livelihoods. Social distancing mandates further compounded the challenges, limiting free movement in public places and thus their ability to work. For waste pickers, who already navigate the margins of society and economy, such restrictions can quickly escalate from an inconvenience to a crisis, cutting off the already tenuous lifeline to basic needs. The loss of income due to these disruptions places them in an even more vulnerable position, as they often lack the savings or safety nets to weather prolonged periods without work. This highlights the need for inclusive crisis response measures that consider the unique circumstances and vulnerabilities of informal workers, including access to emergency funds, food security, and essential services.

For example, Saleha stated:

আমরা লকডাউনের সময় কেও কারও সাথে দেখা সাক্ষাৎ করতে পারি নাই। আমাদের না খেয়ে থাকতে হইছে। আমরা কুন সাহায্য ও পাই নাই। আমি মানুষের কাছ থেকে খাবার এনে বাচ্চাদের খাওয়াছি। এই সময়টা অনেক খারাপ ছিল। আমি জানি না লকডাউন যদি আবার আসে আমি কিভাবে বাচ্চাদের নিয়মিত খাবার দিব। মানুষ অনেক ভয় পাইতু যদি আমি তাদের সাথে মিশতে যেতাম। তারা বলত এখান থেকে চলে যা, আর আসবি না। সবাই তাদের ঘরের দরজা বন্ধ করে দিত। আমি কিছু চাল ধার নিয়েছিলাম আমার প্রতিবেশির কাছ থেকে যাতে বাচ্চাদের খাওয়াতে পারি।

During the lockdown, we cannot meet each other, we had to stay hungry. We did not get any help from others. I collected food then I eat. In that time the situation was horrible. I do not know if lockdown comes again what I will eat or feed my children. I looked for some part time job that time, but I cannot meet anyone in person. People were scared if I wanted to meet with them, they said get out, get out. Everyone was locked their houses; I borrowed some rice from my neighbours and others to feed my children. (Saleha)

The lockdowns brought forth by the Covid-19 pandemic presented an unprecedented challenge for the tokai community. Saleha's experience of being compelled to take loans from waste dealers underscores the precarious nature of the tokai's financial stability. The inability to work outside and the restrictions on movement led to a breakdown of the occupational networks and connections that these communities relied upon, forcing many to seek alternative forms of employment such as vegetable vending, a shift that may come with its own set of unfamiliar challenges and lower incomes. The situation was dire for those without savings, as starvation became a real threat. The act of begging outside supermarkets and bus stations is a stark indicator of the desperation faced by these individuals. The pandemic exposed not just the vulnerability of their employment but also the fragility of their entire ecosystem of survival. Furthermore, the economic strain was exacerbated by the increased prices of daily necessities. Such inflation during crisis times disproportionately affects the poorest, who spend a larger portion of their income on essentials. This situation highlighted the need for targeted assistance and social safety nets for marginalized groups, especially during times of crisis, to provide a buffer against such shocks and ensure basic needs are met. Kajol described her situation:

আমার পরিবারে আমার তিন ছেলে মেয়ে নিয়ে ৫ জন সদস্য। একজন মা হিসাবে, আমি সব সময় আমার খাবার কম খেতাম যাতে আমার সন্তানারা খাইতে পারে। আমি চাই না আমার বাচ্চারা না খেয়ে রাতে গুমায়। আমরা সাধারণত প্রত্যেক দিন আগে তিন বেলা খেতাম, কিন্তু এখন আমরা দুই বেলা খাওয়ার অভ্যাস করছি। কারণ আমি এখন প্রতি বেলা খাবার দিতে আগের মত সক্ষম না, এই অল্প টাকা আয় দিয়ে।

We have five members in the family including three little children. As a mother, I had to reduce the amount of food we consumed. It means that I eat less to cope with and sacrifice for my children's wellbeing because I will not see my children sleeping without food. We normally eat

three times per day but recently we are eating two times per day because I am not able to buy food regularly with my low income. (Kajol)

The Covid-19 pandemic not only disrupted the source of income but also exacerbated their domestic burdens and exposed them to increased violence both in public spaces and at home. Kajol's narrative reveals that the pandemic expanded her domestic responsibilities as she spent more time on household chores and caring for her family, while also intensifying the challenges of daily life, such as fetching water. The social distancing measures, driven by the fear of virus transmission, led to community water sources becoming inaccessible to her, adding to the daily struggle for basic necessities. The pandemic also heightened their vulnerability to violence and harassment. Kajol's encounters with the police and security guards, where she was forced to abandon her work and return home, and the subsequent brutality faced by some tokai, reflect the social stigma and marginalization attached to their work. Moreover, the baseless accusation by householders that tokai were responsible for spreading the virus further demonizes their community and strips them of their dignity.

Marium's experience draws attention to the distressing increase in domestic violence during the lockdown. The confinement at home, coupled with financial stress and the absence of a supportive environment, left tokai like Marium trapped with abusive partners and in-laws, facing physical violence and assault. The pandemic also generated mental abuse and social distancing, as Marium stated:

আমি যদি আমার বাসায় বসে থাকি, কাজে না যাই আমার খারাপ লাগে, আমি অনিরাপদ মনে করি। আমি নিজেকে স্বাধীন মনে করি না, মনে হয় নিজের কুন কিছুই নাই। আমি নানা অসুখে ভুগি আর মানসিকভাবে ভেঙ্গে পড়ি। আমি আমার সবার সাথে কথা বলা , একসাথে খাওয়া, চলাফেরা অনেক মিস করি। এই লকডাউন আমার সব কিছু উল্টা পাল্টা করে দিচ্ছে, আমার সব কানেকশন আর বন্ধুত্ব বন্ধ করে দিচ্ছে। আমি ভাল অনুভব করতেতেছি না।

If I cannot leave my home, I cannot go to work every day, I feel unwell and insecure. I do not feel autonomy, dignity, individuality, and I suffer more health risks and mental stress. I miss my daily work and the friends we work together. I miss my gossiping and eating times with them. This lockdown has stopped all my social /friendship connection. I am not feeling well. (Kulsom)

The Covid-19 pandemic created a paradox for informal workers like Kulsom, for whom the act of waste picking is not just a means of livelihood but also a lifeline that sustains them. Despite the heightened health risks associated with waste picking during the pandemic, particularly with the fear of coming into contact with hazardous waste potentially contaminated with the virus, Kulsom views her work as integral to her survival. Her eagerness for the lockdown to lift reflects

the desperation and urgency that many tokai feel to resume work and escape the burden of debt that has accumulated during the pandemic. Kulsom's selective approach to picking only clean reusable items is a strategy to mitigate the health risks posed by the virus, showcasing her acute awareness of the dangers yet her inability to completely avoid them due to the lack of alternative employment opportunities. The reality of Kulsom's situation illustrates a stark truth about social distancing measures: while they are crucial for public health, they are a luxury that the poorest and most vulnerable in society cannot afford. For tokai like Kulsom, daily earnings are not just for livelihood but are critical for immediate survival, making social distancing a near-impossible measure to adhere to. This highlights the complex challenges faced by informal workers and the need for inclusive policies that address the unique needs and vulnerabilities of this segment of the workforce during public health crises.

Kohinur described how the practice of social distancing, due to the pandemic, meant starvation for her and her family. She continued to go to the landfill despite entry restrictions and was assaulted by a security guard:

সামাজিক দুরন্ত আমাদের দারিদ্রটা কমাতে না বরং এর থেকে ভাল প্রতিদিন কাজ করা যদিও তারা অনেক বাধা দিচ্ছে। আমরা কখন অন্যের বাসায় যাই না, আমরা বাসা বারিতেই থাকি। মাজে মাজে বিভিন্ন মানুষ বিভিন্ন কথা বলে যে আমরা টুকাই, আমাদের গা থেকে গন্ধ আসে। মানুষ তু সব একরকম না। বিভিন্ন মানুষের বিভিন্ন কথা। আমরা যদি একদিন কাজ না করি, আর কাজ থেকে এসে সাবান দিয়ে ভাল করে গুসুল করি তাহলে গন্ধ থাকে না। শরীরের মধ্যে গন্ধ নিয়ে কি আর একজনের বাসায় যাওয়া যায়। তাই আজকের কাজ করসি তাই আজ আর কারও বাসায় জাব না, আমাদের হইতু গন্ধ সহ্য হয়ে গেসে অন্য মানুষ কি বলবে। লকডাউনের সময় আমরা কুন কাজ করি নাই, সবসময় ঘরে থাকছি। যদি কাজে গেছি তাইলে মাস্ক পরে, মুজা পরে আর জুতা পরে যেতে হইছে।

Social distancing will not solve our poverty, better rather to work daily whatever the restrictions they impose. We never go to other houses, we stay at our own house, we know some people are talking ill about us. We are tokai, bad smells emerge from us, they humiliate us by saying these ill words. If I stop working one day and take shower with soap, I will not have any smell, then I can visit others' house. With smell, it is bad to meet with someone. During the lockdown, we can not work and stay at home sometimes I work by wearing socks and mask, shoes.
(Kohinur)

The narrative of Kohinur and Sriti paints a vivid picture of the harsh realities faced by the tokai during the Covid-19 pandemic. Kohinur's description of living in cramped quarters with shared facilities underscores the impracticality of social distancing measures for those living on the margins. The pandemic highlighted the stark disparities between the government's public health mandates and the living conditions of the poor, revealing a gap in policy that fails to account for the lives of the urban poor like tokai. Sriti's plight brings to light the dire economic impacts of

the pandemic on this vulnerable group. The loss of daily income, which was meagre to begin with, has thrust many into a deeper financial abyss, with no safety net to fall back on. Sriti's assertion that "the virus is only for wealthy people" reflects a sentiment that the pandemic, while a health crisis, is a crisis of privilege that overlooks the existential threats faced by the poor, such as hunger and starvation.

These accounts underscore the multiple layers of hardship faced by tokai during the pandemic, which not only threatened their livelihoods but also their safety and well-being. The pandemic laid bare the critical need for social protection mechanisms and community support systems that can safeguard the rights and welfare of marginalized populations like the tokai, especially during times of crisis. The failure of government aid to reach those like Sriti, despite her efforts to register for support, exemplifies the systemic barriers that prevent the most needy from receiving help. Her statement about not being able to bear her daughter's hunger speaks to a mother's desperation and the human cost of a crisis that exacerbates existing inequalities. This account calls for a critical examination of public health policies and social support systems to ensure they are inclusive and responsive to the needs of all societal sectors, especially the most vulnerable. It stresses the importance of a safety net that is accessible to all, particularly during times of crisis, so that no one is left to choose between the risk of infection and the certainty of hunger.

Summary

The chapter concludes with a thoughtful summation of the multifaceted struggles faced by tokai, emphasizing the consequences of their pursuit of independence amidst a backdrop of health risks, environmental hazards, and societal stigma. It underscores the stark health care disparities resulting from entrenched social hierarchies and the intersectionality of untouchability, socio-economic status, and gender discrimination. These barriers perpetuate a cycle of marginalization, limiting access to basic health care services that many take for granted. Their narrative also highlights the exacerbated vulnerabilities of tokai during the Covid-19 pandemic. The lockdown, while a necessary public health measure, disproportionately impacted their livelihoods, illustrating the precariousness of their economic stability. Conversely, this period also revealed the resourcefulness and resilience of tokai as they navigated new opportunities amidst adversity. The subsequent chapter will explore the systemic responses to these multifarious challenges, probing the effectiveness of existing policies and government interventions designed to safeguard the interests of tokai. It aims to explore the structural support that is—or is not—in place, critically analysing the role of policy in either mitigating or perpetuating the hardships of tokai. By doing so, the next chapter seeks to answer Research Question Four, potentially offering insights into the policy reforms needed to improve the welfare and protection of tokai.

Chapter Eight: Findings - Access to Work and Policy Environments

In this chapter, I explore the unique challenges and policy-driven dynamics surrounding the tokai in Bangladesh. The tokai, primarily involved in informal waste collection and recycling, are not just a critical element of the country's urban ecology but also a mirror reflecting the broader socio-economic and policy landscape. Initially, I dissect the Bangladeshi government's constitutional commitments to social welfare and equity. This scrutiny helps me understand the backdrop against which the policies impacting the tokai are framed. I particularly focus on the social and policy constraints that hinder tokai self-sufficiency, examining how these elements contribute to their marginalisation. The narrative then transitions to an analysis of specific government initiatives aimed at improving the livelihood of tokai. This section will highlight efforts to integrate these communities into mainstream society and the effectiveness of these initiatives in bringing about tangible changes.

Subsequently, I investigate the national policies directly affecting tokai, particularly those governing waste management. This discussion extends to examining the roles and rules that either include or exclude tokai from the formal waste management system, offering insights into policy-driven impacts on their daily lives. I also consider interventions by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and their role in supplementing or countering government efforts. These insights provide a broader view of the collective efforts to transform the lives of tokai.

Finally, aligning with the objective of answering Research Question Four, the chapter offers specific examples and case studies where government policies and acts have led to the exclusion of tokai from the formal waste management system. This examination not only highlights the gaps in current policies but also suggests areas for potential reform.

Through this structured exploration, the chapter aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the intersection between government policies, societal attitudes, and the livelihood of the tokai in Bangladesh. It is a journey that takes me from the broad strokes of policy formulation to the daily life and survival for one of the nation's most vulnerable groups.

Social and Policy Constraints

Bangladesh, a nation with a rich tapestry of cultures, communities, and social structures, stands on a constitution that enshrines the principles of equality and non-discrimination. Yet certain nuances and realities of tokai expose gaps between policy and practice. As I have noted previously, the Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, in sections 28 and 29, robustly defends the rights of its citizens. These sections strictly prohibit any discrimination based on religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth, ensuring equal rights and opportunities in

public life, education, entertainment, and employment. On paper, these commitments form the bedrock of Bangladesh's promise to its citizens. However, personal accounts, like that of Roksana, offer a stark contrast to this constitutional promise. The lamentations of tokai, underscored by Roksana's poignant statement, “We are being denied citizenship...”, highlight their feelings of exclusion and marginalization. While some marginalized groups, like the Dalits, have been given designated living spaces, tokai remain a hybrid group, often overlooked and excluded from government benefits. Their stories reveal a systemic neglect, contradicting the nation's constitutional pledges.

While Bangladesh has an array of national policies addressing various community groups and societal sectors, tokai often find themselves conspicuously absent. Notable policies like the Eighth Five Year Plan, National Education Policy, and National Health Policy, among others, often focus on specific marginalized or so-called backward classes but neglect informal workers like tokai (Rahman & Ahmed, 2023). Even in broader policies, such as the National Land Policy or National Social Welfare Policy, the tokai community's challenges and perspectives remain unaddressed.

The crux of the matter is the divergence between policy and lived realities. While Bangladesh's constitution and several national policies advocate for equality and inclusivity, tokai experiences suggest a different narrative. They remain an outlier, often neglected in policy considerations and marginalized in daily life. This discrepancy demands a more inclusive approach, where every community, irrespective of its size or societal role, finds its rightful place in the nation's developmental and welfare initiatives.

This discussion aims to provide a clear understanding of the tokai community's position within Bangladesh's policy framework and societal structure, and points to a series of significant initiatives undertaken by the Bangladeshi government and various NGOs to promote gender equality, women's rights, and social inclusion. While tokai play a significant role in the country's urban waste ecosystem, their contributions and challenges remain largely unacknowledged in formal policy documents (Khursheed et al., 2021).

Fazlul, from a government office, provides insight into the structured approach of Bangladesh's waste management system. According to him, local governmental bodies like the Dhaka City Corporation or the Department of Environment, hold the primary responsibility for handling urban waste, much like their counterparts in other South Asian countries. But within this structured framework, the role of tokai is absent. As Fazlul aptly stated, tokai, being informal urban workers, are not recognised within the local governmental laws and rules, and are thus

excluded from the formal waste management system (Khursheed et al., 2021). The quest for gender equality and empowerment of marginalized communities in Bangladesh has been a focal point for both the government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). As chronicled by a series of landmark initiatives have been undertaken to ensure that these groups receive the rights and representation they deserve.

In a progressive move in 1997, in the Union Parishad, the government reserved three of 12 seats for women members, allowing them to be directly elected by the voters. This was a pivotal step towards enhancing women's representation in grassroots governance. Recognizing the rampant issues of repression against women and children, the Prevention of Women and Children Repression Act was introduced in 2000. This act aimed to provide a legal framework to safeguard the most vulnerable sections of society. A decade later, the National Women's Development Policy was adopted in 2011. This policy was a comprehensive blueprint to ensure the equal rights, safety, and advancement of women. This Act highlighted the government's commitment to addressing the myriad challenges faced by women in the country. The Boishammya Bilope Ain (Elimination of Discrimination Act)-2014 was another significant legislative measure to ensure that no citizen faced discrimination on any grounds. Then, following the end of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals in 2015, gender issues were given prominence in the Sustainable Development Goals. This global agenda, with its emphasis on women's empowerment, found resonance in Bangladesh's developmental plans.

Dalit were not ignored in policymaking, and recognizing the historical disadvantages faced by the Dalit community, the government, on 29th May 2012, reserved specific quotas for Dalit students in educational institutions, ensuring they had equal opportunities in the realm of education.

It is evident from the initiatives enumerated by Khursheed et al. (2021) that there is a deliberate effort by various policy stakeholders to promote inclusivity, gender equality, and empowerment in Bangladesh. However, while these initiatives mark significant progress, the journey towards genuine equality and representation is unfinished. While the government and NGOs have addressed multiple aspects of waste management and other marginalized communities in Bangladesh, for instance, the specific issues faced by the tokai community are largely overlooked. Bangladesh has made strides in recognizing the rights and needs of certain marginalized communities, such as the Dalits, but tokai remain conspicuously absent from formal policy considerations, especially in the waste management sector.

The Solid Waste Management Rules 2021 provides comprehensive guidance on handling urban waste. However, the Rules focus on medical waste management, and ignore the role of tokai in

that management. The National Policy for Water Supply and Sanitation 1998 emphasises waste recycling and bio-gas production from organic waste, yet offers no clarity on the processes of waste collection, nor does it address the health risks and socio-economic challenges faced by informal waste workers. Similarly, the Bangladesh Environment Conservation Act 1995 and other subsequent acts prioritise environmental standards and waste generation control but lack provisions addressing the tokai health and safety concerns (Khursheed et al., 2021).

While NGOs like Waste Concerns, Prodipon, and Prism have been active in waste management in Bangladesh, their efforts remain confined to collection, transportation, and landfill disposal. The specific challenges faced by tokai, including their health risks and socio-economic struggles, are seldom addressed. Limited funds and a lack of direct governmental approval further hamper these NGOs' ability to support directly tokai issues (Khursheed et al., 2021).

The tokai community's essential yet informal and unrecognised contribution to Bangladesh's waste management system underscore the urgent need for policy reevaluation. As the nation progresses, it is crucial that all its stakeholders, regardless of their formal or informal roles, are recognized, supported, and protected. Tokai play a vital yet informal role in Bangladesh's waste management ecosystem, yet remain on the periphery of policy considerations.

Government Initiatives

Waste management, especially in densely populated areas like Dhaka, presents complex challenges that demand multifaceted solutions. Recognizing this, various stakeholders, from the Bangladeshi government to private entities, have undertaken a series of initiatives to improve waste collection, disposal, and recycling. A feature of Bangladesh's waste management system is the role of the informal sector. Several businesses and individuals, operating outside the formal system, engage in waste collection. They sort the collected waste and sell recyclable materials, integrating an economic angle to waste management. This not only aids in waste reduction but also provides livelihood opportunities to many.

The core foundation of any waste management system lies in effective collection and disposal. To this end, the government has employed staff specifically tasked with sweeping streets, collecting household and other types of waste. This initiative is complemented by the provision of large communal bins, which offer residents convenient disposal points. Additionally, to ensure timely transportation of waste to landfills, more drivers have been employed, streamlining the waste transportation process. Recognizing the value of partnerships, the government has also negotiated with NGOs and occasionally with private companies. These collaborations aim to enhance household waste collection, further consolidating waste at communal collection points.

In a move to improve public waste disposal habits, around seven thousand mini bins were strategically placed for pedestrians throughout Dhaka in early 2020. This initiative aimed to reduce littering and encourage responsible waste disposal. Another significant step was the adoption of the 3R Strategy in 2010 by the Department of Environment (DoE) and the Ministry of Environment and Forestry. The strategy, which emphasizes the principles of reducing, reusing, and recycling resources and products, represents a more sustainable approach to waste management. Building on this principle, the DoE embarked on an ambitious program to build two waste management plants in Dhaka. These plants, located in Matuail and Amin Bazar, will transform solid waste into compost fertilizer, with each having the capacity to produce 20 tonnes of compost daily. Such initiatives not only address waste disposal but also convert waste into valuable resources.

Bangladesh's multi-pronged approach to waste management, encompassing infrastructure development, public engagement, and strategic partnerships, paints a picture of a nation committed to addressing its waste challenges head-on. The involvement of both formal and informal sectors in this endeavour ensures a more comprehensive and inclusive solution to a complex issue.

Institutional Influences and Privatisation of Waste Management

There are systemic challenges faced by the tokai as a result of these changing waste management policies in Dhaka City. These challenges often stem from local authorities' attitudes and shifting city policies.

Many tokai have narrated instances of exclusion and neglect by the city authorities, as we have seen in earlier chapters. Their informal status makes them ineligible for support from the Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) and excludes them from other essential services leading to a sense of vulnerability. Local authorities, instead of integrating them, often sidestep their concerns. The growing trend to privatise waste collection and disposal in Dhaka has further exacerbated the challenges facing tokai. With private entities stepping into waste management, tokai find their access to public spaces, crucial for waste collection, increasingly limited. This shift not only impacts their livelihoods but also amplifies their sense of displacement.

The experiences of Kulsom paints a vivid picture of the unfriendly and often hostile attitudes of local councillors towards tokai. The election of a new city mayor marked a turning point for her. Once freely accessible places, like landfills, now came with entry fees, further straining her meagre earnings. The fee, BDT 500 for landfill entry, was an unprecedented change for her. Her account also sheds light on the physical oppression faced by tokai at the hands of city officials.

Incidents, like fires in the landfill, have been conveniently blamed on tokai, further maligning their image. Kulsom's personal ordeal, where she could not work for ten days following the new mayor's appointment, epitomizes the challenges tokai grapple with in the face of changing city dynamics.

The tokai community's plight in Dhaka underscores the broader challenges faced by informal workers globally. As cities evolve and policies change, it is essential to ensure that the most vulnerable, like tokai, are not left behind. Their stories and experiences serve as a reminder of the human cost of urban development and the need for inclusive policies.

Kulsom. stated:

মেয়র আসার পর প্রোজেক্ট নাকি ১২ লাখ টাকায় টেন্ডারে দিচ্ছে, আমাদেরকে বের করে দিবে অন্য লুক নিবো। পরে আমাদের ওস্তাদ কি করছে জানি না, কিছু দিনের জন্য কাজ করছি, আশে পাশের অনেক ভাঙ্গারির দুকান ভেঙ্গে ফেলছে, পরিস্থিতি অনেক খারাপ, দুই দিন যাইতে দেয় তিন দিন যাইতে দেয় না। ভাই এসব বলছি আমার তু আবার কুন ক্ষতি হবে না!

I heard that this mayor will give this project as a tender for 12 000000 taka to a private company. They are planning to get us out and will recruit new people... Our waste dealer has done something, I do not know, now we are working for few days. City officials have also destroyed some of our waste sorting shops, now the situation is so horrible, we work two days and sit three days without work. I am afraid! I am telling you this, I am afraid they will decide to harm my family. (Kulsom)

In Dhaka's rapidly evolving urban landscape, tokai, integral to the city's informal waste management system, stand at a precarious juncture. Recent whispers of the new mayor's plans to privatise waste management have instilled fear and uncertainty within the community. Rumours suggest a potential tender, worth 12,000,000 BDT, are being contracted to a private entity. The implications are immediate and profound: tokai, already witnessing disruptions in their work, now grapple with the spectre of displacement in favour of new recruits. Their once active waste sorting hubs face forced closures, as city officials reportedly demolish some of these centres. The gravity of their situation is not just economic; it is deeply personal. Their apprehensions extend beyond livelihoods, with genuine concerns for their families' safety. As they navigate this challenging terrain, their plea is simple: discretion, understanding, and the hope that their voices are not lost in the din of urban development. The intricate dynamics of urban development in Dhaka have left some of its most essential workers, the tokai, grappling with deep-seated vulnerabilities. Kulsom's story epitomizes the struggle of an individual tokai caught in the whirlwind of change and the looming shadow of privatization. Despite the risks Kulsom's decision to share her story underscores her desperation and the pressing need for her voice to be

heard. She candidly speaks of the self-stigma she feels, the overwhelming fear of retribution from government officials, and the helplessness that arises from her marginalized position. Her grievance against a government official demanding entry fees to the landfill, a place she once accessed freely, speaks volumes about the changing dynamics.

The introduction of privatisation, especially with the new city mayor's potential tender for the landfill, exacerbates her anxieties. She fears the entry of private workers, which could side-line long-standing tokai like herself. The looming threat of waste recovery shops being demolished further adds to her apprehensions, hinting at a possible permanent exclusion of the Tokai community.

Kulsom's vulnerability is emblematic of the broader tokai community's plight. Despite their pivotal role in waste management, their contributions remain unrecognized, leading to their exploitation. The essence of their predicament lies in the lack of sustainable exchange value for their work, leaving them in a continuous struggle for better socio-economic positions. However, their quest is not just for livelihoods but for recognition, support, and inclusion in the city's developmental narrative. A holistic perspective, which considers the integral role of waste in the community's economy and the tokai contribution to urban development, is missing. This study underscores the need for waste management plans to be more inclusive, considering retraining and other support mechanisms for the Tokai set to lose their livelihoods.

Government officials and NGO staff further elucidate this issue. The crux of the matter is the systemic avoidance of recognizing tokai contributions to Dhaka's urban development. Kulsom's story, while deeply personal, reverberates with the collective challenges of the tokai community.

Razaque describes the situation, this way:

ময়লার বাগারে কাজ টু একটা ব্যক্তিগত কাজ, এখানে সরকার কখনই গুরুত্ব দেয় নাই যারা এই ময়লায় সরাসরি কাজ করে জীবিকা নির্বাহ করে। তাদের কি সুবিধা বা অসুবিধা হয় এটা সরকারের দেখার বিষয় না। তাছাড়া সিটি কর্পোরেশন এদের ব্যাপারে তেমন কোন আগ্রহ নাই। কারন এরা সবাই নিজে নিজে কাজ করে এবং তারা সবাই ভাসমান শ্রমিক।

এর কারন এখানে সলিড বর্জ্য ব্যবস্থাপনা পলিচি বা রুল বলতে তেমন কিছু নাই। আমাদের সুধু মেডিকেল বর্জ্য ব্যবস্থাপনা রুল-২০০৮ আছে যা করা হয়েছে পরিবেশ রক্ষার জন্য। এখানে সমস্যা হচ্ছে পলিচি বানানুর সংস্থা তারা রাজনীতির দারা প্রভাবিত, তারা অনেক জায়গায় একমত হতে পারছে না, যেমন সলিড বর্জ্য ব্যবস্থাপনার দায়িত্ব কার হবে, সিটি কর্পোরেশন নাকি পরিবেশ অধিদপ্তর। ওনারা একমত হতে পারছে না।

Waste picking in landfill is an individual occupation/ an informal job. Here, government never considers the advantages or disadvantages for a worker's employment, income, and livelihood.

Even city council does not have any interest in the social security of these marginalised workers. They are self-employed and most of them are migrants and temporary workers. The main reason for excluding them is because we do not have a specific solid waste management policy or rules. We have only Medical Waste Management Rules – 2008, which is circulated entirely for the protection of our environment. Here, policy making organisations have a lot of problems, facing the internal influence of government politics and they do not agree on many of their decisions. For example, they still cannot agree will take the responsibility for solid waste management?
(Razaaque)

The role of tokai as informal waste workers, pivotal to the city's waste management ecosystem, finds little recognition in the corridors of urban governance. Razaaque's insights shed light on this oversight. Razaaque underscores a critical issue: the absence of a comprehensive solid waste management policy in Bangladesh until 2021. When the government finally introduced the Solid Waste Management Rules that year, it was a myopic approach. Rather than taking a holistic view of the urban waste management ecosystem, the policy remained confined to waste management activities, heavily influenced by internal governmental politics. In this framework, the contributions of the tokai and other informal waste workers to the urban economy were conspicuously absent. Razaaque highlights the City Corporation's reluctance to formalize the role of tokai. Despite their undeniable contribution to the urban economy—sorting and processing reusable materials—the Corporation's focus remains on the management of the open land (landfill) and its financial implications. The tokai's contributions, particularly those of landless migrant workers, are side-stepped. This neglect is further exemplified by the classification of the tokai. Labelling them as landless migrants and temporary marginalized workers, local authorities conveniently ignore the fact that many Tokai have dedicated years, even decades, to the same landfills. Some have worked for over 15 years, with one individual serving as long as 41 years. Such long-standing commitment contrasts sharply with their marginalized status in official discourse. Further complicating the situation is the apparent indecisiveness of policymaking organizations. While the need for decisive action is evident, these entities seem stuck in a quagmire of disagreement and uncertainty. The pressing question of who will guide the waste collection and disposal system remains unanswered, leaving the fate of tokai hanging in the balance. Razaaque's insights provide a window into the tokai community's ongoing struggle for recognition and security.

Razaaque also reported the waste collection and disposal process was ineffective:

আমাদের বর্জ্য ব্যবস্থাপনা এখনও আধুনিক হই নাই। এটা সরকারি অথবা কুন কমনিটি গোষ্ঠীর মাধ্যমে বা এনজিও এর মাধ্যমে এখন ও ভাল ভাবে পরিচর্যা/নিয়ন্ত্রণ করা হয় না। এটা ক্রটি যুক্ত হইয়ার পিছনের কারন আমাদের

এখানে ভাল কুন ইঞ্জিনিয়ার ব্যবস্থাপনা নাই, আমাদের বর্জ্য ব্যবস্থাপনার সম্পদ নাই, লোকাল সরকারের ও অবহেলা আছে, প্রাইভেট কুম্পানিগুলো কাজ করে না ভালভাবে এবং অনিয়ন্ত্রিত ময়লার ব্যবসা বেশি।

Our solid waste sorting and processing systems neither practice government regulations nor community-based activities or local non-government organisation initiatives. There is still an ineffective waste management system, facing limited access to an engineering system, avoidance of city authorities, limited resources for waste handling, privatisation of waste management, disorganised waste industry, and frequent informal job opportunities. (Razaaque)

Amidst the evolving landscape of Dhaka's waste management, the reins of municipal waste control are increasingly being handed over to private contractors. Razaaque sheds light on this transition, noting the financial dynamics at play: The City Council compensates these waste contractors based on the weight and volume of the waste they handle. Intriguingly, while these formal mechanisms are in place, many residents remain unaware of the door-to-door waste collection services. This lack of awareness stems from the fact that local ward councillors oversee these services, ensuring that collectors receive a fixed monthly compensation. This stands in stark contrast to the tokai community's economic framework. Rather than a fixed wage, tokai typically receive advance payments from waste dealers, intended to cover their daily needs. However, when it comes to the actual compensation for the materials they collect, there is no fixed rate. Instead, they are subject to the whims of waste dealers, who frequently cite market fluctuations as justification for inconsistent pricing. This paragraph provides a structured overview of the changing dynamics of waste management in Dhaka, highlighting the differences between formal and informal systems, as Razaaque sets out.

When asked about tokai access to work in public places, KI participant Fazlul revealed the contributions of formal city waste collectors to urban development by stating:

আমাদের বর্জ্য ব্যবস্থাপনা সম্পূর্ণ ভাবে পরিছন্ন কর্মীর ওপর নির্ভর করে। এখানে টুকাই আর সিটি কর্পোরেশন পরিছন্ন কর্মীর মধ্যে পার্থক্য আছে। সিটি কর্পোরেশন টুকায়ের কুন দায়িত্ব নিবে না কারন তারা কর্পোরেশন এর কর্মী না। এটা একটা গরিবের সামাজিক বা সমাজ সেবামূলক কাজ হিসাবে বিবেচনা করা হয়। কারন এখন অনেক কমনিটি নির্ভর পদক্ষেপের মাধ্যমে বর্জ্য নিষ্কাশন করা হচ্ছে। যার ফলে অনেক গরিব মানুষের চাকরির সুজোক হচ্ছে। এখানে ময়লার লোকাল মহাজন লাভবান হচ্ছে এই টুকাইদের অপরিবর্তনীয়ভাবে চাকরি দিয়ে আর নানা ভাবে নিয়ন্ত্রণ করে। এখানে টুকাইদের সামাজিক মর্যাদা এবং কাজ করার আধিকার হতে পারে তাদের জীবন পরিবর্তনের একমাত্র পথ।

Our waste management is largely linked with the lives of city waste collectors, street dwellers, and many disadvantaged people. There is a difference between tokai and city waste collectors because the City Corporation never employs tokai and they will not take any responsibility for them. Waste picking is a social action for marginalised communities in urban settings. Community-based initiatives have been taken to change waste collection, sorting, and disposal services. Consequently, many informal job opportunities have been created due to ineffective waste management systems. But unfortunately, a small local waste business [waste dealers] are

controlling the waste recovery system by employing tokai in the landfill... Social recognition and rights to work may be a possible solution to transform the vulnerability of tokai. (Fazlul)

As Dhaka City grapples with its waste management challenges, the role of various stakeholders, from city officials to private contractors, comes into sharp focus. Interestingly, amidst this evolving landscape, the contributions of the tokai community often get overshadowed. Fazlul, while appreciating the significance of waste access for city waste collectors, seems to miss its importance for tokai in the waste collection and sorting domain. He emphasizes the dependency on waste recovery, a process that, in his view, hinges on the existence of city waste collectors. His perspective on waste is that of an economic resource, a catalyst for job creation and entrepreneurial ventures. He remarks, “Waste is a resource; it helps to create jobs. People can invest and make money”. Echoing this sentiment, there is a growing enthusiasm among small private businesses to tap into this 'emerging business for the government'. New types of waste, ranging from animal bones to medicine tablet covers, present additional avenues for profit-making. While Fazlul acknowledges this trend, he envisages a transition for tokai: shifting from 'old waste' to capitalize on these 'new waste' opportunities.

However, a discernible gap in Fazlul's perspective is evident. While supporting the emergence of new waste businesses, the foundational role of tokai remains overlooked. The government's primary attention seems to be veering towards local contractors or companies, side-lining the tokai. In Fazlul's view, the recycling industry's survival is intricately tied to employed waste collectors, conspicuously ignoring the contributions of tokai. His narrative underscores a critical need for further research, and for government officials to take note of that research in their policymaking. A. Furthermore, understanding the ramifications of waste management privatization on the tokai community is crucial, especially given the government's apparent indifference to the benefits of informal waste picking in public spaces.

Fazlul also addressed the real situation of waste management in Dhaka City and the current condition of informal waste workers. He stated:

আমাদের ময়লা হচ্ছে সব একসাথে করা এখানে বাসা বাড়ি থেকে কুন ময়লা আলাদা করা হয় না, সব এক ব্যাগেই ফেলা হয়। আমরা ময়লা প্রতিদিন সিটি কর্পোরেশন পরিচ্ছন্ন কর্মীর হাতে দিয়ে দেই। তারা তার ভ্যান গাড়ীর মধ্যে সব ফেলছে আবার কুন ক্ষেতে তারা একটা কুইক সেগ্রিগেশন করে ফেলছে কারণ তার গাড়ীর মধ্যে বড় বড় ব্যাগ/বস্তা জুলানু থাকে সে যদি মেটাল বা প্লাস্টিক পায় টা নিয়ে নিচ্ছে। যেগুলো বিক্রি করে টাকা পাবে টা রেখে দিচ্ছে বাকি গুলা সিটি কর্পোরেশন এর ময়লার বিনে ফেলে দিচ্ছে, অন্যদিকে আমাদের টুকাই রা যখনি সিটি কর্পোরেশন ময়লা ট্রাকে করে অপেন বাগারে গেলে দিচ্ছে, তারা সেখান থেকে রিসাইকেলেবল জিনিস কালেক্ট করছে।

তাদের সব মাল বিক্রি করে ময়লার মহাজানের কাছে যারা ওই ময়লার বাগারের পাশেই থাকে। এরা খুব অল্প দামে মাহাজের কাছে মাল বিক্রি করতে বাধ্য হয় এবং এরা অন্য কোথাও এটা বিক্রিও করতে অনুমতি পায় না। এরা পুরাপুরি মহাজানের দ্বারা নিয়ন্ত্রিত, এদের কুন বাড়ির বা কলকারখানার মইলার ধরার সুপ্তক নাই কারণ এরা বাড়ির মালিক বা নিরাপত্তা কর্মী দ্বারা বঞ্চিত এবং লাঞ্চিত। তারা সুধু বাইরের জাইগায় মইলা টুকাতে পারে। এখানে মধ্যবর্তি একজন ব্যক্তি/গোষ্ঠী সবসময় সুবিধা ভুগ করে।

Our household waste is kept mixed in one bag. Most inhabitants do not sort their rubbish within a household. We provide all this rubbish daily to City Corporation waste collectors and they throw it all into their waste vehicle. Sometimes they start quickly segregating rubbish if they find any reusable items—for example metal, broken glass, plastic - because they always bring a large bag to sort these out in their vehicle. They are collecting items, which they can sell and earn money. The rest of it they throw into the city waste station in the municipality. On the other hand, our tokai collect recyclable items, while city waste trucks dispose all of the waste into an open landfill.

Our tokai sell their recyclables to certain powerful intermediaries [waste dealers], who stay near the landfill site. They are forced to sell for a low price and are not allowed to trade with outsiders. These are totally controlled by local waste dealers. They do not have direct access to households and industrial waste collection because these are restricted by house owners or security guards. Tokai rely on what has been dumped in public spaces. Middlemen are getting the benefit by managing the price fluctuations of waste materials. (Fazlul)

This is an evident in the common sentiment among officials, emphasizing that Dhaka's cleanliness relies significantly on informal mechanisms. Residents too, recognizing this, have begun sorting their waste at the household level. Despite being at the forefront of recycling recovery, tokai contributions go largely unrewarded by the local government. Razaaque candidly opines that the city's waste management practices are excessively lavish, attributing this to limited expertise in the sector. He believes this is why local City Council officials often overlook the invaluable contributions of informal waste workers like tokai. This neglect, coupled with the city's unregulated waste picking system, places tokai in a precarious position, making them susceptible to exploitation and heightened vulnerability in the urban milieu.

Mafoja, the tokai waste dealer, stated:

আমার এখানে ভাঙ্গারির দোকান আছে। আমি প্রতি মাসে ৪,০০০ টাকা বাড়া দেই। আমার এখন প্রায় ১৫ টা ভ্যানগাড়ি আছে ময়লা আনার জন্য। এখন আট জন মহিলা আমার সাথে কাজ করতেছে। আমি মাল পাটি কাছে বিক্রি করি। পাটি আসে ইসলামবাগ, সনিআকরাহ, কামরাংগিচর এসব জায়গা থেকে। তারা আসে মাল ট্রাকে করে নিয়ে যায়। আমাদের জীবনের কুন দাম নাই, আমরা ময়লা কুরিয়ে খাই। যার কারণে আমরা অনেক অসহায়, আমরা দিন আনি দিন খাই। আমাদের অনেক বিপদ যাচ্ছে। আমাদের এখন দুকতে দেয় না, আমরা মাল কালেকশন করতে পারছি না। তারা বলে দুকতে অনুমতি লাঘবে। এটা সত্য না মিথ্যা জানি না। তারা ব্যবসা বানিজ্য নিয়ে টাকা পয়সা খায়, আমাদের এখন খাওয়া দাওয়ার আসুবিধা হচ্ছে।

I have run a waste shop. I have rented a shop for 4,000 taka per month. I now have 15 waste vehicles [van gari] to collect materials. Eight women are working for me. I sell my materials

to the parties from Islam Bagh, Kamarangichor, Soniakrah areas [recycling company people]. I phone them to pick up and their truck drivers carry all the materials... Our life has no value, we live hand to mouth by collecting reusable materials. For that reason, we are helpless, we are passing a hard and miserable time. The problem is that our collection has been interrupted [by government officials], we are not allowed to enter into the project. They said that we need permission to enter. We do not know if that is true or false. Additional cash money has been provided to run this business, we are facing a lot of problems to maintain our daily meal.
(Mafoja)

Mafoja, with her decades-long association with Dhaka's waste management system, stands as a testament to the city's evolving dynamics. While she was not levied any entry fees to the landfill project specific to tokai, she still bore the financial burden of 700 BDT per waste vehicle each month. The responsibility of collecting this fee fell to a man whose affiliations remain a mystery to Mafoja. She assumes he may be connected to the local city corporation or perhaps the office of a local councillor. At the helm of this intricate system was a chairman (সভাপতি), and Mafoja's dues extended to him as well.

Mafoja's perspective on the waste business offers a unique lens into its changing landscape. Recollecting her initial days, she speaks of a time when the business landscape was more accommodating, with minimal competition and no bureaucratic hoops to jump through. This ease of operation has gradually eroded over time. Now, newcomers face a plethora of challenges. Reflecting on her long-standing association, she remarked, "I did not need any licence or contract to run this shop from others, now they are asking many things. I have been working here almost 40 years, so everybody knows me very well. I have finished my entire life here."

This sentiment of change and the challenges faced by the tokai community are further echoed by Md Maksud, of a local NGO. He observes a palpable sense of threat looming over tokai, emanating from various quarters: city officials, citizen groups, and the private sector. He stated:

অনেক টুকাই কাজ করে শুধু টাকার জন্য। তারা না পায় কুন সম্মান না পায় কুন সাহায্য সরকারের কাজ থেকে যদিও এরা ময়লা রিসাইকেল করতে আর শহরের অর্থনীতিতে অবদান রাখে। এরা অন্য সবার থেকে অনেক কম মর্যাদা নিয়ে শহরে বসবাস করে। যার কারণে কেউ তাদের পাত্তা দেয় না বা দূরে দূরে থাকে। শহরের মালিকরা শুধু খেয়াল রাখে কিভাবে ময়লা সংগ্রহ আর কিভাবে ময়লা ফেলে দিবে বাগারের মধ্যে।

Many tokai are working to earn money. They are not getting any recognition from local government despite contributing to waste recovery and urban economy. They live with low status and limited priority to other people. That is why most urban authorities, urban residents, and private sectors also avoid them. Urban authorities only prioritise waste collection [door to door household waste collection] and disposal [city bins to open landfill]. (Md Maksud)

Mafoja's story, set against the backdrop of Dhaka City's waste management evolution, paints a vivid picture of the challenges and shifts in the industry. As the city modernizes and systems become more formalized, the place of tokai within this ecosystem demands careful consideration and recognition.

Recent moves by city officials have made accessing dumpsites more challenging for many tokai, ostensibly a measure to generate additional revenue. Contradictorily, Fazlul. Says there are efforts to enhance earnings and opportunities for tokai. Yet, he candidly admits that tokai are "the last priority and have low rights to get access to all services". Their lack of recognition and class identity put them at a disadvantage, often pushing them towards local waste dealers for sustenance.

Laboni encapsulates the prevailing sentiment, stating, "Our life has no value because we are picking rubbish, we are helpless, we cannot go against them". Her words reflect the community's feelings of powerlessness, especially as entry into landfills now demands gifts or bribes. These amounts, 200 taka per tokai and 700 taka per vehicle per month, are significant for the community. Laboni notes that this is not an isolated incident; city officials have historically imposed such barriers. She laments the exploitative nature of the system, suspecting that the funds might be channelled to City Corporation officials or local political leaders. Like many in her community, Laboni pays the head of the tokai waste recycling shop, a central figure who controls the waste dealers and recycling shops.

This study's findings underscore the limited formal job opportunities available to marginalized communities like the tokai. Their urban identity contrasts starkly with their village persona. While navigating the precarious urban landscape, in their villages, they project a middle-class identity, a strategy to elevate their status despite some originating from lower castes. Their multiple identities highlight their efforts to transcend caste and class limitations through informal waste picking. Intriguingly, while many were not born homeless, urban migration led them to this state. Their continuous involvement in independent waste work aligns with their aspirations to maintain a middle-class standing in their villages. However, the community's financial dynamics are intricate. Many tokai rely on borrowing from friends, waste dealers, and NGOs. This borrowing culture has turned money lending into a prevalent income source within the tokai community.

This narrative offers a structured overview of the tokai community's experiences, challenges, and aspirations within the broader context of Dhaka City's waste management system.

Waste Picking Rights, Access to Work, and Uncertainty

Urban environments often weave intricate narratives of power dynamics, class relationships, and institutional frameworks. For the tokai community in Dhaka City, these narratives often culminate in a system seemingly designed to marginalize them further. This section explores deep into understanding the mechanisms and relationships that perpetuate this exclusion. Razaaque sheds light on the complex web of relationships that the tokai navigate. Central to their experience is their interaction with middle and upper-class groups, who wield considerable influence in the waste management domain. These include waste dealers, industry stakeholders, and waste truck drivers. Razaaque emphasizes, “A direct relationship with middle class/waste dealers is the only source available to tokai for their future livelihood and existence in the landfill.” This reliance positions the tokai in a vulnerable spot, often at the mercy of these dominant groups.

Many tokai begin waste picking at a very young age. The familial ties in this profession are evident, with young tokai accompanying their mothers or other female relatives like aunts or elder sisters. However, for some, this work is not a familial legacy but a refuge from personal challenges. We have seen that many women, particularly those who have faced marital disruptions due to divorce, widowhood, violence, or their husband's multiple marriages, turn to waste picking as a means of sustenance.

Razaaque said:

এই ময়লায় কাজ করাটা অনেকটা বেচে থাকার জন্য জীবন খেলা। এটা হতে পারে অনেক টুকাইয়ের জন্য একটা স্থায়ী জীবিকা আর তাদের নিজের সিধান্ত নেওয়ার জায়গা। এরা কাজ করে এখানে কারন এই কাজে এদের অনেক স্বাধীনতা আছে, কেও তু আর এদের ডিস্টার্ব করছে না।

Waste picking is a life game to perform and to survive. It may be a way of permanent living and making their own decisions for many tokai. They prefer this because it is freedom of work, no one controls them. (Razaaque)

The tokai journey within Dhaka City's urban landscape is a testament to their resilience amidst structured challenges. While the external framework often seems stacked against them, their spirit, familial ties, and sheer determination shine through. It underscores the need for more inclusive urban policies that recognize and uplift marginalized communities.

The tokai community finds solace in their work, holding onto it with a fervent passion. For many, the ultimate goal is to work diligently, save up, and eventually return to the sanctity of their villages. However, their journey is riddled with challenges, both systemic and societal. As Razaaque poignantly remarks, “Tokai are the worst victims from every sector of life”. Their

aspiration to maintain a sustained connection with the recycling industry is often thwarted by a layered system of exploitation. Dominated by middlemen, these intermediaries further marginalize the Tokai, depriving them of the full value of their labour and hindering their chances of upward mobility. This intricate network of power dynamics underscores the need for more inclusive and equitable policies that recognize and protect the rights of the Tokai community. Razaaque further stated:

বেশির ভাগ টুকাই কুন না কুন পুরুস মাহাজানের উধিনে কাজ করে , যারা আবার বেশির ভাগ আগ্রিম টাকা ধার নেয় এই মাহাজানের কাছ থেকে। এটাকে এরা মনে করে এক ধরনের কাজ করার কন্ট্রাক আর মত। কাজ সুরুর আগেই তারা এই টাকা নিয়ে মাহাজানের কাছে আটকে যায়। অনেক সময় মাহাজান কুম্পানির কাছে মাল বিক্রি করে অনেক টাকা লাভবান হয় যেখানে টুকাই কে তারা কম দিয়ে ঠকায়।

Most tokai usually work under male waste dealers who provide an additional advance loan to continue their daily work. It is a contract signed [daton] between tokai and waste dealers to start waste sorting and selling these to similar waste dealers. In many cases, waste dealers receive more money from the recycling industry by selling the sorted waste but they pay less to the tokai. (Razaaque)

Razaaque underscores the economic disparities faced by the community, noting the absence of a standardized government rate for recycling waste for tokai. This leaves them with no fixed income per hour, often earning a daily wage ranging from 200 to 300 taka—a stark contrast to the more lucrative earnings of waste dealers.

The institutional barriers extend further. While some members of the tokai community have managed to procure identity cards from the City Corporation, the process is not without its hurdles. A fee ranging from 300-400 BDT and a national ID card are prerequisites. Laboni's experience during the pandemic highlights the card's significance, as she found herself barred from landfills without it. Yet, not all tokai possess this crucial document. Many negotiate directly with waste dealers to start working, bypassing the need for the card. Additionally, children under 15 are exempted from this requirement, seen as extensions of their family units. Despite these challenges, there are glimmers of hope. NGOs have stepped in, focusing on the education and health safety of tokai children. But Laboni points out that these efforts, while commendable, often fall short of what is genuinely needed.

The narratives shared by participants paint a vivid picture of tokai struggles, especially in light of landfill privatisation. Many fears this move overlooks the long-standing contributions of tokai, some of whom have dedicated over 30 years to this work. The prevailing sentiment is one of uncertainty and fear. The emotional toll this takes is palpable, with some participants becoming tearful as they recounted their experiences. Amidst this backdrop, societal shifts further impact

the tokai. Tania observes a changing dynamic in waste sourcing. Household owners and their maids have begun sorting out reusable materials and valuable items, selling them directly to city hawkers in exchange for products ranging from food items to plastic goods. These hawkers, often mobile vendors moving from one location to another, represent yet another challenge to the Tokai's traditional role.

Tania stated:

আমি আছি চিন্তায় যদি এই কাজ বন্ধ হয়ে যায় তাহলে জামু কই। সরকার জেকুন সময় এই প্রোজেক্ট বন্ধ করে দিতে পারে। যদি বন্ধ হয়ে যায় আমরা তু ভাতের অভাবে মরে যাব। আমি এখন মানুষের বারিতেও কাজ করি নাই, সব সময় এখানেই কাজ করছি। আমি জানি না কি হতে যাচ্ছে। আমি না পারতেছি নিজের ব্যবসা খুলতে, আমার তু এত টাকা অ নাই , না আছে জমানু কিছু। আমার দরকার এখন পরিবার আর আত্মীয় কাজ থেকে সাহায্য নেওয়া এই ব্যবসা চালু করতে হলে।

I am in tension when this project has been stopped by government. If this project stops, we will die for rice. I never work as a maid servant to another house, I always work in the project. I do not know what happens. I cannot open waste business shop because I need more money and savings to employ others. I need my family's and relatives' support to run this business. (Tania)

The tokai community's journey is a testament to their resilience and adaptability in the face of evolving challenges. As Dhaka City's waste management landscape shifts, the need for policies that recognize and support tokai becomes increasingly evident. This narrative provides a structured account of the tokai community's experiences, challenges, and the changing dynamics of waste management in Dhaka.

Influence of Social Networks and Introductions into Waste Picking

In the midst of urban challenges and systemic barriers, the tokai community finds strength and support in the bonds they share. A web of social relationships underscores their daily lives, providing a safety net that is both functional and emotional. One of the most notable aspects of the tokai's social fabric is their migration patterns. Many come from the same villages, creating a shared sense of origin and identity. This shared background often extends into kin relationships. Sisters, cousins, aunts, and other familial ties bind them together, serving as a reminder of home and shared histories. These connections do not merely exist in the abstract; they manifest tangibly in the way the tokai operate. Many work in close proximity within the landfill, stemming from the same residence or locale, and pooling resources when sorting materials. As Laizo articulately points out, “It is a group or team activity where sharing is important”.

However, it is crucial to note that the community's work dynamics are not homogenous. While many cherish the collective approach, some tokai opt for a more individualistic or family-centric

work style. They keep to themselves, limiting interactions with the broader community. Yet, even within this subgroup, there's an unspoken awareness. Each woman, whether she works collectively or individually, is attuned to the routines and rhythms of others.

Laizo stated:

আমরা সবাই একই বাগারে কাজ করি, মাজে মাজে রিক্সায় আছি একসাথে প্রায় সময় হেটেই আসি। আমরা রিক্সায় আসলে ভাড়া ভাগাভাগি করে দেয়, একদিন আমি দেই, অন্য দিন আরেক জন দেয় এমনি আরকি। আমরা সবাই একসাথে আসি ,এসে সবাই গেটের সামনে দাঁড়াই, এটা অনেকটা আমাদের বন্ধুত্বের বা পরিবারের মত। আমার এলাকা থেকে আমরা ১০ জনের বেশি মহিলা এখানে কাজ করি, যদিও আমরা অনেকটা বাগার থেকে দূরে থাকি।

We sort the scraps in the same landfill and come to this working place on foot or by rickshaw together. We love to share the traveling cost. We all come here and meet in front of the main gate; it is like a group friendship/family member. From my area, we come more than ten women here together although our house is far from the landfill. (Laizo)

The tokai community, with its intricate social networks and shared experiences, stands as a testament to the power of community ties. Amidst the challenges of waste picking in Dhaka City's urban landscape, these bonds offer solace, support, and a sense of belonging. This narrative offers a structured and coherent exploration of the tokai community's social dynamics and the significance of their relationships in the broader context of their work and lives.

In the sprawling urban landscape of Dhaka City, where challenges and uncertainties abound, the tokai community stands out as a beacon of unity and resilience. Their shared experiences and collective struggles have forged deep bonds of community and mutual support. While they might be engaged in the seemingly individualistic task of waste picking, their interactions tell a story of collective strength and mutual benefit.

One of the most remarkable aspects of the tokai social fabric is their innate ability to leverage community ties for practical benefits. They are not just bound by shared experiences or emotional connections, but by a keen business acumen that maximizes mutual benefits. By pooling resources, they find ways to cut down on travel costs, ensure the safety of their children, access health services, and even establish informal lending networks for financial assistance. This collective approach to challenges, as many participants noted, transcends personal bonds and delves into the realm of tangible benefits. Tokai have a sharp business eye that aids in minimising extraneous expenses during their waste-picking endeavours.

Asma's account provides a poignant insight into the multi-faceted benefits of these community networks. Beyond the obvious economic advantages, her strong social ties have served as a protective shield. From safeguarding her against potential crises and providing a buffer against

physical harassment to offering solace from familial tensions, her community stands as a bulwark against adversities. Whether it is the menacing advances of inebriated men, the confrontations with security personnel, or even the occasional disputes among colleagues in the landfill, the collective strength of the tokai community acts as a formidable defense.

She illustrated how social connections and networks support her:

আপনি যদি মনে করেন রাতের বেলা কাজের সময় পরিবারের সদস্য যেমন জামাই, ছেলে মেয়ে এদের না নিয়ে আসেন, এখানে অনেক খারাপ মানুষ আছে, এটা অনেক মারাত্মক জায়গা, এখানে মহিলা মানুষ আকা আকা পেলে খারাপ কাজ করার জন্য অনেক মাতাল মানুষ জন আছে। আমি কখন একা একা যাই না কাজে, গেলে তিন চার জনকে এক সাথে নিয়ে যাই। আমরা আমাদের ময়লার ব্যাগ জায়গায় রেখে তারপর কাজ শুরু করি, আমরা আবার একসাথে বাসায় আসি। আমরা যদি কুন বিপদে পড়ি মনে করেন সাপ দেখলাম, কুকুর আছে, ভুত আছে, আবার মাতাল মানুষ আছে, আমরা খালি একটা চিৎকার দেই আর সবাই এসে পরে সাথে সাথে। আগে আমি আমার মেয়েকে নিয়ে আসতাম, এখন আর আনি না কারণ এখানে বড়দের সাথে শিশু রা নির্যাতনের শিকার হওয়ার সম্ভাবনা আছে। আমি মেয়েকে বাসায় রেখে আসি।

If you do not come with your family, such as your husband or children, at night, there is a higher risk of facing sexual harassment by drunk men or others in the open landfill. So, I always go out for picking with three or four women together. We keep our sorting bag in one place then start picking and come back home together... if we face any problems, like snakes, dogs, ghosts, or drunk men, we just shout, and everyone comes within a second. Earlier I used to take my little daughter, but now I have stopped taking her because little girls are also a victim of harassment. I can keep her in my friend's house. (Asma)

Asma's story is one of collective strength, mutual benefit, and unwavering resilience. Her community ties, built on shared experiences and mutual dependencies, are both a testament to her spirit and a strategy for survival in the challenging urban maze of Dhaka. This narrative captures the essence of the tokai community's strength, emphasizing their collective approach and the benefits it brings to their daily lives. In the complex urban tapestry of Dhaka, the experiences of women like Asma provide a window into the multifaceted nature of social networks among the tokai community. These connections are not just about mutual benefit or shared work experiences; they also serve as a crucial shield against the manifold vulnerabilities faced by women in public spaces.

The nightly shadows of Dhaka's public spaces pose a myriad of challenges for women, accentuated by societal hierarchies rooted in gender, caste, and class. For women like Asma, these public spaces become arenas of negotiation and potential vulnerability. Their safety is not merely a matter of avoiding physical harm, but also of navigating the intricate web of power dynamics and social prejudices. In this context, the social networks of tokai become more than just support systems; they are lifelines. These connections, rooted in shared workspaces,

proximity of residence, and mutual experiences, act as buffers against the pervasive gendered vulnerabilities, offering a semblance of safety and solidarity.

However, these networks also reflect deeper socio-cultural dynamics. The inherent hierarchy and subordination faced by many tokai within familial settings often stifle their agency and voice. Dependency on family, coupled with societal expectations, can curtail their freedom and choices, rendering them subordinate not just in the public sphere but also within the domestic realm.

Yet, in the midst of these challenges, there's a nuanced evolution of identity. Asma's preference for urban friendships and her reluctance to share her occupation with her village relatives sheds light on an interesting duality. While the city offers her a space to work and create a new identity, it also brings with it the weight of societal stigma associated with her profession. Her inclination to distance her urban life from her village roots suggests an underlying desire for reinvention and perhaps, a yearning for acceptance.

The lives of tokai women, as exemplified by Asma's experiences, are a testament to the resilience and adaptability of the human spirit. They navigate the challenges of urban life with a combination of community support and personal determination, carving out spaces of safety and identity amidst the chaos. Their stories are a poignant reminder of the dualities of urban life and the transformative power of community ties. This narrative explores into the complexities of the tokai women's experiences, emphasizing the role of social networks in their lives and the challenges they face in urban settings.

Political Engagement

Within Dhaka City, with its cacophonous blend of diverse cultures, economic disparities, and political fervor, the tokai community emerges as an intriguing anomaly. While the city pulsates with political activism and citizen engagement, tokai, shackled by their socio-economic circumstances and deeply ingrained caste-occupation identities, remain largely removed from these processes. For many in Dhaka, political participation is seen as a conduit for change, a means to voice grievances and aspirations. Yet, for the tokai, this avenue seems distant and unattainable. Their daily struggles for survival, coupled with societal prejudices stemming from their caste and occupation, eclipse any potential political aspirations they might harbour. The societal lens, often reductive and dismissive, perceives them primarily through their occupational roles, overshadowing their individual identities and potential contributions to the political discourse.

Moreover, their socio-economic vulnerabilities further compound their sense of alienation. Engrossed in the daily grind for sustenance, the pressing immediacies of their lives leave little room for political engagement. The challenges of their occupation, the societal stigma attached to their identity, and the overarching economic precarity act as formidable barriers, distancing them from the broader political narrative of the city. Furthermore, the political landscape itself, often dominated by elites and entrenched power structures, may seem unwelcoming, if not outright hostile, to the tokai. Their lack of resources, coupled with their marginalized status, potentially renders them inconsequential in the eyes of political power-brokers. For example, Jahanara shared:

এখন এই কাজ ই আমাদের জীবন , মরণ, আধিকার আর সুজুগ সুবিধা। এটা সব কিছুকে চালায়। আমার মা করত, আমি করিতেছি এই কাজ। আমার তু কুন শিক্ষা লাগে নাই এই কাজ করতে। আমার কুন রাজনীতিতে আগ্রহ নাই আগে পেট পরে সব।

Now waste picking is our life, work, our rights, and our opportunities. This shapes everything. My mother did this, now I am doing it. Where is my education? I am less interested in politics.
(Jahanara)

The detachment of the tokai community from the political processes of Dhaka City offers a sobering reflection on societal hierarchies and the barriers they erect. While the city's political tapestry is vibrant and dynamic, the absence of tokai voices from this narrative underscore the need for more inclusive and equitable political platforms, where every voice, regardless of socio-economic or caste-based distinctions, finds representation and resonance.

Jahanara's narrative serves as a poignant illustration of the intricate web of socio-economic dynamics, gender barriers, and the constraints of traditional hierarchies that hinder marginalized individuals like the tokai from participating actively in politics. Despite the progressive strides that many societies have taken towards inclusivity, Jahanara's story underscores the persistent challenges faced by women, especially those from marginalized communities, in asserting their political agency. A key takeaway from Jahanara's reflections is the pervasive gender discrimination that continues to permeate the political sphere. Her assertion that "I am a woman, I am poor and uneducated, why will they support me well?" is emblematic of the multifaceted barriers – gender, economic, and educational – that deter women from venturing into politics. Even in her village, where some women managed to dabble in local politics, the underlying motivation often seemed transactional, revolving around accessing basic amenities and services rather than genuine political empowerment.

Moreover, Jahanara's apprehensions about the public scrutiny and potential backlash associated with a political career, especially for women, shed light on the deeply entrenched patriarchal

norms that continue to dictate societal expectations. Her belief that navigating the political landscape necessitates appeasing various stakeholders to "avoid violence against a woman" is telling of the inherent dangers and vulnerabilities women politicians might face. Additionally, Jahanara's belief that "Politics is only for rich people, not for the poor" offers a window into the overarching class dynamics that further exacerbate the challenges for marginalized communities. The case of Uday Das (Islam & Parvez, 2013) exemplifies how deeply rooted caste and occupational identities can overshadow an individual's political aspirations, forcing them to retreat from the political arena.

However, it is also noteworthy that some members of the tokai community are gradually realizing the potential leverage that political involvement can provide. As Alisa points out, a few have started engaging with local political leaders or participating in political campaigns, albeit often driven by immediate necessities like food and cash.

Rina stated:

আমি অনেকগুলো সরকার বিরূপি মিছিলে গেছিলাম। আমাদের মহাজান আমাদের ওখানে অংশগ্রহণ করার জন্য জানাইছিল। সত্যি বলতে, আমি গেছিলাম তারা আমাকে খাবার আর নগত ২০০ শত টাকা দিয়েছিল। এটা অনেক জুকিপূর্ণ কাজ ছিল কারন প্রায় সময় মিছিলের মাজ খানে পুলিশ আর মানুষের মারা মারি লেগে যায়। এখন ও আমার মহাজান উৎসাহ দেয় এই সব মিছিলে যাওয়ার জন্য। আমি আসলে অনেক কিছু শিখছি এখানে গিয়ে এখন আমি জানি আমার ভুট দেওয়ার আধিকার আছে।

I attended a number of anti-ruling parties' processions and campaigns. My waste dealer informed us to participate in this. To be honest, I had participated because they gave me food for lunch (biryani) and 200-taka cash. It was risky to participate in this movement; any time police and some people start fighting in public. Most times my waste dealer encouraged me to participate in any procession. I learnt some about political issues and our right to vote by attending this movement. (Rina)

Jahanara's story, juxtaposed with the broader experiences of the tokai community, paints a vivid picture of the myriad challenges that socio-economic status, gender, and traditional hierarchies pose to political participation. While there are glimmers of change and adaptability, the journey towards genuine political empowerment for marginalized communities remains fraught with obstacles. This underscores the pressing need for more inclusive political structures that not only accommodate but actively uplift and champion the voices of the marginalized.

Over the years, the political landscape, as well as the socio-cultural dynamics within marginalized communities such as the Tokai, have witnessed significant shifts. Rina's observations provide a crucial window into these evolving patterns of political engagement among tokai.

A decade or two ago, the very idea of tokai participating actively in political campaigns would have been considered an anomaly. Historically marginalized and relegated to the fringes of society, the Tokai often existed outside the ambit of mainstream political processes. However, as Rina underscores, recent times have seen a discernible change in this trend. The reasons for this shift could be manifold: increased political mobilization efforts targeting marginalized communities, heightened awareness about rights and responsibilities, or even a broader socio-cultural awakening about the importance of political participation.

Yet, even as the winds of change blow, some traditional norms persist, especially those related to gender dynamics within the community. Rina's mention of the husband's influence over the wife's voting choices underscores the entrenched patriarchal structures that still dictate decision-making processes within families. Such dynamics are not unique to the Tokai and can be observed in many communities, particularly in traditional societies where male members often wield significant influence over household decisions, including political ones. Rina narrated:

আমার স্বামী এসব রাজনীতি সম্পর্কে সব কিছু জানে। আমি তার মতা মতের সম্মান দেই, আমি তার পরামর্শ ছাড়া এই সব ব্যাপারে কুন মত দিতে পারি না। আমি আসলে রাজনীতি সম্পর্কে আগে কিছুই জানতাম না। এটা সকল মহিলাদের জন্য খুবই স্বাভাবিক যে তারা রাজনীতি নিয়ে তেমন কিছু জানে না। এখানে কিছু নতুন আর অল্প বয়স্ক মেয়েরা আছে ওরা পারে নিজেদের মত ভুট দিতে আর এই নিয়ে কাজ করতে।

My husband knows everything about politics, I always respect his opinion. Sometimes I cannot make a decision without discussion. Honestly, I did not know anything about politics. It is common for all women here. Only some new young tokai, they have recently voted for a candidate of their own choice. (Rina)

Rina's insights highlight the complex interplay of tradition and modernity within the tokai community. While there is a palpable shift towards greater political awareness and participation, vestiges of age-old norms, especially those related to gender roles, continue to exert their influence. The challenge, therefore, is to ensure that the momentum towards greater political engagement is sustained while simultaneously addressing and dismantling the patriarchal structures that hinder true democratic participation. Rina's account offers a vivid depiction of the changing political dynamics among tokai. Historically marginalized and largely detached from mainstream political processes, the Tokai's increasing engagement in electoral politics represents a significant departure from the past.

One of the most striking elements in Rina's narrative is the growing financial incentive associated with political involvement. While the act of casting false votes is ethically and legally questionable, it underscores a deeper reality: the recognition of tokai as a politically valuable group. As a community often relegated to the socio-economic fringes, the allure of monetary

gains can be a potent motivator for some Tokai to delve into the murky waters of electoral politics. Yet, beyond the financial dimension, the changing political dynamics within the tokai community also hint at a broader socio-cultural transformation. The act of voting, traditionally seen as an expression of one's democratic rights and agency, is no longer the exclusive domain of the dominant groups. The fact that discussions about politics are now happening within Tokai families and communities signifies a shift in their self-perception from passive observers to active participants in the democratic process.

The evolution of political consciousness among tokai, as elucidated by Rina, paints a complex picture. On one hand, there is the undeniable lure of financial incentives, which, for some, might overshadow ethical considerations. On the other, there is a genuine awakening to the power and potential of political participation. As the tokai community continues to navigate these complexities, it will be crucial to ensure that their increased political engagement leads to genuine empowerment and not just transient monetary gains.

Summary

Using a conceptual framework informed by Bronfenbrenner's approach, this chapter delved deeply into the structural and systemic challenges faced by the tokai community, particularly the women working in the informal sector. Despite formal policies being in place, they largely fall short in providing the protection and support required by tokai. The increasing privatization trends threaten their access to waste collection in public places, which is central to their livelihoods. A recurring theme throughout the narratives of the participants is the pervasive sense of uncertainty. Whether stemming from inconsistent policies, societal attitudes, or impending privatization, this uncertainty casts a shadow over their daily lives and work. Yet, amidst these challenges, the resilience and adaptability of the tokai community shine through. Tokai, particularly the women, have consistently found ways to navigate these challenges, often relying on community networks, collective strength, and sheer determination. They have developed strategies to manage not only their work but also the safety and well-being of their families. The next chapter considers ways the tokai community exemplifies resilience, drawing from their lived experiences and the strategies they employ to navigate the complexities of their work and lives.

Chapter Nine: Findings - Survival Strategies, Empowerment, and Resilience

Throughout the course of this research, one thing became evident: while my initial inquiries were framed around the challenges faced by the tokai, their stories resonated with resilience, determination, and empowerment. The traditional narrative surrounding tokai often paints a picture of vulnerability and marginalization. However, when their voices are brought to the forefront, a more dynamic and inspiring narrative emerges. This chapter uses this perspective to address the pivotal Research Question Five: How do tokai harness resilience and resourcefulness in their daily lives?

Contrary to prevalent conceptions, tokai have been active in charting their own course, devising survival tactics, and advocating for their socio-economic empowerment. Their resilience strategies have not only been self-directed but have also caught the attention of various NGOs. For instance, in Dhaka City, the GUC has actively integrated tokai empowerment initiatives into their developmental projects, recognizing the untapped potential within this community. However, acknowledging the empowerment and resilience of tokai is not merely about celebrating their victories. It is about understanding the tools and indicators that have facilitated their journey. This research identifies key markers of empowerment and resilience, such as freedom of mobility, education and indigenous knowledge, financial autonomy, legal awareness, participation in public protests, and more.

In the subsequent sections, I will dissect these socio-cultural empowerment indicators, using them as a lens to analyse the lived experiences of the tokai. By doing so, I am not only to understand the underpinnings of their resilience but also inform policy-making processes. After all, understanding the empowerment journey of tokai can offer valuable insights into crafting more inclusive and effective policies. By defining socio-economic empowerment as a multifaceted construct – encompassing autonomy, self-confidence, financial stability, and gender equality, among other aspects – this chapter aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the silent strength inherent within tokai.

Indicators of Tokai Socio-economic Empowerment and Resilience

In order to understanding the daily life dynamics of tokai, it is essential to comprehend the underlying resilience and empowerment strategies they adopt in urban settings. Kajol, a member of tokai, provides invaluable insights into this aspect. Kajol's narrative offers a unique perspective on the interactions between tokai and local government. When asked about the role of the government in her life and the kind of support she receives from local authorities, Kajol's

response sheds light on the broader relationship between tokai and the administrative entities they deal with. I found her answer exciting:

গরীব মানুষ সরকারের সাহায্য এর আশায় বসে থাকে না। আমরা ভাল করেই জানি সরকার আমাদের কুন সাহায্য করবে না কারন আমরা জানি সরকারের সাহায্য করার মন মানসিকতা আমাদের প্রতি অনেক কম।

Poor people in Bangladesh, like me, do not wait for government help. We know well that the government will not support us because we know that the helping mentality and ability of our government toward poor people is limited. (Kajol)

Kajol's narrative paints a vivid picture of the challenges and resilience of tokai living in urban settings. She candidly shared the glaring absence of government support tailored for the unique socio-economic circumstances of tokai. Despite the lack of structured assistance or recognition from the government, Kajol's resilience shines through as she musters the strength to navigate the urban landscape, building her life and livelihood against all odds. She believes that with appropriate governmental intervention, her journey to empowerment would be smoother. Yet, she does not merely lament the lack of support. Instead, she acknowledges the constraints and actively seeks out her path to self-reliance and resilience. Kajol's sentiments resonate with the views of Razaque, the key informant from Dhaka City Corporation. He affirmed the absence of dedicated policies for the tokai, emphasising that the government's blind spot towards this community stems from their informal employment status. The fact that Kajol works informally for a waste dealer, devoid of any employment contract, further underscores her vulnerable position in the urban hierarchy. Yet she remains acutely aware of the systemic issues at play, especially the corruption that often siphons off benefits meant for marginalized communities like hers. This perspective is crucial, especially in a nation where women hold significant political positions, yet grassroots realities for many women, like Kajol, remain unchanged.

Kajol's story is a testament to the larger systemic issues faced by the tokai community. It underscores the need for a holistic understanding of their lives, capturing not just their struggles, but their resilience and aspirations as well. Kajol's experiences offer a poignant backdrop against which I can better understand the intricacies of tokai life in urban Bangladesh.

The Empowerment of Purchase: Tokai Routes to Autonomy and Recovery

For tokai, empowerment does not always come in grand gestures or sweeping reforms. Sometimes, it is as simple as making a purchase from the local market. Engaging in the act of buying, often considered a mundane task, holds profound significance for many tokai, especially women, because it is something they initiate independently. The seemingly ordinary act of

shopping unearthed the layers of autonomy, empowerment, and stress relief it brings to the lives of the tokai.

One of the evident manifestations of empowerment is the freedom to make decisions independently. The ability of many tokai to make purchases, both big and small, without seeking the approval of family or, more specifically, their husbands, is a tangible testament to their growing autonomy. This act of buying, whether of essentials or luxuries, becomes a personal assertion of agency, a declaration of their capacity to make choices about their earnings and their lives. Furthermore, shopping in local markets offers more than just material gain. The marketplace, with its myriad sights, sounds and interactions, provides a therapeutic escape from the rigours of daily life. It offers a respite from the gruelling work of waste picking, allowing tokai to immerse themselves in a different world, even if just for a while. Engaging in commerce, haggling over prices, or simply browsing through the array of goods can serve as a balm, alleviating mental stress and fostering a sense of normalcy and belonging. In essence, the marketplace becomes a realm of empowerment and recovery for the tokai. Their participation in the market not only boosts their socio-economic standing but also nurtures their mental well-being, highlighting the intertwined nature of empowerment and resilience. Through these insights, it becomes clear that empowerment for tokai is not just about monumental changes but also about valuing and amplifying the smaller, everyday acts of autonomy and agency.

For example, Asma shared:

আমি আমার স্বামীর অনুমতির খার খারি না কারণ উনি সবসময় ঘরের বাইরে থাকে, সে তার কাজ নিয়ে ব্যস্ত থাকে। আমি উনার সিদ্ধান্তের জন্য অপেক্ষা করি না। আমি কখন ও তার খার খারি না কারণ আমি এখন নিজেই টাকা আয় করি।

I do not care about permission from my husband because most of the time he works outside, and he is busy with his work. I cannot wait for his decision. I never consider his permission because this is what I am earning. (Asma)

In the socio-cultural fabric of Dhaka City's urban landscape, tokai are often caught in the crosshairs of traditional norms and their aspirations for autonomy. The simple act of purchasing from local shops emerges as a significant marker of empowerment and resilience among these women. While the broader societal structure might still exert control over their lives, these financial decisions showcase a stride towards self-determination.

Asma's reflections offer a deep dive into this transformative journey. By choosing to control her earnings and deciding where to spend them, Asma, like many tokai, challenges the traditional norms that have long tethered women's financial decisions to male authority. Asma's statement,

referencing the tradition of men being the sole handlers of money, underscores the weight of the societal expectations these women contend with. Yet, in carving out this financial autonomy, they not only establish their agency but also find a therapeutic avenue to alleviate the stresses that come with their occupation and societal position.

Rina's story further elucidates this shift. Her narrative, steeped in the lived realities of tokai women, underscores the profound impact of financial freedom. The ability to purchase, to decide, and to be in control of one's earnings becomes more than just an economic act. It is a declaration of self-worth, a manifestation of resilience in the face of societal pressures, and a beacon of empowerment that shines brightly, guiding many tokai towards a future where they are the architects of their destinies. She stated:

আমি অনেক কিছুই লুকাল পাইকারি বাজার থেকে কিনছি, উদাহরণস্বরূপ (কসমেটিকস, চুলের ক্লিপ, বালতি, কড়াই, চুরি, জামা কাপড়, মাছ এবং সবজি)। মাঝে মাঝে আমি অনেক কিছুই রাস্তার ভ্যান গাড়ি থেকে কিনি কারন ওরা অনেক সস্তায় জিনিস বিক্রি করে। আমার স্বামী সকাল থেকে রাত পর্যন্ত কাজ করে, সে খুব ব্যস্ত মানুষ। এটা আমার পক্ষে সম্ভব না সবসময় তার কাজ থেকে অনুমতি নেওয়া কুণু কিছু কেনার জন্য। তাছাড়া, আমি নিজে আয় করি, আমি চাইলেই আমার মত খরচ করতে পারি। আমি কিছু টাকা সব সময় আলাদা করে রাখি যাতে পরে কিছু কিনতে পারি যা আমি আমার স্বামীর সাথে শেয়ার করি না। আমার দরকার হলে আমি আমার বন্ধুদের কাজ থেকেও ধার নিতে পারি কিছু কেনার জন্য। তারা অনেক ভাল, সবসময় টাকা ধার দেয়। আমার শাশুড়ি মা এখানে থাকে না , তাই আমার তার কাজ থেকেও কুণু অনুমতি নিতে হয় না। আমি আমার নিজের মত চলতে পারি।

I purchase many small and large goods (for example cosmetics, hair ribbon, pod, hairclips, cloths, knife, pan, fish, and vegetables) for my family from local shops. Sometimes I buy these from street hawkers who are selling items door to door and they sold these very cheap. My husband works from morning to evening, he returns home at night. It is quite difficult to ask for permission to buy small things. I am earning so I can spend it to buy anything. I save some extra money and never tell my husband. If I need money, I can ask for this from my friends and neighbours. They are helpful to lend me money. My mother-in-law does not live with us, so I did not seek any permission from her about what I am doing or buying. (Rina)

In essence, for tokai, financial autonomy is not just about money. It is about reclaiming their identities, reshaping societal narratives, and building resilience—one purchase at a time.

Rina's life encapsulates a transformative journey, echoing the broader experiences of many tokai striving for autonomy in their urban lives. For Rina, managing finances is not merely about economic survival; it is about carving out an identity distinct from the shadows of societal norms. By independently handling money, making her own purchases, and not seeking her husband's nod for every expenditure, Rina underscores her emancipation from patriarchal

constraints. This newfound autonomy is manifested in her statement, “I am earning so I can spend it to buy anything”, reflecting her sense of empowerment.

The interplay of relationships also profoundly impacts tokai's empowerment journeys. Rina's independence is further amplified by her detachment from a traditional joint family setup, which often comes with its own set of expectations and restrictions. Her assertion about not seeking her mother-in-law's permission provides a peek into her quest for autonomy, even in personal spaces. Similarly, Razia's narrative brings forth the idea that smaller family structures can sometimes be more liberating, especially for tokai. With fewer mouths to feed and fewer opinions to consider, she can make swift decisions and manage her finances better. Her strategy to send her son to the village, while difficult, showcases a pragmatic approach to maximize her freedom and financial stability.

However, it is essential to note that this financial independence varies across the spectrum of tokai. While some, like Rina and Razia, have managed to carve out a significant degree of autonomy, others still grapple with the constraints of larger family structures and deep-rooted patriarchal norms. The overarching theme is clear, though: tokai are gradually awakening to their rights, challenging societal norms, and striving for self-reliance. Their journeys, marked by resilience and adaptability, offer invaluable insights into the evolving dynamics of gender, power, and autonomy in urban Dhaka City.

The Power of Mobility: Tokai Breaking Boundaries

The changing dynamics of women's mobility in public spaces in South Asia is noteworthy. Historically anchored in a tapestry of social norms, religious practices, and cultural rules, women's movements outside the home were often restricted and scrutinized (Bagheri, 2019). However, the rising tide of informal sectors and the need for paid work has significantly expanded these boundaries, particularly for women like the tokai. For tokai, waste picking in open landfills is more than just a livelihood—it is a symbol of liberation. This occupation offers them unparalleled freedom: the liberty to earn independently, the flexibility of routine, the absence of stringent regulations from superiors, and most importantly, the empowerment stemming from financial autonomy. But above all, it grants them the freedom of mobility—a simple yet powerful act of moving freely in public spaces, devoid of societal shackles.

Razia's story is emblematic of the transformative power of this mobility. For her, moving freely is not just about accessing public spaces; it is about exercising control over her life. The ability to walk outside, make decisions, interact, and even make purchases on her own terms is emblematic

of her autonomy. Her mobility has tangibly transformed her life, evident in her acquisition of assets like land and housing.

However, it is not just about the materialistic gains. For many tokai, this newfound mobility translates into a heightened sense of identity and self-worth. They cultivate relationships, foster friendships, and build networks, all while balancing familial responsibilities. Their movements in public spaces become acts of resistance against historically entrenched norms, subtly challenging and reshaping societal perceptions. In essence, for tokai, the freedom of mobility is a beacon of empowerment. It is a testament to their resilience, their defiance against age-old restrictions, and their journey towards self-determination. As they navigate the landscapes of urban Dhaka City, they're not just picking waste—they're paving paths of empowerment, one step at a time.

In their native rural settings, the socio-cultural fabric was intricately woven with religious tenets, often acting as barriers to women's mobility and independence. Stepping outside the home, let alone working in public spaces, was a luxury few could afford, both socially and economically. Traditional roles and expectations often tethered them to domestic confines, limiting their horizons. However, the landfill projects in urban Dhaka City offers them an escape, a silver lining. For many tokai, this was not just about earning a livelihood; it was about reclaiming their space in public domains. The very act of working in these landfills, often perceived as a male-dominated domain, became a protest against the restrictions they once faced in their rural abodes. The city, with its vastness and anonymity, provided a canvas for them to redefine their identities. Here, they were not just women bounded by cultural or religious norms; they were earners, contributors, and independent entities navigating the challenges of urban life. Their roles in the landfills not only ensured financial independence but also paved the way for personal empowerment. The freedom to move, work, and interact in public spaces became symbols of their liberation from past constraints.

In essence, the journey from rural villages to urban landfills is emblematic of the broader journey of tokai from confinement to liberation. Through their resilience and determination, they have managed to carve out spaces for themselves, challenging and reshaping societal norms along the way. In the sprawling landfills of Dhaka City, they found more than just waste; they discovered freedom, identity, and empowerment.

For example, Asma indicated “Waste picking is not only freedom of mobility or a way of making my own decisions but also it provides daily necessities [foods, education, medical services, savings, housing, and other mental strengths such as financial security and knowledge] for my family.” She shared her experiences working in the landfill:

সত্যি কথা বলতে আমি ঢাকা আসছি ময়মনসিংহ থেকে শুধু টাকা আয়ের জন্য। আমার কুন কাজ কর্ম ছিল না দেশে, আমার স্বামীর ও কুন আয় ছিল না। আমি আসলাম এখানে কারণ যদি ঘরের বাইরে কাজ করতে যাই, দেশের বাড়িতে মানুষ অনেক সমস্যা করে। আমি তাদের সাথে জগরা করতে চাই না। কেউ আমাকে বুজে না। আমি সব সময় চাইছি আমার পরিবারকে সাহায্য করতে কিন্তু তারা আমাকে বাইরে কাজ করতে দেয় নাই। আমি আগে নকশি কাথা বুনতাম তা বিক্রি করে টাকা বানাতাম। আমি আরও মাটির জিনিস, বাঁশের জিনিস বানাতাম (ঝুরি, মাটির পট, বাঁড়ু)। আমার বিয়ের পর আমার শাশুড়ি বলে, নতুন বউ নাকি ঘরের বাইরে তাদের উনুমতি ছাড়া কাজ করতে পারবে না। কিন্তু শহরে আমি চাইলেই সব কিছু করতে পারি আমার বাসা ও দেখতে পারি, কাজ ও করতে পারি।

I came from Moymansing to Dhaka City because of the ability to earn, to be honest. I did not have a job and my husband had very little income in the village. I migrated here also because in the village they make a lot of restrictions on me to work outside. I was struggling to fight with them, no one understands me. I always try to help my family financially and contributed but they never allowed me to work outside. I used to sew nokshi katha [handmade towels, handcrafts, bed sheets etc]. I also prepared soil materials, and bamboo made products (basket, clay pot, brooms etc). You know, after my marriage, they told me that a new wife never goes outside the home without her mother in law's permission. In the city, I can maintain my family and continue to work. (Asma)

The journey of Asma mirrors the transformation of countless tokai who have traded the shackles of rural conservatism for the relative freedom of urban landscapes. While the constraints of village politics and traditional norms sought to limit her aspirations and mobility, the city's expansive landfill became her oasis of opportunity.

The dichotomy between village and city life, as narrated by Asma, paints a vivid picture of the broader societal dynamics at play. In the village, the patriarchal power structures, deeply entrenched in cultural and religious beliefs, were omnipresent. Men, as the traditional heads of families, held the reins of control, dictating the boundaries of a woman's world. Asma indicated that the scarcity of jobs in the village forced her to migrate to the city and encouraged her to engage in waste picking. She mentioned that the boundaries and restrictions to work outside the home for women in village represented people still practicing old cultural and religious norms and values. She called this “dirty village politics” and said it started from a male headed family.

However, Dhaka City's landfills offered her an escape from these suffocating confines. In the vast expanse of the dumpsite, Asma found not just waste, but a world free from the prying eyes and judgmental whispers of village life. Here, she was not just a woman; she was a worker, an earner, and an individual. The freedom she experienced was not just physical, but deeply emotional and psychological. By coining her newfound independence as freedom, Asma draws a

parallel with Bangladesh's own journey to independence, suggesting that her personal liberation is as significant as the nation's.

Building relationships and networks with waste dealers further fortified her position, allowing her to navigate the challenges of urban life. These connections not only provided her economic stability but also a sense of belonging in an otherwise unfamiliar landscape. Through her resilience and adaptability, Asma carved out a space for herself in the city, embodying the spirit of empowerment and self-determination.

Asma's story is a testament to the transformative power of migration and the pursuit of freedom. It serves as a reminder that amidst the rubble of landfills, one can find stories of hope, resilience, and liberation.

Asma also expressed the difficulties of her first day working in open landfill.

আমি অনেক খারাপ অনুভব করি, সবকিছুই নুংরা আর দুরগন্ধযুক্ত ছিল। আমি প্রথম সপ্তাহ কিছু খেতে পারি নাই। আমার হাত পা সব কিছুতেই শুধু ময়লার গন্ধ ছিল। আমি অনেক সাবান ব্যবহার করছিলাম কিন্তু এটাতে কাজ হয় নাই। আমার এক বন্ধু পরামর্শ দিল পারলে বডি স্প্রে ব্যবহার করতে। বডি স্প্রে অনেক দামি। এখন আমার অভ্যাস হয়ে গেছে, ময়লাতে বসেই সকালের নাস্তা এবং দুপুরের খাবার খেতে পারি। আমার কুন সমস্যা হয় না।

I feel so bad, everything was filthy and smelly, I could not eat rice in the first week. My hands and body were full of smells. I used soap but it did not work. One friend suggested I use body spray. It is expensive. Now I am used to eating my breakfast and lunch sitting in tila [hill of waste]. I do not have problems. (Asma)

Asma's narrative provides a profound insight into the intricate relationship between adversity and empowerment. For many, the landfill signifies decay, filth, and the end of utility. However, for Asma, it represents opportunity, resilience, and a path to autonomy. Her initial interaction with the landfill was likely characterized by revulsion, mirroring society's disdain for such places. The pervasive odours and seemingly chaotic environment could easily deter many lesser persons. Yet, Asma's determination allowed her to see beyond the immediate physical challenges. Over time, she developed a symbiotic relationship with the landfill, deriving sustenance and purpose from what many consider waste. Her reference to the filthy and smelly environment is not just an acknowledgment of the landfill's conditions, but also a testament to her adaptability. By choosing to focus on the opportunities it offered, she transformed a potentially debilitating environment into a platform for empowerment. Her ability to adjust and find harmony in such conditions is not merely about physical tolerance but signifies a deeper, intrinsic resilience. Furthermore, Asma's journey illustrates the interconnectedness of challenges and strategies. Her choice to work independently in the landfill paved the way for her to develop other coping

mechanisms, demonstrating the ripple effect of empowerment. One act of resilience facilitated another, creating a cascading effect that fortified her against multiple adversities. In essence, Asma's story underscores the transformative power of perspective. In the face of challenges, she chose to adapt, innovate, and thrive, turning the landfill from a place of discard into a domain of opportunities.

Saleha also contributed to how working outside built her empowerment:

আমি এখানে কাজ করতে পছন্দ করি কারণ এখানে কাজের স্বাধীনতা আছে আর অনেক নগত টাকা আয় করা যায়। আমি আমার বিয়ের পরে একাই আসছিলাম এখানে কাজের সন্ধানে, আমি এখানে নিজের মত করে কাজ করি। আমি নিজের মত যাই, নিজের মত কাজ থেকে বাড়িতে আসতে পারি। আজকে শরীর ভাল লাগল না কাজে গেলাম না, কিন্তু কুম্পানির কাজ অনেক জামেলা সময় মত কাজ করতে হয়। আমি যদি ফ্যাক্টরিতে কাজ করি, তারা তু আমাকে যখন তখন ছুটি দিবে না। আমি এখানে সকাল ৬ তা থেকে ১ পর্যন্ত কাজ করি, আমি মাজে মাজে আমার স্বামীর সাথে জুম্মা রাতে এসে ময়লা টুকাই কারণ তখন অনেক কিছু পাওয়া যায় আর অনেক কম মানুষ কাজ করে। আমি এগুলো বাচাই করি তারপর বিক্রি করি মাহাজানের কাছে। আমি ১ তা বাজে বাসায় এসে রান্না করি, বাসার অন্যান্য কাজ করি। আমি সব সময় কাজের মধ্যেই থাকি। আমার স্বামী আমাকে অনেক সাহায্য করে এই বাইরে কাজ করার জন্য। সে যখন বাসায় থাকে না আমি ফল কিনতে বাজারে যাই আর প্রতিবেশির বাসায় যাই বেড়াতে। আমি নিজে নিজে ডাক্তার আর ওষুধ কিনতে পারি।

I prefer to work in landfill because there is autonomy of work and a cash income. I came here alone, after my marriage. This is my own independence. I can go to work and return at my willingness, today I did not feel well, I will not work but it is hard to maintain routine work in a factory. If I work in a factory, they will not give me leave. I start working here early morning at 6am until 1am. Sometimes, I go to the landfill on the moonlit night with my husband because we can collect many items and few people work that time. I sort these materials and sell these. I come home at 1pm and cook for my family, I do all my household work. I am working and working all the time. I work outside the home because my husband supports me a lot. When he is not at home, I go to open space to take some fruit and sometimes visit my neighbour's house. I can go to local doctor shop to buy medicine without my husband's support.
(Saleha)

Saleha's journey offers a glimpse into the contrasting experiences of women in urban and rural settings. Through her narrative, we get a lucid understanding of how the freedom of mobility, while seemingly a simple act, holds significant implications for a woman's empowerment.

In the urban landscape, the landfill, often perceived as a place of decay, becomes a beacon of hope for many tokai like Saleha. Waste picking, while laborious, provides them with a sense of independence and autonomy. The city's teeming markets, with their diverse array of items and services, offer tokai an opportunity to venture out, interact, and even indulge in a bit of leisure shopping - all without the prying eyes of societal judgment.

However, the rural backdrop paints a starkly different picture. The village, with its deep-seated cultural and traditional norms, limits women's mobility. For Saleha, a trip to the village market is not just about buying essentials but navigating a maze of societal expectations and judgments. The village market, which stands as a hub of activity and commerce for men, becomes a daunting challenge for women, especially those who do not fit the traditional mould of being married or accompanied by a male relative. This divergence in experiences emphasizes the profound impact of the environment on a woman's sense of empowerment. The urban setting, despite its own set of challenges, offers women like Saleha, Asma, and Razia a semblance of freedom and autonomy that the village denies them.

Yet, it is important to note that this freedom is not absolute. While the urban environment provides more opportunities for mobility and self-reliance, women still tread cautiously, often opting for the safety of numbers during night-time outings. In essence, Saleha's story accentuates that empowerment is contextual. While urban life offers her more autonomy, the shadows of societal expectations and safety concerns still loom large. Nevertheless, the very act of navigating these challenges, of choosing the city over the village, of stepping out to the market alone, embodies a silent yet potent rebellion against traditional norms.

Marriage Laws and Socio-Economic Empowerment Among Tokai

For tokai, knowledge of marriage laws is not just a legal matter, but a tool for empowerment and resilience. Their understanding of these laws offers them a shield against societal pressures, enabling them to navigate complex marital terrains with confidence and agency. Bangladesh's marriage laws, a blend of religious edicts and civil code, emphasize consent and set legal age thresholds. However, with no specific regulations against forced marriages and the persistent cultural practice of arranged marriages, navigating this landscape becomes a challenge. For the tokai, love marriages, often blossoming within the confines of the landfill, provide an alternative narrative. Rahima described how knowledge about marriage, along with practical experience, helped her make decisions about marrying off her daughter. She was able to decrease the rate of dowry and prevent an early marriage. Her ability to make personal decisions regarding marriage improved her socio-economic empowerment and resilience strategy. She was mentally released from pressure and anxiety due to already having information about the influence of early marriage.

Armed with knowledge about marriage laws, Rahima's could decisively act against the pressures of dowry and early marriage for her daughter. This knowledge, more than just legal jargon, became a tool of liberation, allowing her to protect her daughter's future and ease her own

mental anxieties. Yet, they too come with their own set of challenges, as Rahima's recounting of fleeting romances and unstable unions reveals.

The stark reality for many tokai is the transient nature of marital ties. Marriages, whether born out of love or arranged, often crumble under societal pressures, leaving many tokai as single mothers. These experiences underscore the urgency for tokai to be well-versed in marriage laws.

Alisa's narrative further highlights the significance of this knowledge. Understanding the nuances of marriage registration, the dowry system, and early marriages empowers tokai to make informed decisions. It offers them a semblance of control in a domain traditionally dominated by societal norms and family pressures.

She stated:

আমি উন্য টুকাইদের সম্পর্কে অনেক কিছুই জানি কারণ আমরা সবাই সবার সাথে অনেক কিছু শেয়ার করি। সত্যি কথা বলতে, আমরা পরিবারের চাপে অপরিচিত মানুষ কে বিয়ে করতে বাধ্য হই। আমি অনেক কিছু শিখছি জীবনে, আমার মেয়ের সাথে যাতে এমন না হয়। আমি মেয়েকে তার পছন্দের আর মতামতের গুরুত্ব দিবা। আমি তাকে স্বাধীনতা দিব কিন্তু প্রথমে আমি তার ভাল মন্দ বিচার করব। এখানে পুরুষ মানুষ সব সময় খালি তাদের ভালবাসা দেখায়, কিন্তু বিয়ের পরে তারা সব ওয়াদা আর তাদের নৈতিকতা ভুলে যায়। তারা শুধু আমাদের ফেলে চলে যায়, তাদের কাছ থেকে চলে যাওয়ার জন্য বাধ্য করে। কারও ওপর নির্ভর করা অনেক বিরক্তিকর, এটা আমাদের মেয়ে ফেলে। পুরুষ মানুষ এই কাজ করে এখানে সব মহিলাদের সাথে, তারা তাদের আগের স্ত্রী, বিয়ের কথা সব সময় লুকায়। তারা অনেকটা কুত্তার মত সব সময় এখানে সেখানে খাইতে চায়। কুখাও মন ভরে না। পুরুষ মানুষের মন বুজা অনেক কঠিন। আমার একটা বান্দুবি অনেক খারাপ অবস্থায় আছে কারণ তার স্বামী তাকে আর তার ছোট বাচ্চাকে রেখে পালিয়ে গেসে। সে নাকি উন্য কাথায় বিয়ে করছে। আমি ভাল করেই জানি ভালবাসার বিয়ে আর পরিবারের বিয়ে এটার জ্বালা কেমন।

I know a lot about the other tokai's marriage life, we often share with each other. Honestly, we are obliged to get married to an unknown person because our family makes a decision. I have learnt so I never do this with my daughter. She has her own choice of life and decision. I will give her freedom of choice but I will explore her choice first. Here, men always show their love and emotion first, later in marriage they forget every promise and lose their sense of morality and modesty. They just throw us out and we are forced to leave them. Dependency is so annoying, and it kills us. Men do the same thing with another woman and hide their earlier marriage and wife. They become a dog who always tries to hunt [taste] new things. It is hard to believe men's characters. One of my friends was suffering a lot because of her little child and her husband ran away from her. Her husband got another marriage. I know the negative influence of marriage, whether it is love marriage or arranged marriage. (Alisa)

In essence, for the tokai, marriage laws are not just rules penned on paper, but tools of empowerment, equipping them to challenge societal norms, make informed decisions, and carve out paths of resilience. Marriage, often perceived as a union of two souls, becomes a complex

mosaic of experiences, choices, and challenges when seen through Alisa's eyes. Her narrative provides a poignant reflection on the intricacies of arranged and love marriages in the context of tokai community. Alisa's marriage, arranged by her parents with minimal scrutiny of her spouse, encapsulates the challenges many tokai face. Such unions often suppress a woman's autonomy, thrusting her into socio-economic dependency on her spouse. Alisa's discontent is palpable. Yet, rather than succumbing to her circumstances, she draws wisdom from her experiences. She vows not to replicate the same mistakes for her daughter, indicating her determination to break the cycle and her yearning for socio-economic empowerment. Her views on men, moulded by her experiences and observations of fellow tokai, offer a stark commentary on the transient nature of marital bonds in their community. Alisa's perspective that men change post-marriage, often renege on their promises, sheds light on the vulnerability of tokai in such unions. The ease with which men in marginalized communities engage in multiple marriages, often unbeknownst to their spouses, further exacerbates these challenges.

Yet, amidst this bleak landscape, Alisa's resilience shines through. Her experiences have sharpened her understanding of relationships and empowered her to make informed decisions for herself and her daughter. Her narrative not only underscores the challenges tokai face in their marital journeys but also their indomitable spirit, resilience, and drive for empowerment.

Similarly, Kohinur described the influence of forced marriage and how it caused her daily sufferings:

এটা টু পরিবারের বিবাহ না কারন কেউ আমাকে আগে বিয়ের ব্যাপারে জিজ্ঞাসা করে না। আমি তখন ১৪ বছরের একজন স্কুলের ছাত্রী, তারা আমার মতামতের ধার ধারে না। আমি এখন ভুগতেছি, আমার স্বামী আমাকে প্রতিদিন ই মারে আর বকা জকা করে। এটা হইছে কারন আমার মা বাবা অশিক্ষিত, গরীব, আর তারা সব সময় আমাকে নিয়ে চিন্তিত ছিল। এটা আমাদের সংক্রতি যে উল্ল বয়সে মেয়েকে বিয়ে দেওয়া, আমি আমার মেয়ের সাথে এসব করবা না।

This does not mean an arranged marriage because no one asked my permission for marriage, I was only just 14 years, a school going girl, they did not need my permission. Now I am a victim and abused by my husband almost every day. This happened because of my parent's illiteracy, poverty, and the insecurity of girls. It was a tradition, but I will not do this with my daughter.
(Kohinur)

The intricate tapestry of socio-cultural norms often entangles women like Kohinur and Sriti, casting shadows on their autonomy and aspirations. Kohinur's poignant recount of her marriage, which she deems as neither arranged nor consensual, offers a window into the systemic challenges many women face. For her, the term 'arranged marriage' becomes a euphemism for forced unions, where the bride's consent is merely a formality, often overlooked. She poignantly

underscores the lack of agency many women have in their own life choices. Kohinur's narrative also sheds light on the societal mechanisms that perpetuate such practices - parental poverty, societal pressure, and illiteracy. The gravity of her situation is further magnified when viewed against the backdrop of existing marriage laws which, at least on paper, mandate mutual consent. Kohinur's resilience is evident as she transforms her challenging circumstances into opportunities for growth, harnessing her experiences to inform her decisions. Her journey resonates with that of many tokai, who, despite facing societal marginalization, seek empowerment and knowledge in urban settings like Dhaka City.

Sriti's narrative complements Kohinur's. Her challenges, rooted in traditional and ill-informed family values, manifest as early marriage, limited education, and early motherhood. The undercurrent of regret in Sriti's story underscores the cost of ignorance and the implications of socio-cultural norms that undervalue female education and agency. She stated:

কিছু মূর্খ মানুষ আছে যারা সব সময় মেয়েদের লেখা পরার ব্যাপারে অনেক প্রশ্ন তুলে। তারা অনেক কিছু বলে মেয়েদের লেখা পরার দরকার কি, তারা মেয়েদের অনেক উল্ল বয়সে বিয়ে দিয়ে দেয়। আমার বিয়ে যখন হয়, আমার তখন ১২ বছর বয়স আমি তখন স্কুলে ফাইভে পড়ি।

Some uneducated family members always ask question about why girls need to go to school, they ask what is the benefit of education? They suggest getting married early. I got married while I was only twelve years old and was a Class-5 primary school student. (Sriti)

Taken together, Kohinur and Sriti's tales offer a powerful testament to the resilience of tokai women. They navigate a labyrinth of socio-cultural norms, making the best of their circumstances, and in the process, redefine notions of empowerment and agency.

Generations of illiteracy have created a ripple effect in communities like those of the tokai, where the lack of educational access and awareness perpetuates cycles of poverty and limited opportunities. Sriti's experiences serve as a poignant illustration of this cycle: her parents' illiteracy led to her own educational deprivation, early marriage, and subsequent challenges. Her story highlights the far-reaching implications of illiteracy, not just in terms of academic skills, but also in terms of life choices, autonomy, and socio-economic empowerment. However, amidst these challenges, a beacon of hope emerges in the form of educational initiatives by NGOs. The establishment of tokai school near the landfill by a local NGO is a testament to efforts aimed at breaking the cycle of illiteracy and providing tokai children with the tools they need to shape their own futures. Beyond just basic education, this school also serves as a hub for legal awareness and health-related knowledge, equipping tokai with information that can transform their lives. As some tokai become more informed about legalities and family decisions, they

begin to exercise greater agency in areas such as marriage, birth registration, and financial negotiations during marriage. Sriti's narrative, juxtaposed with the transformative work of NGOs, paints a picture of both the challenges and potentialities faced by tokai. While the shadows of generational illiteracy loom large, rays of hope, in the form of education and awareness, pierce through, promising a brighter future for the tokai. Nasrin stated:

প্রতিটি মেয়ের বিয়ের সময় এই কবিন গুরুত্বপূর্ণ কারণ আমি চাইলে আইনগত ব্যবস্থা নিতে পারি যদি আমি আমার স্বামী বা তার পরিবার দ্বারা নির্যাতিত হই। আমি মাজে মাজে আমার স্বামী কে ভয় দেখাই, যদি সে কুন খারাপ কাজ করে তাইলে আমি তার বিরুদ্ধে বিচার দিতে পারব কাউন্সিলর এর কাছে। যদি আমি তাকে তালাক দিতে চাই, আমি এখন জানি কেমনে কি করতে হয়। আমাদের সমিতির আপা সব বলছে আমাদের কি কি অধিকার আছে। যদিও এখানে স্বামীর বিরুদ্ধে যাওয়া অনেক জামেলা কারণ মানুষ সবসময় জেকুন সমস্যার জন্য প্রথমে মহিলাদের দুষ দেয়। আধিকাংস মানুষ এখানে অপরিচিত। আমি মনে করি তারা বিচার করার সময় টাকা খায়। আমার মাজে মাজে অসহায় মনে হয়, আমি গ্রামে যাই বিচারের জন্য কারণ ওখানে আমার সাহায্য করার মত আত্মীয় স্বজন আছে।

This kabin is important for all girls during marriage because I can take legal steps if I am abused by my husband or other family members. I sometimes frighten my husband if he does anything wrong to me, I will complain against him to the local councillor. Even I know how to take steps in case of divorce if I want to. My NGOs school Madam, I call her sister, informs me of everything about our rights and power. Although here, taking any steps against my husband is difficult because people always blame the wife for any faults. Most of the people are unknown. I think they receive money to change the shalish [formal legal steps]. Sometimes I feel helpless, I go to village to take shalish, because I have a good relative there. (Nasrin)

Legal awareness can be a transformative tool, especially for marginalized communities like the tokai. Nasrin's narrative stands as a testament to the empowerment that can arise from understanding one's legal rights. The concept of Kabin – an informal dowry or monetary commitment promised by the husband to his wife at marriage – serves as a focal point in her story. Nasrin perceives the Kabin as more than just a financial agreement; to her, it represents a safeguard, a leverage against potential abuses, and a means to exert some control in her marital relationship. Yet, the broader picture painted by Nasrin's account highlights a systemic issue: the lack of widespread knowledge about such legal rights among the tokai. The difficulties she cites in discussing the *kabin*, the reluctance of the husband's family to honour it, and the challenges in determining its amount all underscore the importance of legal education and awareness. If more tokai were informed about their rights, especially pertaining to marital agreements like the *kabin*, they could better advocate for themselves and navigate the complexities of their familial and societal dynamics.

Nasrin's experience illuminates the larger theme of how legal knowledge can serve as a form of socio-economic empowerment. The right information and understanding of laws can equip women like Nasrin with the tools to better their circumstances and foster resilience in the face of societal challenges.

Salish: A Traditional Pathway to Modern Empowerment

The *shalish* system, while rooted in tradition, has emerged as a potent tool for empowerment among tokai. It offers them an avenue for redressal, allowing them to navigate the complexities of societal issues and familial disputes. But beyond the conventional understanding of *shalish* as a mode of informal adjudication, its significance for tokai expands into broader realms of empowerment and resilience. For many tokai participants, *shalish* is not just about dispute resolution but also about influencing change within their familial structures, particularly in addressing the behaviour of their husbands. The innovative ways in which these women are adapting and utilizing *shalish* underscore their resilience. Instead of relying solely on the traditional adjudicators or *matabbars*, these women are carving out their own space within this system, intertwining love, patience, sacrifice, and dedication to ensure the well-being of their families. This evolution of *shalish* reveals the adaptability of tokai and their determination to better their circumstances. By leveraging a system deeply entrenched in their cultural fabric, they are not only finding their voice but also empowering themselves to bring about change within their communities. As these women continue to redefine and reshape the *shalish*, they're testament to the fact that even within traditions, there lies the potential for modern-day empowerment and resilience.

For example, Fatema explained how she turned her drug user husband into a good husband:

স্বামীকে সুখে রাখা আর ভাল সম্পর্ক করা এটা একটা স্ত্রীর দায়িত্ব, যাতে সে ভাল মানুষ হতে পারে। সত্যি বলতে, আমি অনেক সালিশি করছি কুন লাভ হয় না। আমি এই সালিশি করে আমার স্বামীকে মাদক থেকে ফিরাতে পারি নাই। এটা কুন কাজ করে না। আমি খালি খালি আমার অনেক জামেলা নিয়ে শরীরের উপর ওজন কমাইছি। আমার স্বামী বিয়ের আগে থেকেই এই সব খারাপ জিনিস খাইত। আমি জানতাম না তার এসব খারাপ কাজ। সে আমাকে অনেক বার পিটিয়েছে, আমি কারও সাথে তার শেয়ার করি নাই। আমি তার বিরুদ্ধে বিচার দেওয়া বন্ধ করে দিছি কারণ কিছু মানুষ বিচার না করে আরও তাকে ওসকে দেয় খারাপ কাজ করার জন্য। আমি কখনও সঠিক বিচার পাই নাই। এখন আমি সিদ্ধান্ত নিছি যদি সে ভাল হতে চায় তাহলে এমনি এমনি হবে, বিচার দিয়ে লাভ নাই। বিচার দিলে সে আরও খারাপ হয়, সামাজিক এই বিচার তাকে ভাল মানুষ বানাতে পারবে না।

This is the responsibility of a wife, to keep her husband satisfied and build a mutual understanding to make him a good man. To be honest, I did a lot of shalish to keep him away from drugs; it did not work. I lost weight by taking on too much pressure. My husband started taking drugs before our marriage. I did not know his attitude. He oppressed me several times,

I never shared with others, always kept silent. I stopped complaining against him because some people encouraged him into bad things without doing a proper shalish. Then I decided if my husband realises and wants to be good, it will happen naturally, no one makes him moral by doing public shalish. (Fatema)

Fatema's narrative provides a deep insight into the complex interplay between personal relationships, societal norms, and the traditional *shalish* system in Bangladesh. While the *shalish* system is designed to address disputes within the community, its impact often extends beyond simple conflict resolution. Fatema's journey of navigating her husband's drug habits through the prism of *shalish* reveals a multi-layered approach to empowerment and self-determination. While the *shalish* did not directly offer her a solution, the process itself facilitated introspection and provided her with a renewed sense of purpose. By attending *shalish*, Fatema could articulate her concerns and actively participate in discussions, which in turn, bolstered her confidence and assertiveness. Her approach to her husband's drug problem, grounded in love, patience, and dedication, represents a unique form of resilience. Rather than confronting the issue head-on, she chose to work around it, using her influence as a wife to steer her husband away from his harmful habits. This underscores the importance of understanding and adapting to the nuances of personal relationships, especially in the context of societal expectations and constraints.

However, Fatema's experience also brings to light the inherent biases and challenges within the traditional *shalish* system. The system's male-centric nature, characterized by the dominance of male organizers and a tendency to blame women, often undermines women's voices and perspectives. This can create a hostile environment for women, making it difficult for them to seek justice or voice their concerns effectively. Yet, despite these challenges, Fatema found value in the *shalish* process. For her, the act of participating in *shalish* was not just about seeking a resolution to her husband's drug problem; it was an exercise in self-awareness, agency, and empowerment. By navigating the intricacies of the *shalish* system and leveraging her role as a wife, Fatema demonstrated that empowerment can be achieved even within traditional frameworks.

In essence, Fatema's story is a testament to the power of indirect influence. While the *shalish* system may not have provided her with a direct solution, its role in shaping her approach to her husband's drug problem cannot be understated. Through patience, love, and a deep understanding of her societal context, Fatema was able to transform a challenging situation into an opportunity for personal growth and empowerment. In societies where traditional systems of justice and decision-making hold sway, individuals often find themselves navigating complex

social dynamics. Fatema's and Laboni's experiences, though seemingly disparate, underscore the intricacies of these dynamics and the inherent power structures that shape them.

Fatema's story unveils a nuanced approach to empowerment within the constraints of societal norms. Facing oppression and abuse from her husband, she sought solace not in confrontation but in understanding. She believed that her husband's drug habits were the root cause of their problems, and if he ceased using, harmony would be restored. This belief led her to create a unique form of *shalish*, one rooted in love, patience, and dedication. Rather than seeking external validation, Fatema looked inward, developing a resilience strategy centred around understanding and empathy. By not sharing her family issues with outsiders, she hoped to protect her husband from feeling judged and further isolated. This approach is both empowering and reflective of the broader social context in which Fatema exists. Her emphasis on love and mutual respect as tools for resilience offers a potent counter-narrative to traditional modes of conflict resolution.

Laboni's story, on the other hand, sheds light on the intricate power dynamics that exist between tokai and their waste dealers. While the *shalish* system revolves around community-based justice, the relationship between a tokai and their waste dealer is rooted in economic dependence.

Laboni's trust in her waste dealer is both a testament to their established relationship and an acknowledgment of her vulnerable position. Her dependence on him for financial stability means she must navigate this relationship carefully, balancing trust with self-preservation. Despite their differences, both stories underline the importance of personal agency and resilience in the face of systemic challenges. Whether it is the interpersonal dynamics of a marriage or the economic relationship between a worker and her employer, individuals like Fatema and Laboni showcase the power of personal resilience strategies in navigating and reshaping traditional power structures.

Kulsom's narrative offers a poignant lens into the struggles of many tokai, navigating both societal norms and personal relationships fraught with power dynamics. Her experience illuminates the layered complexities of seeking justice, empowerment, and maintaining familial harmony in a socio-cultural landscape that often places women in subordinate roles. Kulsom's initial approach to her husband's transgressions—his attempts at a second marriage and subsequent physical abuse—was one of recourse through established channels of authority: her waste dealer and the local police. Her choice to involve the waste dealer emphasizes the crucial role these figures play in the lives of tokai, not just as economic intermediaries but as influential community members. The police, a formal institution, unfortunately failed to offer Kulsom the justice she sought, underscoring issues of corruption and the challenges in seeking help from official channels. Yet her determination to protect her dignity and ensure her children's future

led her to take matters into her own hands when she discovered her husband's attempts at an illicit relationship with her cousin. Her actions, both in confronting her husband physically and seeking justice in her village, underline a sense of agency and a refusal to be subjugated. By leveraging the influence of the village chairman and her own assertiveness, she was able to alter the power dynamics in her marital relationship.

At its core, Kulsom's story is a testament to resilience, the power of community networks, and the complex interplay of personal and societal forces in shaping a woman's journey towards empowerment. In her narrative, we see the embodiment of a woman's fight for respect and agency, challenging and reshaping traditional notions of gender roles and familial dynamics.

Momotaz: Breaking Barriers Through Community Justice

Momotaz's experience underscores the evolution of women's agency within traditional structures of justice in communities like hers. Her story paints a vivid picture of the challenges many women face in navigating relationships and societal norms, while also highlighting the power of community-based justice systems in effecting change. The practice of *shalish* has historically been a male-dominated space. Its role as a form of informal justice in local communities means that its decisions carry significant weight and can deeply impact individuals and families. Momotaz's initial inability to participate in *shalish* reflects the broader societal restrictions placed on women, limiting their voice and agency in matters that directly concern them. However, her journey is a testament to the winds of change. With her brother-in-law being a chairman, she found an entry point into these community dialogues, not as a passive observer but as an active participant voicing her concerns. This shift, from being excluded to becoming an advocate for herself, signifies a larger transformation in community perceptions and the recognition of women's rights.

The challenges Momotaz faced in her marital life, from dealing with an addicted husband to confronting societal prejudices about her appearance and educational background, are emblematic of the multi-dimensional struggles many women in similar situations endure. Yet, her proactive approach in seeking justice through *shalish*, combined with her perseverance, eventually led to a positive outcome. Her husband's transformation, catalysed by the *shalish* proceedings, underscores the potential of community justice to reshape personal dynamics and challenge harmful behaviours. Momotaz's advice to other women to actively participate in *shalish* is both empowering and visionary. By advocating for more women to engage in these community dialogues, she's championing a future where women's voices are not just heard but actively shape the outcomes of justice.

In essence, Momotaz's journey is an example for other women, illustrating that even within traditional structures, change is possible when individuals assert their rights and communities are willing to evolve.

Education and Empowerment: The Tokai's Resilient Path

The transformative power of education is a universally acknowledged truth, and its impact is perhaps most palpable in communities where access to it remains a challenge. The experiences of tokai underscore this truth, highlighting the crucial role education plays in fostering empowerment and resilience. For tokai, education is not just about reading and writing; it represents a path out of the cycle of poverty and a means to navigate the complexities of urban life. Fatema's assertion that education equips individuals with the ability to adapt to adverse situations encapsulates its multifaceted benefits. It is not just about academic knowledge but also about the life skills, critical thinking, and problem-solving abilities that come with it.

However, the journey towards education is not without its hurdles. As highlighted by Nasrin's account, socio-economic barriers often disproportionately affect girls, who bear the dual burden of household responsibilities and work in the landfill. This gender disparity in access to education not only perpetuates existing inequalities but also deprives communities of the potential contributions of empowered women.

While formal education remains an aspiration for many, tokai also possesses a wealth of indigenous knowledge. This local knowledge, derived from generations of lived experiences, is a testament to their adaptability and resilience. From understanding the intricacies of waste sorting to navigating the socio-economic dynamics of urban life, tokai draw upon this indigenous knowledge to confront and overcome daily challenges. Moreover, the value of these lived experiences and the knowledge they encapsulate is not just limited to survival. When harnessed effectively, they can serve as a foundation for community-led initiatives and interventions, offering insights that are grounded in reality and tailored to the community's unique needs. The stories of tokai, as encapsulated by the narratives of Fatema, Nasrin, and others, serve as a poignant reminder of the transformative power of education. They also underscore the importance of recognizing and valuing indigenous knowledge. Together, these two pillars - formal education and indigenous knowledge - can pave the way for a more empowered and resilient tokai, capable of confronting and overcoming the myriad challenges they face. Nasrin began waste picking work and stopped going to school at an early age:

আমি যখন ছোট ছিলাম তখন এখানে কাজ করতে আসছি। আমি আসলে মনে করতে পারছি না তখন আমার বয়স কত ছিল। আমার ছোট ভাই তখন ক্লাস ২ তে পড়ত। আমি তার থেকে তিন বছরের বড়। আমার বাবার ময়লার ব্যবসা ছিল আর সে বাসা বাড়ির ময়লা আনত। আমি আর আমার মা এগুলো বাছাই করে দোকানে বিক্রি করতাম। আমার মা মানুষের বাসায় বাসায় কাজ করত। আমি সব সময় ছোট ভাইকে দেখা শুনা করতাম আর বাছাইয়ের কাজে যেমন বুতুল, গ্লাস, কাগজ, বাঙ্গা মুবাইল এগুলো আলাদা করতাম। আমার ভাই স্কুলে গিয়েছিল, সে ক্লাস নাইন পর্যন্ত পড়েছে। আমার স্কুলে যাওয়ার সময় ছিল না। আমার মা বাবা কখন আমাকে স্কুলে যেতে বলে নাই। আমি অনেক সময় ময়লার জিনিস যেগুলো কাজে লাগবে সেগুলো ড্রেনের পানিতে ধুয়ে রুদে সুকাতাম পরে বিক্রি করতাম। আমি এখন সকল পরিবেশে সাথে মানানসই। আমি এই ময়লার মধ্যে হেটে হেটে কাজ করা, চলা ফেরা করা, খেলা করা পছন্দ করি। স্কুলে যাওয়া আমার জন্য একটা স্বপ্নের মত ছিল।

I came to work here while I was a little girl. I cannot remind my age at that time. I can remember only that my younger brother was in Class-2 and studied in school. I was three years older than him. My father had a waste business and he used to collect all household rubbish. My mother and I sorted these for selling to local shops. My mother also worked as a maidservant in different houses, I used to take care of my brother and sometimes sort out recycling plastic bottle, glass, paper, broken mobiles, and other things with my mother. My brother started schooling and he continued to class nine. I did not have time to go to school. My parents never encouraged me to have an education. I washed a number of reused items in local drainage and cleaned these and put them in the sunlight for drying. Now I am used to adapting to all bad situations. I loved to play and walk around this area. Honestly, schooling was a dream for me.
(Nasrin)

The stories of Nasrin and her fellow tokai unveil a broader systemic issue surrounding the accessibility of education for girls in their community. Within these stories lie the intricate dynamics of gender, poverty, and societal expectations that play pivotal roles in shaping their lives. The account paints a vivid picture of the stark gender disparity in education within tokai. Girls, much more so than boys, find themselves ensnared in a web of socio-economic barriers that deter them from accessing formal education. These barriers are multifaceted, stemming from deeply entrenched patriarchal norms that prioritize boys' education and relegating girls to domestic and labour-intensive roles. Nasrin's narrative is emblematic of this disparity. While boys in the community might have a glimmer of hope to escape the landfill's clutches through education, girls like Nasrin are often left with no choice but to follow in their mothers' footsteps, picking waste from a tender age. This not only deprives them of their childhood but also perpetuates a cycle where they remain trapped in the same socio-economic circumstances as their parents.

However, Nasrin's story is not just one of despair; it is also a testament to human resilience. Despite the dire circumstances, she speaks fondly of her childhood, playing with her peers amidst the landfill's harsh environment. Moreover, her determination to self-educate, even if it is

just basic numeracy and writing her name, highlights an intrinsic drive to better oneself, even in the face of overwhelming adversity. Her narrative also sheds light on the nuanced dynamics within families. Nasrin's mother, despite the family's financial constraints, recognized the importance of education and tried to enrol her daughter in school. Yet, these efforts were thwarted by her father's reluctance, revealing the complex interplay of gender norms and economic realities that dictate decision-making within households.

Nasrin's journey, while unique in its details, represents the broader struggles faced by many tokai girls. Their quest for education is not merely a pursuit of academic knowledge; it is a fight for a better life, for breaking free from the chains of poverty, and for challenging deeply rooted gender norms. The resilience and determination exhibited by Nasrin and many like her serve as a clarion call for systemic interventions that ensure every child, irrespective of their gender or socio-economic background, has access to the transformative power of education.

Fatema's Sacrifice: The Weight of Gender Roles and Familial Obligations

The poignant tale of Fatema unfolds the multifaceted challenges faced by many girls in tokai. Her story interlaces gender dynamics, familial obligations, and economic hardships, painting a vivid image of the sacrifices many girls make for their families. Fatema's narrative underscores the gendered dynamics deeply rooted in many South Asian cultures, where sons are often prioritized over daughters. This is evident in Fatema's own life trajectory, where she was sidelined for her brother's education. While he was given the opportunity to study and presumably uplift the family's socio-economic status, Fatema was relegated to the landfill, mirroring the experiences of countless girls in similar circumstances. The expectations placed on her were two-fold; she was not only expected to relinquish her dreams for her brother but also to shoulder the familial burdens once he moved away. The story further accentuates the vicious cycle of poverty and lack of education. Without a formal education, Fatema was confined to the landfill, a place offering limited economic prospects. The economic instability of her family was exacerbated by her father's paralysis and her mother's declining health. This placed an even greater financial strain on Fatema, forcing her to work longer hours in the landfill, further entrenching her in the very cycle she sought to break out of.

A significant aspect of Fatema's tale is her brother's detachment from the family after his marriage. Despite benefiting from the sacrifices of his sister and parents, he distanced himself, offering no support to his aging parents. This points to a broader societal issue, where even after receiving education, many fail to fulfil their familial and moral obligations, further underscoring the importance of instilling values alongside education. Fatema's journey is a poignant reminder

of the complexities of gender, family, and economic challenges faced by many in marginalized communities. While education is often heralded as the panacea for socio-economic upliftment, Fatema's story highlights that it is not merely about access to education but about ensuring that the benefits of education permeate the entire family and community. Her sacrifices and resilience underscore the urgent need for systemic interventions that provide both educational and economic opportunities for all, irrespective of gender. She stated:

আমার শাশুড়ি বলেছিল আমি যদি আমার মা বাবা কে সাহায্য করি তাহলে নাকি আমার স্বামী আমার সাথে আর জুগাজুগ রাখবে না। আমি শিক্ষিত না তাই বলে কি আমি আমার বাবা মাকে ভুলে যাব। আমার তাদের প্রতি একটা দায়িত্ব আছে না। আমার ভাই তু একটা স্বার্থপর, সে তু বিয়ের পরে আমার মা বা বাকে ভুলে গেছে। আমি চাইলেই আমার মা বাবার ছেড়ে দিতে পারি না। আমার দুইটাই পরিবার সমান চুখে দেখি। আমার স্বামী খুশি না আমি যদি কাওকে সাহায্য করি। সে আমার শাশুড়ি কথায় উঠে

My mother-in-law told me if I continue to support my parents, my husband will not contact me. I am not educated, that does not mean I will forget my own parents. I am responsible for taking care of them. My brother is a selfish and a bad man. He forgot everything after his marriage, I cannot do any wrong with my parents. Both families are my family. My husband is not happy. He is used to obeying his mother's advice. If I am educated, everyone will pay attention to my words and understand my feelings. (Fatema)

In the heart of South Asia, the story of Fatema exposes the stark realities of educational disparities, societal expectations, and deeply ingrained prejudices, even within familial structures. The irony in Fatema's life is palpable. While her husband's family is educated, she faces discrimination and condescension due to her lack of formal education. Her mother-in-law's discriminatory treatment, based on Fatema's illiteracy and perceived lack of beauty, highlights the deeply entrenched societal values that prioritize education and physical appearance. The irony is further heightened when considering that the Bangladesh government has initiated efforts to provide free education, especially to girls. Despite these initiatives, many like Fatema remain trapped in the quagmire of ignorance due to systemic failures and socio-economic constraints. Fatema's experience with her mother-in-law is emblematic of the broader societal prejudice against the uneducated. Being uneducated is not merely seen as a lack of formal schooling but is associated with a host of other negative connotations, including being uncouth, unsophisticated, or even morally inferior. Fatema's mother-in-law's actions—hiding Fatema's identity and differentiating between her sons' wives based on their educational status—underline the profound societal stigma attached to illiteracy.

While the Bangladesh government's efforts to promote education, especially among girls, are commendable, Fatema's story underscores the chasm between policy initiatives and ground

realities. The provision of free books and compulsory primary education, while significant, needs to be complemented with broader socio-economic interventions. Factors like economic hardships, early marriages, and deeply rooted cultural practices like dowry often overshadow the government's educational initiatives. For many families, the immediate economic needs outweigh the long-term benefits of education, leading to school dropouts.

Fatema's tale is a sobering reminder of the multifaceted challenges faced by many in South Asia. While policy interventions like free education are a step in the right direction, they need to be buttressed with comprehensive societal reforms. Addressing deep-seated prejudices, raising awareness about the importance of education, and providing economic support to vulnerable families are imperative. Only then can stories like Fatema's move from being a tragic norm to a relic of the past.

This section has considered how participants think about the importance of education in waste picking work. Laboni's words sum up their motivation and knowledge:

ময়লাতে কাজ করতে আমার কুন পড়াশুনা জানা লাগে নাই। আমি তু কখন স্কুলে যাই নাই। আমি কাজ করি, টাকা কামাই। এটা ছুট কাজ, কুন অফিসিয়াল কাজ না। আমি আমার পরিবারের জন্য খাবারের ব্যবস্থা করি, আমার পড়াশুনার সার্টিফিকেট দিয়ে কি হবে।

I did not need education to join waste picking, I never go to school. I am earning and surviving now. This is a lower job not an office work. I keep food on the table for my family by working, regardless of my school certificate. (Laboni)

The narrative of the tokai, the waste pickers of Bangladesh, offers a unique perspective on survival, resilience, and the role of local knowledge in navigating urban landscapes. Despite the Bangladeshi government's efforts to promote free education, many tokai continue to live outside the purview of formal education, relying instead on their indigenous skills and knowledge to sustain themselves in the cities. While formal education is undoubtedly a powerful tool for empowerment and socio-economic mobility, the tokai story underscores the significance of local knowledge. These waste pickers have honed skills that are directly relevant to their environment and survival needs. Their ability to identify recyclable materials, negotiate prices with waste dealers, and navigate the intricate socio-economic dynamics of the landfill sites speaks to their deep-rooted understanding of their trade and environment. This local knowledge, accrued over years of hands-on experience, is their capital, enabling them to thrive in an otherwise challenging urban milieu.

The urban environments of Bangladesh's cities present a dichotomy for the tokai. On one hand, the city offers them relative freedom from traditional socio-cultural constraints. Unlike rural

settings, where gender roles are more rigidly defined, the city's landfills do not discriminate. Here, both men and women can work as waste pickers, free from the watchful eyes of a traditionally conservative society. This urban freedom is both a testament to the city's cosmopolitanism and a reflection of the desperation that drives people to overlook societal norms in the face of economic need. On the other hand, the city also poses its challenges. The absence of formal education means many tokai are confined to low-paying jobs, perpetuating a cycle of poverty. Additionally, while they might be free from traditional rural restrictions, they face urban challenges such as exploitation by waste dealers, exposure to health hazards, and the constant threat of eviction from municipal authorities.

The tales of tokai highlight the complexities of urban survival in developing nations. It underscores the need for holistic approaches to development, approaches that recognise the value of local knowledge while also emphasizing the importance of formal education. As Bangladesh marches towards a brighter future, the story of its waste pickers serves as a poignant reminder of the myriad challenges that lie ahead and the indomitable spirit of its people. Laboni described the situation:

আপনি যদি গ্রামে থাকেন, দেখবেন অবিবাহিত মেয়েরা সব সময় ঘরে মধ্যে থাকে, তারা ঘরের বাইরে কাজ করার উন্মতি পায় না কারন কাজ করলে সমাজ তাকে ছুট চুখে দেখে। এটা অনেক লজ্জাকর যে শুধু অল্প বয়সের ছেলেরা কাজ করবে আর মেয়েরা ঘরে বসে থাকবে। মেয়েরা পরিবারের আয়ে কুন অবদান রাখবে না কারন গ্রামের মানুষ এই কাজ করাকে নিয়ে অনেক জামেলা পাকায়, মনে করেন যদি কুন মেয়ে ঘরের বাইরে কাজ করে বিয়ের সময় জামাই পেতে সমস্যা হয়। এটা অনেক তা পরিবারের সম্মান আর প্রাচীন চর্চা হয়ে গেছে।

If you live in the village, unmarried girls always stay at home, they are not allowed to work outside because people in society look down on them. It is shameful that only boys are working outside the home. Girls cannot help the family income because village people always make this difficult or a barrier during their marriage particularly to find a husband. It relates to family prestige and culture. (Laboni)

The narratives of Laboni, Fatema, and Sriti offer a captivating insight into the intricate relationship between education, empowerment, and socio-economic mobility within tokai of Bangladesh. While the broader societal discourse often champions education as the key to empowerment and upward mobility, the lived experiences of these waste pickers paint a more nuanced picture. Laboni's story highlights the deep-rooted cultural and economic dynamics that often limit girls' access to education. The perceived financial burden of educating a girl, coupled with the anticipated costs of dowry, make families reluctant to invest in their daughters. This economic calculus, combined with cultural biases, positions girls as liabilities rather than assets to

their families. Such views perpetuate gender disparities in education and limit opportunities for girls to break free from the cycle of poverty.

While education is undoubtedly a powerful tool for empowerment, the tokai narratives underscore that empowerment can manifest in various forms. For many within this community, empowerment is directly tied to economic independence and the ability to provide for one's family. Sriti's perspective challenges the conventional wisdom, suggesting that in the immediate context of the tokai, educational qualifications do not necessarily translate into better economic outcomes. Her observation that some educated individuals are working in landfills due to job scarcity underscores the complex interplay between education, employment opportunities, and socio-economic status. Sriti's point about older tokai being numerically adept and successful businesswomen, even in the absence of formal education, speaks to the value of experiential learning and the development of practical skills. For these individuals, their years of navigating the intricacies of the waste business, building relationships with waste dealers, and honing their negotiation skills have equipped them with valuable competencies that contribute to their success.

While tokai narratives highlight the importance of practical skills and economic empowerment, the value of education should not be diminished. Education equips individuals with a broader set of skills and knowledge that can open doors to diverse opportunities. As Bangladesh continues to develop, ensuring equitable access to quality education for all, irrespective of gender or socio-economic status, will be crucial in fostering a more inclusive and empowered society.

Microcredit: A Pathway to Empowerment for Tokai

Microcredit has emerged as a transformative tool for socio-economic empowerment across developing nations. Bangladesh, being the birthplace of the microcredit movement, has witnessed its profound impact on vulnerable populations, especially rural women. This study saw the ripple effects of microcredit in urban settings, specifically within tokai. The accessibility of microcredit services through local NGOs has provided tokai with a lifeline to financial inclusion. For a marginalized group that traditionally operates on the fringes of the formal economy, these financial services grant them the autonomy to make decisions, invest in their futures, and chart their own paths. The entrepreneurial spirit of tokai shines through in the narratives. Armed with microloans, some tokai have transitioned from being mere waste collectors to running waste businesses, employing others, and playing pivotal roles in the waste management ecosystem. Such entrepreneurial endeavours not only elevate their socio-economic status but also position them as decision-makers, breaking free from the shackles of dependency and exploitation. The

collaborative approach of some tokai, wherein they form groups to run waste sorting and selling businesses, is testament to the power of community and collective action. Such collaborative endeavours amplify the benefits of microcredit, as they pool resources, share risks, and leverage collective strengths to navigate the complexities of the business landscape. While the benefits of microcredit are evident in tokai entrepreneurial endeavours, it is essential to recognize the potential challenges. Microcredit, if not managed prudently, can lead to over-indebtedness and financial strain. Hence, complementing microcredit programs with financial literacy training can equip tokai with the skills to manage their finances judiciously.

Microcredit has emerged as a beacon of hope for tokai in urban Bangladesh. It has transformed their economic trajectories, offered them a sense of agency, and empowered them to craft their destinies. As tokai navigate the urban waste ecosystem with renewed vigour, their stories stand as testament to the transformative power of financial inclusion and entrepreneurship.

Morsedha shared her experience about getting loans to run a waste shop:

আমি এখানে ২৫ বছরের ওপরে কাজ করছি। আমার স্বামী মারা গেছিল যখন আমার ছেলের বয়স ছিল ১৩ বছর। আমি জীবনে অনেক সংগ্রাম করছি। আমি আমার ছেলেমেয়ের কথা চিন্তা করে, সব সময় চেষ্টা করছি টাকা জমাতে। আমার অনেক কম আয় ছিল। একদিন গ্রাম বাংলা উন্নয়ন কমিটি নামের একটা এজিও কথা শুনলাম যে তারা নাকি আমাদের মত গরীবদের সাহায্য দেয়। আমি তাদের কাজ থেকে কিছু টাকা নিলাম আর আমার আমার বড় ছেলেকে নিয়ে এই মাতুইল পাশে নিজের ময়লার ব্যবসা চালু করলাম।

I have been working here more than 25 years. My husband died while my son was thirteen years old. I was struggling to earn and maintain my family. I always try to save some money for my children's future. My earnings were not enough. Once I heard about Gram Bangla Unnayan Committee and they supported me a lot. I took a loan from them. Now I have established my own business with my older sons in Matuail areas. (Morsedha)

Microcredit has been heralded as a transformative tool for socio-economic empowerment, especially in developing countries. For marginalized communities like tokai in Bangladesh, access to such financial services can indeed be a game-changer. However, as the narratives reveal, while microcredit brings opportunities, it also comes with its set of challenges. Morsedha's story is a testament to the potential benefits of microcredit. With a loan of 50,000 taka, she was able to start her business, underscoring the power of financial inclusion in fostering entrepreneurship among tokai. Furthermore, the provision of educational and health-related training by NGOs enhances their life skills and overall well-being.

While local NGOs can play a pivotal role in empowering tokai, an over-reliance on them can breed dependency. This dependency can shift the power dynamics, where tokai become

beholden to the NGOs, not just for financial services but also for other forms of support. This delicate balance needs to be navigated judiciously to ensure that empowerment does not translate into a new form of control or dependence.

The narratives also highlight the potential pitfalls of microcredit. For many tokai, repaying loans can become a herculean task, especially if the business venture does not yield the expected returns. The pressure to repay loans can lead to extended working hours, increased stress, and even financial distress. A concerning aspect that emerges from the narratives is the gender dynamics surrounding loan control. While the loans are often taken by the female tokai, control over the funds and the responsibility of repayment frequently falls on them, even if the male counterparts exercise control over the funds. This gender disparity underscores the deep-seated patriarchal norms that still permeate even financial transactions.

Microcredit, as seen through the lens of tokai, is indeed a double-edged sword. While it offers a pathway to financial autonomy and empowerment, it also comes with challenges that can amplify vulnerabilities. A holistic approach that addresses these challenges, while leveraging the opportunities, is crucial to ensure that microcredit truly serves as a tool for genuine empowerment. Rina stated:

আমি এক বার এনজিও লুকদের সপ্তাহের টাকা দিতে পারছিলাম না, তারা আমার বাড়িতে এসে আমাকে হুমকি দিয়েছিল যে তারা নাকি আমার বাসার সব জিনিস নিয়ে যাবে। তারা আমার সাথে অনেক খারাপ ব্যবহার করছিল। আমি আমার বাচ্চার স্কুলে যাওয়া বন্ধ করে দিয়েছিলাম আর কিছু আমার আত্মীয় কাজ থেকে টাকা ধার আনছিলাম।

Once I failed to pay my weekly loan to an NGO; they came to my house and threatened to take my household items and they also humiliated me badly. I was forced to stop my children's education and borrow some money from my relatives. (Rina)

Microcredit has often been positioned as a silver bullet for poverty alleviation, particularly in developing nations. For marginalized communities like tokai in Bangladesh, microcredit offers more than just financial support – it is a gateway to resilience, self-confidence, and social empowerment. The narratives of tokai, as exemplified by Tania's experience, shed light on the multifaceted impact of microcredit.

Tania's story is emblematic of the transformative power of microcredit. By participating in somiti (local NGOs), not only was she able to access funds in times of need, but she also tapped into a network of support and shared knowledge. These regular meetings with other members served as a platform for collective learning, knowledge exchange, and peer support. The sense of

belonging to a community and being able to actively participate in decision-making processes can significantly boost one's self-worth and confidence.

Resilience is often about the ability to bounce back from adversities. For tokai, financial shocks can be debilitating. Access to microcredit means that individuals like Tania have a safety net to fall back on during emergencies. Additionally, the culture of savings instilled by such programs ensures that members have a buffer against unforeseen hardships. This financial resilience, in turn, can mitigate the stress and anxiety that often accompany economic vulnerabilities.

Organizations like the Gram Bangla Unnayan Committee play a crucial role in operationalising microcredit initiatives. Their involvement goes beyond mere disbursement of loans. They serve as facilitators, educators, and supporters, ensuring that beneficiaries like Tania are not just recipients of financial aid but are also equipped with the knowledge and skills to use these funds judiciously. Regular meetings organized by these NGOs foster a sense of community, mutual trust, and shared responsibility.

Engaging with microcredit can indeed be a powerful strategy for social empowerment and resilience building for tokai. However, it is essential to approach it with a holistic perspective, understanding both its potential benefits and the challenges it might pose. With the right support structures, like those provided by NGOs, microcredit can be a catalyst for sustainable change, empowering marginalized communities to chart their paths to a brighter future.

GUC helped Tania many times through lending money and regular meetings:

এখানে আমি অনেক মানুষের সাথে মিশতে পারি, অনেক কিছু জানতে পারি। আমাদের প্রতি মাসের মিটিং এ আমাদের জতুক আর বাল্যবিবাহ নিয়ে অনেক কিছু পরামর্শ দেয়। কারণ আমরা এখন বন্ধুত্ব আর একে অপরের সাথে শেয়ার করা শিখে গেছি।

This was the place to meet with different people and develop many new ideas. Our monthly meeting helps me to understand the influence of dowry and early marriage because we develop friendships and start to share our problems each other. (Tania)

Tania mentioned their Sir (male leader) suggested that she not pay or take a dowry and that she stops child marriage in her family:

আমি একবার গ্রামে থাকতে সমিতি থেকে কিছু মুরগি আর ছাগল কেনার জন্য টাকা ধার নিছিলাম। আমি মনে করতে পারি যে সমিতি স্যার আমাদের সিখাইছিল কিভাবে এগুলো লালন পালন করতে হয় আর কিভাবে আয় করতে হয়। তারা আমাকে আরও বাড়িতে বুনার জন্য একটা মাগনা কাঠের গাছ দিয়েছিল। শহরে আমি টাকা ধার নিছি মেয়ের বিয়ের জন্য। আমি তাদের মিটিং জাইতাম আর আমার মতামত প্রকাশ করতাম। আমি আমাদের স্যার আর পাশেই বসতাম। আমার খুব ভাল লাগে এসব জায়গায় নিজের মত কথা বলতে। স্যার আমাদের কে সিখাইছে

ময়লায় কাজ করেও কিভাবে শরীর স্বাস্থ্য ঠিক রাখতে হয়। এখন আমি কম অসুস্থ হই, অনেক টাকা আয় করতে পারি। আমি নিজেই একটা দোকান দিছি ময়লার এখানে, অনেককে এখন কাজ দিতে পারি। আমি কিছু ট্রেনিং নিছি যাতে কাজ করতে পারি। আমাদের ম্যাডাম আমাকে নাম লিখা সিখাইছে, বলছে নিজেই নিজের কাজ করতে। আমি আসলে এখন থেকে ট্রেনিং আর মিটিং করে অনেক কিছু জানি।

Once I borrowed money from Somiti in my village to buy hens and goats. I can remember the officer showed me how to take care of all these and prosperity to earn well. They also gave me a free wood tree to plant in my house. Here I took loans for my daughter's marriage. I used to attend their meeting and I loved to share my views and ideas. I sit together, even our Sir sat beside me. I feel so proud and happy to share my views. Sir also provided me with suggestions on how to ensure health and safety while sorting rubbish. Now I feel less ill than earlier, and I can earn well. I have organised a waste shop and I am happy; I can employ others. I received different basic trainings. One of our Madams teaches me how to write my name and encourages me to be self-independent. I have learned a lot from trainings and weekly meetings. (Tania)

The story of Tania reflects the intricate realities faced by many in tokai, where economic challenges often intertwine with family dynamics and societal expectations. Microcredit, for Tania, became a tool to reclaim her family's dignity and secure a roof over their heads. Tania's predicament began with her father-in-law's decision to mortgage their family home in exchange for a loan. Such decisions, often made out of desperation, reflect the financial vulnerabilities many families face. The weight of this decision was not just financial but also emotional and social. The family home, a symbol of security and heritage, was now out of their reach, creating a tangible sense of loss. In this challenging scenario, Tania saw an opportunity in microcredit. By approaching Somiti (microcredit), she was able to secure a substantial portion of the funds needed to reclaim the house. The decision to take on this debt was not taken lightly but was driven by the urgency to restore the family's honour and regain their ancestral home. While the loan from Somiti addressed a significant portion of the funds needed, Tania also had to rely on personal networks, borrowing from her sister. This scenario underscores the complexities of debt management. Now, Tania not only has a financial obligation towards an NGO but also a personal debt that ties into family relations.

Tania's story sheds light on the dual nature of microcredit. On one hand, it provided her with the means to reclaim her family home, a significant achievement that speaks to her resilience and determination. On the other hand, it also added a layer of financial obligation, binding her to monthly repayments. Tania's journey exemplifies the real-world challenges and triumphs associated with microcredit. Her story is a testament to the empowerment potential of microcredit, but it also serves as a reminder of the responsibilities it brings. As she navigates her

way through repaying her debts, Tania stands as a symbol of hope, resilience, and the indomitable spirit of tokai.

Empowerment Through Digital Connectivity

In an era of rapid technological advancement, the digital realm is increasingly becoming a space for empowerment, especially for marginalized communities. For tokai in Bangladesh, the proliferation of mobile phones and the accessibility of the internet have opened up new avenues for self-empowerment, information access, and social connectivity. For many tokai, the mobile phone acts as a portal to a world beyond their immediate surroundings. Platforms like YouTube offer them a chance to be informed about national and global events, to gain knowledge on essential topics like health, sanitation, and education, and to engage with entertainment content.

Beyond being a mere tool for entertainment or information, mobile phones have transformed the way tokai maintains its social connections.

Importantly, Alisa said that “mobile contact with waste dealers was also important because she sometimes called them for extra work, such as sorting and lifting rubbish in the waste shop.” Access to a mobile phone can make tokai’s life easier, and more flexible and up to date. Alisa's account illuminates how mobile phones can serve as a lifeline, keeping her connected with her family in the village, her child's school teacher, and even her waste dealer for work opportunities. Similarly, Roksana declared: “It is much safer to use a personal mobile for personal calls, sometimes it is challenging to ask anyone to use their mobile phone. It is shameful if I do not know how to use mobile phone now.” Roksana used Bkash, a mobile banking system, to both send and sometimes receive financial support from relatives, which meant she did not need to go to the bank or shops to transfer money from the city to the village. Importantly she found, “Life is easy in the city because I can maintain private relationships and receive support if I require.”

Roksana's experience with Bkash, a mobile banking system, showcases the broader implications of digital empowerment. Such platforms not only simplify financial transactions but also infuse a sense of independence and autonomy into the lives of their users. It eliminates the need for physical visits to banks or shops, ensuring a seamless and private transfer of funds.

Historically, certain activities or spaces were gender-segregated or less accessible to women. The example of needing separate rooms for men and women to make phone calls in villages underscores this. However, personal mobile phones challenge these norms by providing a private and personal space for women to connect with the world.

The tokai engagement with mobile technology underscores a broader global trend where marginalized communities harness the power of digital tools for self-empowerment. The stories of Alisa and Roksana are not just individual tales of digital adaptation but symbolize a collective leap towards a more informed, connected, and empowered future.

Problem-solving in Family Life

In the intricate socio-economic fabric of tokai, the women's resilience and adaptability shine through. Their stories of survival, adaptability, and ingenuity provide insights into the innate potential of individuals to rise above challenges when equipped with the right skills and mindset. One such narrative is that of Razia, a tokai who represents many like her.

Razia's journey is not just one of personal growth but also of emerging as a beacon of inspiration for others. Her multifaceted persona, as acknowledged by her husband and co-workers, is a testament to her adaptability, intelligence, and leadership. Terms of endearment and admiration like বরিশালা (barishalla) paint a picture of a woman respected for her wit and wisdom. In a society often governed by patriarchal norms, Razia's ability to voice her disagreements, not just with her peers but also with her husband and family, signifies a shift. It highlights the increasing space for women to assert themselves, make decisions, and play an active role in shaping their destinies. The stories of tokai like Razia underscore the immense reservoir of potential that lies within communities often side-lined by mainstream society. Their narratives of resilience, adaptability, and leadership challenge stereotypes, offering a glimpse into the transformative power of lived experience and community support.

Razia's tale is emblematic of the many tokai who have harnessed their lived experiences to develop problem-solving skills. By continually engaging in dialogue, sharing, and seeking advice from their peers, these women have cultivated a robust toolkit of strategies to navigate the myriad challenges they encounter daily. Tokai, bound by shared experiences, offers a nurturing environment for its members. For individuals like Razia, this community becomes a wellspring of knowledge, support, and camaraderie. By actively forging and nurturing connections within this community, Razia and her peers can tap into collective wisdom, share experiences, and learn from each other. Razia explained how she resolved her conflicting relationship with her mother-in-law and managed her family:

আমার শাশুড়ি কখন আমার জন্য জামা কাপড় কিনে না। উনি আমাকে দিয়ে শুধু ঘরের কাজ করায়। উনি আমাকে মুটা কালা বউ বলে ডাকে কারন আমার গায়ের চামরা কাল। উনি শুধু মানুষের সামনে আমাকে নিয়ে মজা করে আর তুচ্ছ তচ্ছিল্ল করে। আমার অনেক বিরক্ত লাগত। আমি তাই উনার কাজ থেকে পালানুর জন্য শহরে আসি

আর এই ময়লায় কাজ ধরি। আমি এখন গ্রামের বাড়িতে যাই না আর শাশুড়ির সাথে কম কথা বলি। প্রথমে আমার স্বামী ও আমার সাথে জগর করতু যদি আমি তার মায়ের বিরুদ্ধে কুন কথা বলতাম। স্বামী আমাকে অনেক বার মানসিক আর শারীরিক ভাবে নির্যাতন করছে।

আমি এখন সালিশ দেওয়া বন্ধ করে দিছি। আমার শশুর বলে কি আমার নাকি শাশুড়ি কে সম্মান করা উচিত কারন সে নাকি আমার মায়ের মত। উনি বলে সব কিছুর সাথে মানিয়ে নিতো। উনি বলে আল্লাহ্ নাকি একদিন আমাকে সাহায্য করবে। আমি শশুর মারা যাওয়ার পর বাড়ি থেকে পালিয়ে চলে আসছি এই শহরে , এখানে আমাকে কেও ডিস্টার্ব করে না। এখন আমার শাশুড়ির সাথে ভাল সম্পর্ক আছে , উনি আমার বাসায় আসে, আমি তাকে সম্মান করি। উনি অনেক লজ্জিত তার আগের এই সব খারাপ আচরণ আর জন্য।

My mother-in-law never buys any dress (three pieces) for me. I used to perform all their household work. She used to call me fatty black/unfair wife because of my skin colour. She used to make fun and humiliate me in front of others. I felt so annoyed. To get away from her, I migrated to Dhaka City and started working in the landfill. I never visit her house in the village and talk with her less. At first, my husband also kept fighting with me while I protested about his mother using these types of humiliation and mental torture. He and his mother pained me several times.

Now I stopped complaining about her. My father-in-law continuously guided me and made suggestions telling me, you know - she is another mother, and you should respect her, she is your senior, you need to adapt to this situation. He told me Allah will help me once. After my father in law's death, I hid from her home, and came to the city; here no one disturbs me. We have a good relationship now and my mother-in-law regularly visits my house in the city and I take care of her. She is now ashamed and apologetic for her previous misbehaviour. (Razia)

Razia was deprived of household benefits and access because of her skin colour and illiteracy.

Her mother-in-law used to eat the বড় মাছের মাথা (head of large fish) and she never shared this with others, even her children. Her husband was so obedient to his mother he would take less care of his own family. Razia stated:

আমি যদি আমার স্বামীকে টাকা পাঠাইতে বলি আমার মুবাইলে, সে সবসময় উজুহাত দেখায়। আমি যদি বলি ৫০ টাকা পাঠাইতে , সে পাঠায় ২০ টাকা। যদি তার মা বলে তাইলে ঠিকও ৫০ টাকা সে পাঠাবে। এটা হচ্ছে আমার আর তার মার মধ্যে তফাৎ। আমি যদি এগুলা বলি সে আমাকে ভয় দেখায় এসব বলে যে তর গলা কেটে ফেলবু, লাথি দিয়ে মুখ ভাব্বু, পিঠের চামরা উটিয়ে ফেলব।

If I ask my husband to deposit some money in my mobile, he often makes excuses. If I ask for 50 taka for mobile recharge, he gives 20 taka. If his mother says she wants 50 taka for her mobile balance, he gives 50 taka; this is the difference between us. If I protest, he abuses me and threatens physical torture, such as “cut your chest, kick on your mouth, take out your back skin”. (Razia)

Several times Razia has been forced to go to bed without eating her dinner. She silently accepted this domination and violence, and did not think about divorce because:

গরীব মেয়েদের একবারই বিয়ে হয়, আমাদের পরিবারই আমাদের এই বিবাহের ব্যবস্থা করে। তারা মনে করে তারা সঠিক কাজ করছে। আমি এসব গ্রহন করে নিছি, মাজে মাজে মনে হয় যদি আমি বিবাহ থেকে বের হয়ে আসতে পারতাম। আমি কুন দ্বিতীয় বিবাহের কথা চিন্তা করতেছি না। এখন আমার দুটা ছেলেমেয়ে আছে। আমি এটা করতে পারি না তাদের মুখের দিকে তাকিয়ে।

A poor girl gets married once in her life. Our parents did our wedding arrangement, they did the right things. I have accepted all this, sometimes I would wish if I could be released from my marriage and work alone. I am not planning another marriage because I now have two children. I could not do this after seeing the face of my children. (Razia)

Fatema shared her similar story:

আমার স্বামী শুধু তার মা বাবার পরিবারকে বেশি দেখে, সে আমার ছেলে মেয়ের প্রতি উদাসীন। সে প্রায় প্রায় গ্রামে তার পরিবারকে দেওয়ার জন্য টাকা পাঠায়। সে অনেক উদাসীন আমাকে নিয়ে। আমার বাড়িআলা আপা বলে যে কেন আমি এই স্বামীকে বিয়ে করছি, সে নাকি ভাল স্বামী না। আমার এই অবস্থা দেখে আমার ভাই বলছে স্বামীকে তলাক দিয়ে দিতে। একবার তু তারা সব কাগজ নিয়ে আসছিল তলাক দেওয়ার জন্য, আমি তখন অনেক অসুস্থ, হাস্পাতালে গিয়েছিলাম, বিছানা থেকে উডতে পারি নাই। সবাই বলল আগে আমি সুস্থ হই তারপর তলাক দিবে। পরে সুনী আমার নাকি বাচ্চা হবে আর তিন মাসের বাচ্চা আমার পেতে ছিল। এরপর আমি আর তলাক দিতে পারি নাই। আমি আসলে জানতাম না কিভাবে আমি প্রেগন্যান্ট হয়ে গেছিলাম কারণ আমি তু কখন পরিবার পরিকল্পনা আর পিল খাই নাই।

My husband always takes care of his father's family members, such as his mother and his younger brothers, rather than his own children. He used to send money to the village to maintain their families. He is careless about me. My landlord lady asks me why I married this man, he is not a good husband. After seeing this situation, my brother encourages me to get divorced. Once he bought stamp for a divorce and needed my signature. I was in my bed and feeling sick. Everyone suggested then that divorce could occur later, first I needed to be fit and healthy. I was hospitalised and I heard I was pregnant and I was almost three months pregnant. Finally, I could not get divorced. Getting pregnant happened suddenly because I never used any family planning or took any pill. (Fatema)

In the diverse and complex world of tokai, Fatema's story stands out as a testament to the strength and resilience of women who navigate societal judgments and economic challenges daily. Her experiences provide a lens into the life of a tokai, shedding light on their struggles, adaptability, and the intrinsic strength they possess. Working as a waste picker, Fatema often found herself at the receiving end of societal disdain. The physical manifestations of her labour, such as her body's odour, made her a target of prejudice. Rather than succumbing to societal pressures, Fatema carved out her own space, seeking solace and camaraderie within her community. She strategically presented herself, emphasizing her family's respectable background when interacting with outsiders.

Fatema's life is filled with instances of her innovative problem-solving skills. Whether it is finding ways to stay hydrated at work or seeking affordable healthcare solutions, her approach is always rooted in practicality and resourcefulness. Her ability to draw from traditional knowledge, like herbal treatments, and combine it with modern solutions showcases her adaptability. At the heart of Fatema's journey is her deep connection to her community. Despite facing external judgments, she finds strength and support within tokai. Her relationships, both familial and social, act as a protective shield, enabling her to weather the storms of life. Her admiration for her mother, a figure of resilience and wisdom, underscores the significance of familial bonds in shaping her outlook and approach to life.

Fatema's story is also one of breaking social boundaries and forging meaningful connections. Her ability to maintain good relationships, despite societal judgments, speaks to her character and determination. In a society where social boundaries are often rigid, Fatema's approach to building networks and connections offers a refreshing perspective on community and belonging. Fatema's journey is emblematic of the countless tokai who navigate societal judgments, economic challenges, and personal struggles daily. Her resilience, adaptability, and unwavering spirit offer valuable lessons on the power of community, the significance of relationships, and the indomitable spirit of women.

It is common among tokai communities for family management to include assets and investments. Many tokai keep informal accounts of housing expenditures, cost of daily goods, education, medicine, and saving in Somity etc. Alisa reported that her husband did not have good ideas about saving, managing the family, or how to allocate money:

আমার পরিবার যখন গ্রামে থাকত, আমার স্বামী জানে ও না কত লিটার দুধ আর সবজি প্রতিদিন বাজারে বিক্রি করতাম। আমি জানতাম বাজারে সব কিছু বিক্রি করে কত টাকা আমরা আয় করতাম। আমি জানি কুথায় টাকা লাগাতে হবে, কিভাবে টাকা আনতে হয়। আমার স্বামী তু অনেক অলস, কাজ করতে চায় না, সে তেমন চালাক না বুকা বুকা লুক। মাজে মাজে আমি বাজারে গিয়ে দেখাসুনা করতাম সব ঠিক ঠাক আছে কিনা আবার ঘরের কাজ ও সামলাতাম। আমি যদি টাকা পেতাম তাইলে স্বামীর সাথে সব শেয়ার করতাম। আমি স্বামী মানুষের সাথে দরকষাকষি করে না, বেশি বেশি জিনিস দিয়ে দেয়, টাকা কম নেয়, অনেক বুকা মানুষ।

While my family in was in the village, my husband did not know how many litres of cow milk and vegetables needed to be sold in the bazaar each day. I know the amount of cash we can get from the market. I always decide where to invest and earn money. My husband is lazy and not intelligent. Sometimes I go to the local Bazaar and also look after our cultivatable land and do household work. Whatever I earn, I always share with my husband. My husband does not bargain with customers; sometimes he gives more and receives less money. (Alisa)

In the ever-evolving urban landscape of Bangladesh, the stories of Alisa and Kohinor, two women from tokai, stand as powerful testament to the resilience, tenacity, and strength of women who, despite their socio-economic challenges, continue to build better futures for their families. Alisa's life is a tapestry of sacrifices and determination. Her deep-rooted belief in helping others, driven by her faith, showcases her magnanimity. By loaning money to friends and investing in their futures, she has not only supported them but also gained benefits for herself and her family.

Education, a key to a brighter future, is a priority for Alisa. By sending her sons to Madrasha schools, she not only ensured they receive an education but also made a financially prudent decision, saving on tuition, hostel, and food costs. Her sacrifices also extend to sending her young daughter to her mother-in-law's house, a decision rooted in economic practicality. Alisa's dedication to her family is evident in her efforts to uplift their financial situation. From a shaky economic footing, she has brought stability, purchased land and planned for a future home for her children. All these achievements have been accomplished while working diligently in the landfill project, a testament to her unwavering resolve.

Kohinor's story parallels Alisa's in many ways. Despite her husband's lack of support, Kohinor took charge of her family's future. Her hard work in the landfill project enabled her to build a brick house in her village, a symbol of her resilience and dedication. When it came to the pivotal moment of her daughter's marriage, Kohinor's meticulous planning and financial management came to the fore, ensuring a smooth transition for her daughter into a new phase of life.

Alisa and Kohinor's stories are not just individual tales of success but represent the collective spirit of many tokai. Their lives, marked by challenges, are also filled with achievements that underscore the potential of women to change their destinies through sheer determination and hard work. Their stories inspire and remind us of the indomitable spirit of women, even in the face of adversity.

Religious Faiths and Cultural Practices

For tokai, life is marked by a series of relentless challenges. From daily struggles for sustenance to systemic societal prejudices, they constantly face an uphill battle. Yet, despite these adversities, many tokai exhibit an astonishing level of resilience, much of which can be attributed to their deep-rooted religious faith and cultural practices. Religious beliefs play a pivotal role in shaping the tokai perception of their circumstances. As Rahima aptly puts it, they view their hardships as manifestations of Allah's will. This perspective helps them find solace in the idea that their suffering is part of a divine plan, a test of their faith and endurance. Such beliefs act as a source

of comfort, offering a semblance of meaning to their struggles. For many, daily rituals and prayers become a source of strength, providing moments of introspection and connection with the divine. They believe that every challenge they face is a test from Allah, and their unwavering faith will eventually lead them to better times.

Beyond religious beliefs, traditional cultural practices also play a vital role in the tokai's resilience. These practices, passed down through generations, offer a sense of identity and belonging, reminding them of their roots and the collective strength of their community. However, it is essential to note that while these practices offer solace, they can also perpetuate certain notions that might hinder progress. For instance, the belief that their fate is pre-ordained and they are destined to be poor can sometimes lead to a sense of resignation, preventing proactive efforts to improve their situation. Still, while religious faith and cultural practices provide a safety net for the tokai, many participants expressed concerns regarding the government's attitude towards their community. They feel marginalized and overlooked, with their efforts to better their circumstances often being stymied by bureaucratic apathy.

The resilience of tokai is a testament to the power of faith and tradition. Their religious beliefs and cultural practices serve as guiding lights, helping them navigate the turbulent waters of their lives. However, for true progress to be achieved, systemic issues, especially the role of governmental agencies, must be addressed to ensure a brighter future for the tokai. For example, Rahima stated:

আল্লাহ্ আমাদের তৈরি করছে, আল্লাহ্ আমাদের খাবারের জন্য মুখ দিচ্ছে তাই আল্লাহ্ আমাদের পেটের ব্যবস্থা করবে, আমাদেরকে না খাইয়ে মারবে না। সে আমাদেরকে রিজিক এর ব্যবস্থা করবে। আসলে দারিদ্রাতা আল্লাহ্ কাছ থেকে আসে আবার আল্লাহ্ নিজেই এর সমাধান করে। আল্লাহ্ গরীব মানুষকে ভালবাসে। আমি ছুটবেলায় মানুষের বাড়ির উটশিষ্ট খাবার এনে খেয়ে বড় হইয়েছি। আমি তিন বেলা খাইতে পারি নাই। মাছ বা মাংস কি চুখেও দেখি নাই। এখন আমি নিজেই কামাই করি এবং আল্লাহ্ আমাকে অনেক কিছু দিচ্ছে। আমি এখন তিন বেলা ভাত খাইতে পারি।

Allah creates us, He has given us a mouth for eating and He will manage our food for consumption. He will not keep us hunger or without food. He will manage our livelihood and earnings. Poverty comes from Allah's will and he will help us to solve this. He loves poor people. During my childhood, I used to eat the leftover food of my neighbours. I cannot eat three meals with rice. I never see fish or meat dishes in my meals. I am earning now, and Allah gives me a lot. I am now eating three-times rice. (Rahima)

In her life, adversity often goes hand in hand with resilience, and Rahima's life story is a poignant testament to this truth. Abandoned by her husband in an unfamiliar city, left to navigate the challenges of a new environment alone, Rahima's journey is emblematic of the strength and

tenacity many tokai display in the face of overwhelming adversity. Rahima's entry into Dhaka City was marred by betrayal. What should have been a new chapter in her life with her husband turned into a tale of desertion. Waking up alone on a train in an unfamiliar city, Rahima was vulnerable and lost. Yet, in this moment of despair, a stranger extended a hand of friendship. This act of kindness set Rahima on a path to rebuilding her life in Dhaka, marking her initiation into the landfill project. Throughout her journey, Rahima's faith remained unwavering. Fasting not only as a religious observance but also as a means to save money, she prayed fervently for a reunion with her husband. And while she did eventually find him, the reunion was bittersweet. Discovering her husband's second marriage was a heart-wrenching revelation, but Rahima's response was telling. Instead of seeking revenge or harbouring resentment, she placed her trust in divine justice, believing that Allah would mete out the appropriate punishment.

Her faith also manifested in her entrepreneurial spirit. Despite the challenges, Rahima ventured into the banana business, showcasing her adaptability and willingness to explore new avenues for sustenance.

Rahima's resilience is deeply intertwined with her religious beliefs. She is convinced that Allah watches over her, ensuring she never goes hungry and always has a means of earning. Born into a Muslim family, she internalized the idea that life's hardships are tests from the Almighty. Poverty and suffering, in her eyes, are divine trials designed to test the human spirit. Rahima's own life is a testament to the transformative power of faith. In the face of betrayal, abandonment, and economic hardship, her unwavering trust in Allah provided solace and guidance. Her story underscores the profound impact of religious beliefs in shaping resilience and offers a lens into the lived experiences of many tokai who navigate adversity with grace, tenacity, and an indomitable spirit. Rahima's grandmother told her:

আল্লাহ সর্বশক্তিমান আমাদের জন্ম দেয়ার আগেই আমাদের জীবিকা আর খাবারের ব্যবস্থা করছে। এরপর সে আমাদের দুনিয়াতে পাঠাইছে। এই কারণে যখন একজন শিশু জন্ম হয়, তার মায়ের বুকের দুধ লাগে আর আল্লাহ্ টা আগেই ব্যবস্থা করে রাখে। আল্লাহ্ বলসে খাবার হচ্ছে মানুষের জন্মগত অধিকার।

Allah Almighty has managed food/livelihood and consumption for everyone before creating human beings and finally He sent us to the world. That is why while a child is born, he or she needs to drink milk from their mother's breast. Allah always manages this food earlier than childbirth. Allah said taking food is a birth right of human beings. (Rahima)

Rahima's life, like many other tokai, is a tapestry woven with threads of faith and the stark realities of survival. Her story provides an insightful glimpse into the interplay of two distinct sets of values that guide and influence the choices and beliefs of many within her community.

For Rahima, religious faith is not just a guiding principle but an integral part of her identity. Her unwavering belief that economic hardships and life's trials come from Allah and will ultimately be addressed by the Almighty showcases the depth of her faith. Such beliefs provide her with a sense of purpose and hope, even in the face of adversity. This faith-based perspective is deeply rooted in traditional values, emphasizing the significance of religious beliefs and family obligations. It provides a moral compass, guiding tokai like Rahima in their day-to-day decisions and interactions.

On the other side of the spectrum are the survival values that shape Rahima's actions and choices. The urban environment, with its unique challenges and opportunities, brings to the fore the need for security, liberty, and mobility. These values stem from a pragmatic understanding of life, focusing on the immediate necessities and priorities. Having transitioned from a restricted rural life to the city, Rahima's survival values have equipped her with the resilience to adapt and thrive. The city offers her a chance at independence, a stark contrast from her life in the village.

While these two sets of values might seem contrasting, they harmoniously coexist in Rahima's life. Her faith provides solace and perspective, while her survival instincts equip her with the tools to navigate the urban landscape. Together, they have moulded Rahima into a resilient individual, capable of finding meaning and purpose amidst challenges. Her journey highlights the intricate dance of faith and survival that many tokai navigate daily. Her story underscores the importance of understanding and appreciating the dual values that shape the lives of individuals within marginalized communities, revealing the depth of their resilience and the strength of their spirit.

Similarly, Asma shared how her religious beliefs helped her survive with her drug addicted husband:

আমাদের জন্ম, মারা যাওয়া, বিবাহ আল্লাহ্ নিজের হাতে আগেই লিখে রাখে। আমরা চাইলেও এটা পরিবর্তন করতে পারি না। আমি কি পারি আমার স্বামী কে ফালাইয়ে দিতে। কারন তার পায়ের নিচে আমার বেহেশত। সে যাই করুক, স্বামী তু স্বামী। তাকে কিছু বলার যাবে না। আমার মা বলছে স্বামীর ডান পায়ের হাড্ডি দিয়ে নাকি স্ত্রী কে আল্লাহ্ বানাইছে। আমি ধর্ম মানি ইসলাম মানি আর আল্লাহ্ কে ভয় পাই।

Our birth, death, and marriage are pre-determined or fixed by Allah Almighty. We cannot change this if we wish. Am I able to leave my husband? No, I never do this. Because my heaven lies beneath the feet of my husband. Whatever he does, my husband is my husband. We cannot say anything. My mother told me all wives were created from the bone of the right leg of the husband. I believe in religion, faith in Islam, and I am scared of Allah Almighty. (Asma)

Asma's story paints a complex picture of a woman striving to maintain harmony in her household, uphold her religious beliefs, and navigate societal expectations. Her actions and decisions are deeply influenced by her faith, societal norms, and personal aspirations for her family. Asma's deep-rooted beliefs in Islam guide her actions and decisions. The act of physically stopping her husband from remarrying showcases her assertiveness and her belief in preserving the sanctity of their marital bond. The phrase "a husband is not a silly thing to throw away or change" underscores the reverence she has for the institution of marriage, as dictated by her faith. Enrolling her children in Madrasha education reflects Asma's desire to instil strong religious values in them. By doing so, she not only ensures that they receive an education in the absence of mainstream schooling but also strengthens their religious foundation. Her hope for her son to join the waste business after his Qur'anic education signifies her intent to merge religious teachings with practical life skills. Asma's distress over her inability to consistently observe religious practices like prayer, fasting, and reading the Qur'an highlights the conflict between her daily struggles for survival and her spiritual obligations. This internal conflict reveals the challenges many face in balancing daily responsibilities with religious duties.

Asma's confusion regarding the role of the government vis-à-vis her faith-driven perspective is emblematic of a broader dilemma faced by many. The interplay of religious beliefs, societal expectations, and perceived governmental inadequacies shapes the worldview of many tokai. The intertwining of these forces often results in a unique blend of fatalism, religious faith, and scepticism towards institutional support.

Asma's story is a testament to the intricate web of factors that influence individual choices and perspectives. Her journey, marked by faith-driven decisions, societal expectations, and the challenges of daily life, provides a window into the lives of many who navigate similar terrains. Balancing religious obligations with societal norms and the demands of daily life remains a constant challenge for many, as they seek to find harmony amidst these competing forces. She stated:

এটা আল্লাহ্‌ তালার দায়িত্ব আমাদেরকে রক্ষা করা, সে নিজেই তু আমাদের সেবা করার জন্য সরকারকে পাঠাইছে, কিন্তু আমরা সব সেবা থেকে বঞ্চিত। আল্লাহ্‌ সরকারকে দিছে, কিন্তু সরকার আমাদের অধিকার আর জিবিকার নিশ্চিত করতেছে না।

It is the responsibility of Allah to save us, He selects the government to give service to all, but we are deprived from these services. Allah gives to us but the government did not ensure our rights and access to livelihood. (Asma)

Asma's narrative reveals the intersection of her religious convictions, societal dynamics, and expectations from governance. Through her eyes, we gain insight into how she perceives the roles and responsibilities of different entities in shaping her life and the lives of others in her community. In Asma's worldview, the Chairman's election is not just a product of democratic processes but also the divine will of Allah. This perspective reflects a synthesis of faith and societal structures, where the divine and the mundane coexist seamlessly.

Asma believed, for example, that the Chairman, a locally elected person, was selected by the will of Allah and people's votes. It was his duty to coordinate both the government and tokai; Allah cannot do everything alone. Throughout her interview, Asma expressed that she did not have an umbrella over her head and faced a lot of sufferings. Several times she had submitted photocopies of her documents (e.g., national ID, birth certificate, marriage certificate) to the government for help during a crisis but she did not get help. She believed the government officials were failing the responsibilities that Allah gave them.

For Asma, the Chairman's role is pivotal - he bridges the realm of divine ordination with the practical duties of governance. Asma's metaphorical lament of not having an umbrella over her head vividly conveys her feelings of vulnerability and neglect. It underscores her yearning for a protective shield, be it in the form of divine blessings or tangible support from the government.

Despite her unwavering faith, Asma's interactions with governmental bodies have been marked by disappointment. Her repeated attempts to seek assistance, symbolized by her submission of various documents, have been met with inaction. This has led her to question the efficacy and intentions of government officials. In her eyes, they are failing not just in their civic duties but also in the divine responsibilities entrusted to them by Allah.

Asma's narrative offers a poignant reflection on the complexities of life where faith, societal structures, and governance intersect. Her story encapsulates the hopes, challenges, and disappointments of many who navigate the delicate balance between their spiritual beliefs and their expectations from societal institutions. Asma's journey underscores the need for a compassionate and responsive governance system that acknowledges and addresses the unique challenges faced by marginalized communities, while also respecting their deeply held beliefs and values.

While Asma felt hopeless about government support, she had faith that Allah would help her in any crisis situation. She provided one example of how she was neglected by local government and how they treated her:

প্রতিটি নির্বাচনের আগে রাজনৈতিক লোকজন আমাদের কাছে আসে, আমাদের সাথে হাত মিলায়, অনেক অনেক প্রতিশ্রুতি দেয়, অনেক আসা দেয়, মাঝে মাঝে আমাদেরকে বোন বা মা বা খালা বলে ডাকে যদিও আমরা ময়লায় কাজ করি। আমাদের শরীর থেকে গন্ধ আসে তখন তারা কিছু মনে করে না। আর নির্বাচনের শেষে, জয় পেয়ে আমাদেরকে ভুলে যায়, ভুলে যায় তাদের সব দেয়া প্রতিশ্রুতি। তখন তারা আমাদেরকে সুধু একজন অপরিচিত লোক ভাবে।

Before the election, political candidates came to our house, shook our hands, gave a lot of promises, hope for helping, treats us as sisters, mothers, and aunts, no matter what dirty or smelly work we are doing. But you see after the election, when they win, they just forget their promises and treat us like a stranger. (Asma)

Asma's journey in navigating life's challenges, as narrated above, is a testament to the intricate balance between spiritual faith and practical strategies, which together foster resilience in the face of adversity. Her experiences, beliefs, and coping mechanisms provide a nuanced understanding of how individuals draw strength from both spiritual and material realms to confront and overcome hardships. For Asma, faith in Allah serves as a bedrock of her resilience. She perceives life's challenges as predetermined tests from the Almighty. This belief empowers her to embrace her circumstances, be they good or bad, with acceptance and patience. It instils in her a sense of purpose and hope, where every difficulty is seen as a divine ordination with a potential silver lining. Parallel to her unyielding faith, Asma employs various practical strategies to navigate her daily challenges. From her decision to work hard, to strategic fasting, to seeking alternative avenues of earning, her choices reflect a pragmatic approach to life. These decisions, while rooted in material needs, are also underpinned by her spiritual belief that Allah favours the hardworking. For Asma, faith and pragmatism are not mutually exclusive; rather, they complement and reinforce each other. Her belief that everything happens by Allah's will does not deter her from taking practical steps to improve her life. Instead, it provides a spiritual framework within which her efforts gain meaning and purpose.

Asma's story underscores the multifaceted nature of resilience among tokai. It is a poignant reminder of the complex interplay of faith and practical strategies in shaping individual responses to adversity. While spiritual beliefs provide a sense of purpose and acceptance, pragmatic strategies ensure survival and incremental progress. Together, these elements form a holistic approach to resilience, enabling individuals like Asma to persevere in the face of challenges, drawing strength from both the divine and the tangible realms of existence.

Summary

The lives of tokai are a testament to human adaptability, resilience, and the power of the human spirit. Despite existing at the peripheries of society, they navigate a myriad of challenges with grit and determination, often employing innovative strategies to survive and even thrive. This chapter explores the nuances of empowerment and resilience within tokai, shedding light on the myriad ways they assert agency and build resilience. Tokai are not mere passive victims of their circumstances. Their lives, as explored in this chapter, are a tapestry of challenges and triumphs. They manage not just their work environments, fraught with hazards, but also navigate intricate family dynamics, societal stigmas, and fluid identities. They are the unsung custodians of urban waste management, operating in the shadows of a society that seldom acknowledges their contributions.

Markers of empowerment include their ability to manage their work, assert agency in family matters, leverage social networks, and tap into their religious faith are all emblematic of their empowerment. However, there is heterogeneity within this community. Different life stages, marital statuses, and financial conditions influence the dimensions and degrees of empowerment and resilience. The diverse experiences of tokai defy monolithic categorization. Factors like marital status, financial conditions, and familial support play pivotal roles in shaping their experiences of empowerment. The challenges they face are multifaceted, and their responses to them are equally diverse. This complexity underscores the need for nuanced, context-specific indicators that can capture the richness of their lived experiences.

The findings presented in this chapter challenge prevailing notions of vulnerability, underscoring the agency and resilience that often go unnoticed. The subsequent chapter will contextualise these findings within the broader literature, elucidating the key contributions of this research and paving the way for policy recommendations that can better support and empower tokai.

Chapter Ten: Discussion, Conclusion, and Recommendations

The path of any research is seldom linear; it is rather an intricate interplay of the researcher's positionality, initial assumptions, and the lived realities of the participants. In this final chapter I aim to situate the study within its broader context while critically examining the underpinnings that have shaped its trajectory. This chapter aims to encapsulate the essence of the research findings, juxtapose them against the existing literature, and contextualise the experiences of the women from a specific caste and class in Bangladesh within the overarching structures of caste, class, patriarchy, capitalism, and colonisation. Through this discourse, I hope not only to answer the foundational research questions posed at the outset of this thesis but also to identify the novel contributions this study brings to the field, potential avenues for future research, and implications for policy-making. In doing so, this chapter seeks to weave a coherent narrative that bridges the gaps between individual experiences, systemic forces, and scholarly works, offering a holistic understanding of the subject at hand.

Researcher's Positionality and Assumptions

When I began this study, like so many people I problematised tokai: that is, I saw their work as an act of desperation, the only option available to low-caste, poor women. I saw the health and social problems associated with informal waste picking. I believed they were victims of an oppressive but complex social system. Having encountered tokai and worked in depth with the valuable stories they provided I am now in a position to critique my assumptions.

Each tokai is uniquely different. Patriarchy, capitalism, and colonisation can influence us to think about and treat all tokai the same way or assume they all have the same characteristics. It is very tempting to generalise tokai as a class of women, but in reality, each woman has their own individual class, caste, marriage, gender, and understanding of capitalism. They are all influenced differently, and they all have different responses to these influences; therefore, we can make general comments about tokai.

There are some commonalities among tokai such as gender, religion, and (lower) caste, as well as their desire for freedom and self-determination, the latter two being their highest values. These women who elected to become tokai migrated from their villages or rural areas because they wanted freedom, flexibility, and the ability to decide their own circumstances and futures. They wanted something better than the role set out for them by their caste, class, and social circumstances and they were willing to tolerate almost anything, such as terrible conditions, horrible marriages, and awful relationships, to preserve their autonomy and self-determination. For example, Saleha, a disabled tokai, said that her husband stopped beating and assaulting her

after she started earning. She became independent in her life and made her own decisions after gaining financial security by engaging in informal waste picking. She was then empowered to protest against her husband's misbehaviour and oppression after gaining her autonomy. She asked why her husband beat her if he was not feeding her. She was fed by her earnings, and she was no longer dependent on him. If she relied on him, if she asked him to buy a dress for her, then he felt he had a right to dominate and control her. She had the economic power to protest against him now. This example shows that her economic independence supports her release from her husband's domination and violence. It also illustrates that waste picking is a job that enables a disabled person to be independent of male oppression and control: an informal, waste picking job can be a threat to the traditional, patriarchal system in South Asian countries.

After conducting interviews and data analysis, my assumptions have been both challenged and changed. I originally planned to recommend social policy reforms to improve the conditions for tokai and their livelihood, and to help them connect with local people and local government to become normal employees, thereby improving their social position and status in society. I realise now that none of this is appropriate. Autonomy is the highest value for tokai, and to propose an externally imposed policy reform would be to remove that autonomy, and simply replace one kind of oppression with another; to replace social and economic oppression with a government plan. This is not to say that reforms, recommendations, and policies are not needed and that the health and inequalities that tokai face are not very real: they certainly are. However, a simple government policy reform, even a well-intended one, is not the way forward. It is better if the recommendations and interventions come from the tokai themselves rather than being imposed from the government and others.

While the need for societal transformation and policy reforms to address the challenges faced by tokai cannot be discounted, the onus of spearheading such changes must lie with the tokai themselves. External interventions, no matter how well-intentioned, carry the risk of stifling the very spirit of autonomy and self-determination that the tokai so valiantly uphold. It is a poignant reminder that true empowerment comes not from external salvation but from the amplification of inherent strengths and voices.

Summary of the Findings

The study illuminates the motivations and challenges of tokai who do not simply view waste picking as a means of income generation. Instead, within the socio-political and religious constraints of South Asia, they search for dignity, liberty, flexibility, and a deeper sense of purpose. Autonomy emerges not as an end-goal for these women, but as a vital survival strategy.

Despite facing health risks, unsavoury work conditions, and personal hardships, the overarching desire for self-determination often outweighs the pursuit of a better quality of life for many.

Work dynamics play a significant role in the lives of tokai. Findings from Chapters Five and Nine emphasise the inherent flexibility and freedom associated with tokai work. This flexibility, often preferred over more structured formal work, serves as a buffer against mental stress and offers an avenue for independence. The study also unveils a willingness among tokai to sacrifice their well-being for autonomy. For many, the act of waste picking becomes a means of setting a precedent of autonomy for their children and future generations.

Religious beliefs and cultural practices heavily influence the lives of tokai. The prevailing marriage system, shaped by these beliefs, often puts tokai at a disadvantage, amplifying male privileges like polygamy. Some tokai utilise religious teachings as coping mechanisms for daily challenges. The story of Mafuja exemplifies this, where religious beliefs rationalise and help endure oppressive marital situations. On the other hand, the practice of polygamy by their husbands causes significant strain in their marital lives. This strain, compounded by a lack of legal validation for separations, becomes a recurrent theme in their narratives.

A salient theme from the study is the idea of tokai navigating multiple identities. In urban spaces, they may be viewed as economically disadvantaged, but in their native villages, they often enjoy a perception of relative affluence. Their role in financially supporting their families, despite facing societal challenges, often affords them a degree of respect and liberty. Discrimination, however, remains a pervasive challenge. Many tokai face income and gender discrimination. Yet, stories like Asma's show that some defy these stereotypes, assert their autonomy, and actively challenge male domination and socio-cultural norms.

Systemic discrimination also manifests in restricted access to essential services for tokai. Their voices and narratives have often been silenced or overshadowed due to societal, economic, and political oppression. Yet, through it all, employment emerges as a beacon of hope. For many tokai, it provides a pathway to self-worth, empowerment, and freedom. The transformative impact of the freedom and choices that paid work offers cannot be understated. Further insights from this study will focus on the array of influences, including colonialism, migration patterns, the dynamics of the male-dominated waste labour market, the gendered division of space, patriarchy, the role of religion, and systemic exclusions.

Influences of Colonialism and Migration

The historical evolution of the tokai in Bangladesh was shaped by the socio-economic structures that emerged from the combined influences of British colonialism and the local Mughal regime. Drawing upon the works of researchers like Asaduzzaman (2001b) and Jodhka and Shah (2010), it becomes evident that the plight of the tokai was interwoven with the decisions and activities of these powerful entities. The British colonization period, spanning from 1700–1947, ushered in monumental shifts in the socio-political landscape of the Indian subcontinent, including East Bengal, which is modern-day Bangladesh. Dalrymple (2021) posits that while the presence of the British may have been numerically minimal, their influence was both profound and pervasive. Through strategic alliances and collaborations, they managed to establish an enduring dominion in the region. Amidst this backdrop, the tokai, who are often considered a mix of Hindu and Muslim Dalits (Asaduzzaman, 2001b), became emblematic of a particular socio-economic tragedy. The term Dalit, traditionally rooted in the Hindu caste system, took on a broader connotation in the Muslim-majority context of Bangladesh, representing the marginalized and the oppressed. As noted by Jodhka and Shah (2010), due to certain socioeconomic factors, these communities, who were initially employed during the Mughal period, became especially vulnerable to exploitation during the British era.

Dalrymple (2021) highlights that the British, despite their limited numbers, effectively leveraged local power structures, partnering with local elites to ensure their dominion. This had a cascading effect on communities like the tokai. Many of them, lured by the promise of jobs and better living conditions (Asaduzzaman, 2001a), were often despatched to menial tasks, particularly those viewed as undesirable by the higher classes. This pattern of employment, while having roots in the Mughal period, was amplified during British rule. The practice of offering incentives such as free alcohol and tea to the tokai further underscores the exploitative nature of their employment. These workers, driven by desperation and the need for survival, became ensnared in a system that promised much but delivered little (Asaduzzaman, 2001a). This work, drawing on comprehensive sources, paints a vivid picture of a community's evolution through the annals of history. It is a potent reminder that the past, as influenced by colonial policies, continues to shape and influence present-day realities.

The experiences of Razia serve as a striking reminder of the exploitative systems that have evolved over centuries and continue to persist in various forms today. The waste dealer's promises and subsequent lack of follow-through echo the historical manipulations and hollow assurances provided by colonial masters and native elite collaborators. Razia's story also demonstrates the obvious power dynamic in which those in positions of influence – be it British

colonial rulers or waste dealers – leverage their authority to manipulate and exploit those at the societal periphery. This overarching theme of exploitation resonates deeply within the context of British colonialism. Just as Razia's waste dealer promised her a better future and did not deliver, the British colonial powers made similar hollow promises to native populations to ensure a continuous supply of cheap labour for their enterprises (Banerjee & Mehta, 2017).

The analogy to African kings participating in the slave trade further drives home the concept of native elites partaking in and benefiting from the oppression of their own people (Freeman, 1980). In the case of the tokai, the exploitation was not solely an outcome of British colonial agendas but was also perpetuated by upper-caste Bengali collaborators who sought to further their interests at the expense of the marginalized. However, it is essential to recognise that while colonial history and its exploitative mechanisms played a significant role in the establishment and perpetuation of such systems, the dynamics have evolved over time. Today's waste dealers, while reminiscent of the past's exploitative actors, operate within a different socio-economic landscape. The division of labour, initially created through the economic and political stratagems of British colonisers and their upper-caste collaborators, now persists in nuanced ways, shaped by both historical legacies and contemporary socio-economic forces (Singh, 2002). The continuity of this cycle of oppression underscores a deep-seated problem in society, where structures, once established, can endure and adapt to changing times, continuing to marginalise those deemed lower or with a difference that is devalued. It also highlights the necessity for active intervention, policy reforms, and societal changes to break these cycles and provide marginalised communities like the tokai a fair opportunity in society.

This research endeavours to challenge and expand the existing narratives surrounding the origins and reasons behind the existence of tokai. While conventional literature has predominantly attributed the emergence of tokai to influences from the British colonial legacy, Mughal empire dynamics, and local collaborators, the nuanced experiences and narratives of the tokai themselves paint a more diverse and multifaceted picture. Stories like Laboni's and Mafuja's shatter the one-dimensional representation of tokai as merely products of colonial or caste impositions. Instead, they highlight the resilient human spirit seeking better opportunities, autonomy, and agency. Laboni's migration to the city, driven by natural disasters and subsequent losses, underlines how individual circumstances and personal histories play pivotal roles in shaping livelihood choices. Mafuja's journey from being a waste picker to an entrepreneur illuminates the aspirations and resilience inherent in many tokai, challenging societal assumptions of their passivity or victimhood.

The comprehensive list of pull and push factors presented in Chapter Five adds further depth to the understanding of the motivations of tokai. Factors like viewing the landfill as ‘Mother’, the allure of direct cash incomes, the freedom from stringent labour contracts, and opportunities for personal relationships diversify the understanding of why one might choose waste picking. Conversely, societal challenges like early marriages, lower caste classifications, family poverty, and gender-driven income disparities elucidate the many push factors that might compel individuals towards this line of work. While the roots of the tokai phenomenon may trace back to the colonial era, it is evident that their existence and persistence in today's world are informed by a complex interplay of socio-cultural, economic, and political factors. The story of each tokai is a tapestry woven with threads of personal experiences, socio-cultural realities, economic imperatives, and individual aspirations.

My call for further research on tokai or their equivalents in other cultures is not only timely but necessary. It is essential to understand and appreciate that while systems of oppression might create or exacerbate certain societal divisions, the individuals within these systems are not mere passive recipients of their circumstances. They possess agency, dreams, and the capacity for resilience. As a researcher, it is my responsibility to recognize, amplify, and respect these narratives, ensuring they are not overshadowed by larger historical or socio-political discourses.

Informal Waste Picking in a Patriarchal Tradition

Chapter Six and Nine of this thesis explore the multifaceted nature of male dominance within the realm of waste picking in Bangladesh. Notably, they underscore the idea that this male dominance can manifest either as outright oppression and marginality, or conversely, as an avenue for negotiation with entrenched patriarchal systems in the quest for self-reliance and autonomy.

Using Walby's theories, I specifically analyse the experiences of tokai in Bangladesh through the lens of structural patriarchy. Walby's framework helps in understanding how patriarchal norms and power structures permeate different aspects of the lives of tokai, from their relegation to low-income, less-skilled jobs like waste picking to their vulnerability to various forms of gender-based violence. By applying Walby's concept of private and public patriarchy, I explore the dual realms of oppression faced by tokai, both in domestic spaces and in the broader societal context. This theoretical approach shapes my analysis by highlighting the intersections of gender with caste, class, and capitalism, thereby providing a comprehensive understanding of the complex identities and challenges faced by tokai in a patriarchal society.

Patriarchy in Bangladesh extends beyond mere male dominance. As delineated by Chowdhury (2009, 2015), it constitutes a systemic framework through which men control various facets of women's lives, including their income, property rights, sexual health, and overall livelihood. The uniqueness of patriarchy in Bangladesh stems from the inextricable intertwining of religion with patriarchal norms. The blurred lines between religious dictates and patriarchal norms make the distinction between the two nebulous. This intertwining amplifies the control men exert over women, with religious norms often serving as the foundation for patriarchal dominance (Feldman, 2001; Kabeer, 2011; Schuler et al., 1996). Historically, the roots of this entrenched patriarchy trace back to at least the era of British colonization. As proposed by researchers such as Khanal and Sen (2020) and Spencer-Wood (2016), the British regime significantly influenced gender roles and dynamics in South Asia. Their colonial rule played a pivotal role in solidifying gender hierarchies, often to the detriment of women.

However, it is crucial to understand that the British colonial influence was not the genesis of patriarchy in the region. Sinha (2017) underscores the prevalence of patriarchy during the Mughal period, suggesting that even then societal constructs were deeply rooted in religious rituals, values, and beliefs. The Mughal influence on Indian society, characterized by its religious interpretations, fortified the gender hierarchies, and further marginalized women. The emphasis on women's oppression and marginality during this period, as highlighted by Sinha (2017), underscores the long-standing nature of this issue. While the colonial British regime might have further entrenched and perpetuated patriarchal norms, they were not its instigators. These norms, rooted in religion and the interpretation of religious scriptures, have persisted for centuries, moulding the social fabric of South Asia and presenting both challenges and opportunities for women as they navigate their spaces and assert their agency.

The present thesis challenges Khan's (2021) perspective by suggesting that the vulnerability of marginalised communities, especially those of women, stems not just from traditional patriarchy and religious constructs, but also from a confluence of social, economic, and institutional factors. Factors such as marriage customs, class, caste, poverty, and dominant societal institutions play significant roles in shaping women's lives and their marginality. This broader view suggests that the decision by women to engage in waste picking as *tokai* is not only influenced by their vulnerability or marginality but also represents a strategic choice aimed at gaining economic autonomy, breaking traditional norms, and challenging the patriarchal status quo.

Kabeer (2016) frames Bangladesh as a typical patriarchal society, where a man's identity and societal role are primarily defined by his status as the provider for his family. Hunnicutt (2009)

extends this understanding by noting that male domination is prevalent not only in the private sphere of family and social relationships but also in public spaces such as markets, government policies, law, and religion. Within this context, women's entry into paid work, particularly in a traditionally male-dominated field like waste picking, can be perceived as a challenge to male authority and social norms. For instance, participant Alisa's experience reveals how her earning income as a tokai is seen as a threat to her husband's authority and societal image. Such narratives illustrate that women's involvement in paid work like waste picking is not just about economic necessity; it is also a form of social and patriarchal challenge. It underlines the potential for women's economic activities to subvert traditional gender roles and power dynamics within the household and society.

The present thesis further asserts the importance of public space in providing women access to markets, empowerment opportunities, and socio-economic power. Moser's (1980) theory that access to employment fulfils both practical and strategic needs for women supports this idea. Employment is not just about meeting immediate financial necessities; it is also crucial for women's broader socio-economic empowerment and independence from men. Syed (2008) highlights the lower participation of women in the workforce in Muslim-majority countries compared to non-Muslim nations, attributing it to social and religious barriers. However, in Bangladesh, the growing participation of Muslim women in informal waste work like tokai challenges these norms. It not only indicates a shift towards women's economic participation but also represents a movement towards autonomy, empowerment, and entrepreneurship, as illustrated by the increasing number of Muslim women joining the informal waste sector (Lata et al., 2021).

This study offers a nuanced view of the role of waste picking in empowering marginalized women. It demonstrates that while factors like poverty, caste, and class push women into this work, the nature of the job itself provides a unique opportunity for these women to challenge and negotiate traditional social and religious constraints, carving a path toward greater autonomy and empowerment. The traditional framework of male guardianship in Bangladeshi society delineated by Ahmed et al. (2000) underscores the institutionalised power dynamics that men exert over women. From birth to adulthood, the traditional paradigm places women in positions of dependence, with their fathers, brothers, or husbands dictating their choices and trajectories. This arrangement, as noted by Sanauddin et al. (2016) and White (2017), often acts as a barrier, limiting women's participation in external labour forces and confining them to domestic realms.

However, this study shines a spotlight on the nuanced experiences of tokai, revealing that their perceptions and experiences of male guardianship diverge from established norms. The traditional view sees guardianship as a protective shield, ensuring women's safety and upholding family honour. But for many tokai, guardianship was absent, detrimental, or stifling. Sriti's narrative poignantly underscores the variability of experiences under guardianship. Her life, marked by the absence of maternal love and a strained relationship with her father, continued its tumultuous trajectory after her marriage to an abusive husband. However, her subsequent emancipation from male guardianship empowered her, allowing her to harness her independence and navigate life on her terms. Sriti's experiences encapsulate the broader theme of the study: the absence of traditional support structures, rather than diminishing these women, often propels them to chart their own path, developing resilience, resourcefulness, and autonomy along the way.

The cultural practice of multiple marriages in Bangladesh further exemplifies the patriarchal leverage men have. It is not just a system that allows them to exercise marital dominance but also serves to consolidate their socio-cultural power. Rina's story elucidates this intricate dynamic. Her husband's multiple marriages solidify his public image of masculinity. Despite having multiple wives, he does not bear the financial responsibility for them; rather, it is shouldered by the wives themselves. This highlights a multi-layered patriarchy where women not only navigate their relationships with their husbands but also grapple with societal structures that enable male dominance.

The experiences of tokai provide invaluable insights into the intricate web of patriarchy and male guardianship in Bangladeshi society. While the dominant narrative emphasizes the protective nature of guardianship, the lived experiences of these women reveal a complex tapestry of challenges, resilience, and empowerment. The study underscores the need to reconceptualise the traditional notions of guardianship, recognizing its multi-faceted impacts on women's lives, and the potential for autonomy and empowerment even in its absence. The narratives presented shed light on a significant aspect of the socio-economic dynamics within the lives of tokai women, revealing a complex intersection of patriarchy, economic survival, and marital dynamics in Bangladeshi society.

The present study reveals that some men leverage the traditional marital framework, especially the allowance of multiple marriages in Islam, to exploit their wives economically (White, 2017). The reliance on their wives' earnings from waste picking seems counterintuitive to traditional gender roles. The stories of Rina and Nasrin unveil this ironic inversion of roles where the

husband becomes economically dependent on the wife while still maintaining an oppressive patriarchal dominance (Miedema et al., 2021). Despite this economic reliance on their wives, the need to uphold societal perceptions of masculinity remains paramount for many men (Atkinson et al., 2005). As in the case of Nasrin's husband, the facade of independent work (rickshaw driving or business) is maintained to avoid societal judgment and emasculation (Ahmed, 1986). While Islam does allow multiple marriages, the narratives suggest that this religious provision is sometimes misused, not as a religious right but rather as a tool for economic exploitation (White, 2017). Women like Asma find their earnings being used to enable their husband's pursuit of additional marriages, essentially turning marital relationships into economic ventures (Chowdhury et al., 2020).

It is heartening to see that not all tokai are passive in these dynamics. Despite the overarching patriarchal setting, some have found ways to negotiate with their husbands for greater autonomy (Das et al., 2015). They have learned to manage their finances and save money, ensuring a degree of independence. Yet, many remain trapped by religious and societal expectations, like Jahanara, who feels obligated to obey her husband due to religious beliefs and societal norms (Hasan et al., 2018). The juxtaposition of economic empowerment with socio-cultural oppression paints a complex emotional landscape for the tokai (Kabeer, 2016). On one hand, they derive self-worth and pride from being breadwinners and supporting their families. On the other, they grapple with the challenges of navigating a marriage within a patriarchal framework, which often curtails their autonomy (Hunnicut, 2009).

The presented narratives in this study draw attention to the intricate dance between economic independence and socio-cultural obligations of tokai in Bangladesh. The dynamics within a marriage, as illustrated by Jahanara's experience, paint a picture where fulfilling traditional marital obligations often overshadows a woman's need for autonomy (Jahan, 1975). This goes beyond just following the spouse's desires, extending into traditional household services and roles. The belief that "heaven lies under their husband's feet" is deeply rooted in religious and cultural traditions, and is reflective of a broader societal belief system that emphasizes subservience to male authority. While economic independence outside the home does bring about a certain empowerment, this does not necessarily translate into an equal footing within marital dynamics. As evident from the narratives, many tokai grapple with the choice between maintaining their family structures and asserting their newfound economic independence (Rowbotham, 2014). The case of Roksana provides a poignant example of women resisting deep-rooted patriarchal norms. Forced into an oppressive marital situation, her resilience and determination allowed her to break free from both the confines of a dangerous marital bond and societal expectations (White, 2017).

While waste picking may carry with it societal stigmas, for many, it serves as a path to self-assertion, breaking barriers, and challenging the entrenched patriarchy (Hirschman, 2016; Wittmer, 2021).

The concept of male marriage privilege is glaringly evident in the experiences shared, and poses a systemic challenge for many women. Roksana's tale is a testament to the extremities this privilege can extend to, with her husband willing to commodify her for financial gain. The term husband supremacy aptly encapsulates this toxic dynamic, highlighting the gendered power structures that are deeply ingrained in Bangladeshi society (Karim et al., 2022). Despite these systemic challenges, it is evident that a section of tokai are finding their voices, leveraging their economic positions to assert their rights, and challenge traditional marital norms. The sentiments echoed by Roksana and others suggest a simmering undercurrent of resistance against marital oppression and a desire for more agency in their life choices.

The narratives from the studies cited focus on the intersectionality of religious interpretation, cultural norms, and gender dynamics. Baobaid (2006) highlights a critical distinction between religious teachings and their cultural interpretations. Islam, as a religion, posits equality between genders. However, its interpretation, especially in specific cultural contexts, can be distorted to uphold patriarchal norms. The dichotomy between religious scripture and cultural values often leads to the perpetuation of gender biases and male domination. Baobaid underscores how male propaganda, rooted in selective and often skewed interpretations of religious texts, is manipulated and weaponised to maintain male supremacy. Such practices are more profound among marginalized communities, like the tokai, who might not have direct access to the primary religious sources. Their reliance on intermediaries, often male figures, for religious teachings makes them susceptible to biased interpretations (Baobaid, 2006). The lack of direct religious knowledge creates a significant barrier especially for marginalised women to challenge the patriarchal norms imposed on them. Their limited exposure to religious teachings, coupled with the patriarchal interpretations they receive, hinders their ability to contest the male dominance grounded in misinterpreted religious beliefs.

The dynamics of multiple marriages among tokai communities serves as an interesting lens to observe gender relationships. On one hand, it is indicative of the deeply rooted male marriage privilege and dominance. On the other, as the study suggests, it may also provide some women with the leverage or circumstances to break free from oppressive marital relationships. But the complexities surrounding multiple marriages are not limited to marginalised communities. The dynamics among the wealthy, especially regarding multiple marriages and its impact on educated

women, warrants exploration. Additionally, investigating the causes of divorce among educated families can provide deeper insights into changing gender dynamics, societal expectations, and the influence of education on marital relationships.

The present study underscores the intricate relationship between cultural values, religious interpretations, and gender dynamics in Islamic countries as they impact tokai. While religion might advocate for equality, cultural practices and male-centric interpretations can distort its message, leading to entrenched patriarchal norms. The experiences of tokai, as highlighted, serve as a microcosm of these larger societal dynamics, offering valuable insights into the challenges and potential pathways for change.

Influences of Muslim Norms on Waste Picking

This examination of the role of Islamic rules (Hadith) and interpretations in shaping the socio-cultural landscape of Bangladesh sheds light on the complexities of gender dynamics in the region. A few key takeaways emerge. The distinction between public and private spaces, as understood in Bangladesh, is deeply influenced by its religious norms. Public spaces are predominantly male-dominated, while women are relegated to the private spaces, often curtailing their visibility and participation in public life (Bhuiya & Chowdhury, 2002; Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 2001). Murshid (2001) offers an insightful analysis of the entanglement of religion with politics in Bangladesh. Political parties often exploit religious tenets, utilizing them as campaign tools, especially to sway marginalized sections of the population. This manipulation sometimes extends to emphasizing particular religious ideas and practices as guidelines for daily living, with an aim to cement their electoral position. The present research emphasises the unique position of the tokai within the broader societal structure of Bangladesh. Their marginalised socio-economic status, coupled with religious interpretations that often underscore male supremacy, ensures that tokai, particularly women, endure oppression, discrimination, and abuse. The account of Marium exemplifies the challenges faced by many Muslim women in accessing productive resources and thereby achieving economic autonomy (Ahmed, 2008). The overarching theme that emerges from the accounts is the profound impact of religious interpretations on consolidating male privilege. Men generally occupy positions of power, both in private and public spheres, fortified by societal norms rooted in religious teachings and interpretations (Ahmed et al., 2001; Amin & Li, 1997).

Patriarchal norms supported by Islamic interpretations, restrict women's economic participation outside the home (Hossain, 2018). Even when women become the breadwinners, it often leads to societal stigma and feelings of shame for their spouses. The intersectionality of religious

interpretations, political manipulation, and socio-cultural norms in Bangladesh adds to the multi-layered context in which gender roles and dynamics manifest. The experiences of the tokai serve as a testament to these complexities and offer a window into the challenges and potential pathways for change. Future work in this area can further dissect these interwoven narratives to highlight nuances and identify strategies for advancing gender equity in the region.

The narratives of participants, offer a poignant look into the entrenched patterns of hegemonic masculinity in the country. There are several important takeaways and reflections from the provided context. Hegemonic masculinity in Bangladesh not only exerts dominance over physical domains but also permeates the emotional landscape, often depriving women of their autonomy over feelings and desires. Such a pervasive definition of masculinity suppresses women's emotional spectrum, ranging from care and admiration to sexual desires (Kane, 2006; A. R. Khan et al., 2022). Haque and Kusakabe (2005) highlight two critical realms of masculinity: public and household. In the public realm, men predominantly socialise with other men, reinforcing the male-dominated structure of society. In the household, men wield their power, securing their status as the primary breadwinners and controlling the domestic space. Rahima's testimony underlines the powerful interplay of religious interpretations and societal norms in bolstering male domination. Her resigned acceptance of her husband's control underscores the deep-seated belief in predestination and the pervasive influence of societal norms (which are often conflated with religious tenets) on individual agency.

Participant accounts emphasise that the systemic oppression of women, a phenomenon not restricted to Bangladesh but also seen across the Indian subcontinent, acts as a propellant for maintaining hegemonic masculinity (Heasley & Crane, 2012). Laijo's story vividly illustrates this, where her husband's multiple marriages are sanctioned by religious and cultural norms, while the mere thought of a woman having multiple husbands is stigmatized, even to the extent of being labelled with derogatory terms like "খাচ্চর বা মাগি" (*characterless or prostitutes*). Laijo's acceptance of the societal status quo, despite being subjected to oppressive marital dynamics, speaks to the deep-rooted beliefs and cultural norms that continue to govern gender relationships in Bangladesh. Her comments on কুরকুরানি *korkorani* (sexual interest) reveal the internalised shame and fear associated with female sexual desires, which are often suppressed in patriarchal societies.

The testimonies and analyses provided highlight the intricacies of gender relations in Bangladesh, set against the backdrop of religious interpretations, societal norms, and entrenched patriarchy. Addressing these deeply embedded patterns necessitates a multifaceted approach, encompassing

educational initiatives, societal reforms, and shifts in religious interpretations that foreground gender equity.

Participants underscored the detrimental effects of entrenched patriarchal norms, particularly within religious marriage systems in Muslim societies of South Asian countries, on the mental and physical health of Dalit women. There are several significant points of reflection from the narratives. Hindu Dalits, historically oppressed due to their caste position in South Asia, face multi-layered discrimination. When combined with gender-based oppression, Dalit women become particularly vulnerable to numerous adversities (Komanapalli & Rao, 2021; Verma & Acharya, 2018). Fatema's personal account epitomises the neglect and abuse that many women in similar societal positions face. Her husband's lack of empathy and callousness during her illness, combined with forced labour and coercive intimacy, further deteriorates her well-being. Such experiences can lead to heightened stress, depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues.

The patriarchal religious marriage system not only leads to psychological distress but also exposes women to an array of physical health risks. Poor diets can result in malnutrition and related diseases; forced and unprotected intimacy can lead to unwanted pregnancies, STIs, and complications; drug use and tobacco consumption can induce addiction and long-term health complications; and hazardous work can lead to injuries, disabilities, and exposure to harmful chemicals or environments. Sleep deprivation can further exacerbate mental health issues and lower immune responses (Matheson et al., 2021). Patriarchal norms deeply ingrained in Muslim marriages can dictate healthcare-seeking behaviours, and can deter women from seeking medical attention due to shame, fear of societal judgment, or because of their husbands' or families' refusal. Moreover, many might not have the autonomy or resources to access healthcare services (Sholkamy, 2023).

The study accentuates that the challenges faced by tokai in the male-dominated waste picking profession are multifaceted. Lack of education, minimal marketable skills, limited opportunities, sparse social networks, and pervasive poverty further solidify male dominance. Existing research by Barnabas et al. (2009) and Kabeer (2008) resonates with these findings, suggesting that these barriers are not unique to tokai but are widespread.

Seidler (2006) notes that this aversion is not just prevalent among less educated or lower socio-economic groups. Educated, affluent men also restrict their wives from joining the workforce, viewing women's participation in paid work as a deviation from the established norm. Chen (1986) provides a more nuanced understanding of purdah, highlighting its role in excluding

women from the public domain, which encompasses economic, social, and political activities. This exclusion drastically limits the opportunities available to women and perpetuates their dependency on male members of the family. In Bangladesh, purdah is not just a social or cultural practice; it also acts as a formal deterrent to women's entry into the labour force. Studies by Agarwal and Bina (1994), Amin (1997), and Haque (2010) reinforce this notion, indicating that purdah systematically hampers women's economic independence and mobility. While for rural wealthy women, purdah is a symbol of status and power, for working-class women like the tokai, practicality often takes precedence. Women in the Ready-Made Garment (RMG) sector, by virtue of their employment outside the home, are already challenging socio-religious expectations. Beyond this, they also adapt their dress code and interact freely with male colleagues, thereby further breaking traditional boundaries. The practice of purdah is not universal but rather influenced by socio-economic factors. While for rural wealthy women, it is a symbol of status and power, for working-class women like the tokai, practicality often takes precedence.

While Bangladesh has seen notable progress in women's education and health sectors over the decades, the practice of purdah underscores the persistent patriarchal beliefs that restrict women's autonomy and participation in the public sphere. Challenging these norms and creating a more equitable society requires comprehensive efforts, ranging from policy initiatives to grassroots-level societal change.

Participant narratives offer a practical perspective on the practice of purdah, among the tokai community in Bangladesh. The nature of their work, often in unclean environments, and the associated practical difficulties make wearing purdah unfeasible. Kajol's narrative emphasizes the practical difficulties of wearing purdah, especially during the hot summer months. The physical discomfort, combined with the demands of her occupation, outweighs the societal expectations placed on her as a Muslim woman. Despite the challenges and her decision not to wear purdah while working, Kajol respects the tradition and dons it in her village as a sign of respect to the elders. This dual approach to purdah suggests that for some women, it can be a symbol of empowerment, respect, and identity in certain contexts, while being impractical in others. Her experience underscores the disparity between rural and urban practices. While purdah might still hold significance in village settings, its relevance diminishes in urban landscapes, the practice of purdah is therefore not universal but rather influenced by socio-economic factors. The distinction between rural and urban perspectives on purdah has been observed in prior research (Feldman, 2022; Haque, 2010). However, choosing not to wear purdah in public spaces is a bold statement against established societal and religious norms. This decision reflects a broader trend

among women in Muslim countries, who are gradually redefining their roles and breaking free from restrictive traditions. By choosing their attire based on practicality and personal preference, these women are indirectly challenging and negotiating with deep-seated socio-cultural norms (Haque, 2010; Mir-Hosseini, 2007). Kajol's narrative provides a fresh perspective on the practice of purdah in Bangladesh. It showcases the adaptability of cultural practices, the practical challenges faced by certain communities, and the evolving nature of women's roles and choices in contemporary Muslim societies.

Kajol underscores the fluidity and adaptive nature of the practice of purdah in Bangladesh, particularly among certain communities like the tokai and female workers in the Ready-Made Garment (RMG) sector.

Kulsom's choice of wearing a long saree is pragmatic. It serves as a means to reduce potential harassment, underlining how dress can be employed as a protective mechanism in public spaces. Older tokai women's choice to abandon purdah while working at the dumpsite showcases the flexibility in adherence to cultural practices based on situational requirements. The choice of many tokai to forgo purdah when working in public spaces represents a direct challenge to established societal norms. Their ability to claim public spaces, traditionally reserved for men, signals a shift in cultural dynamics. Kajol, Kulsom, and other tokai showcase resilience by prioritizing autonomy and survival over traditionally imposed restrictions. Their stories exemplify the daily negotiations women make to challenge patriarchal and religious barriers. In a twist of societal expectations, purdah has evolved from a religious and cultural mandate to a symbol of privilege in certain contexts. While traditionally used to denote modesty and adherence to Islamic principles, in contemporary Bangladesh, among some groups, it highlights socio-economic status.

Participants offered a nuanced understanding into the evolving nature of purdah in Bangladesh. The choices made by women, whether in the RMG sector or among the tokai, highlight the interplay of culture, socio-economics, and individual agency in shaping contemporary societal norms.

Empowerment and Survival Strategies

Drawing on Foucault's Theory of Power, I explore the complex power dynamics that shape the lives and social contexts of tokai in Bangladesh. Foucault's conceptualization of power as relational, based on practices, techniques, and procedures, helps us to understand how power operates in waste picking, the association of power with gender, the ways tokai are controlled, and strategies for changing their subordinate status. This theory allowed me to explore how

different actors and institutions wield power over tokai, influencing their roles and experiences in waste management, and how gendered power relations further marginalize them. Additionally, I focus on empowerment, particularly of women, by investigating the capacities, abilities, and strengths of tokai. This approach identifies ways to transform power relations and empower tokai, recognizing the diversity among them and the various factors, including caste, class, and gender, that shape their experiences. Ultimately, my research use of Foucault's framework seeks not only to analyse existing power dynamics but also to contribute to the empowerment and agency of this marginalised community.

Foucault's Theory of Power significantly shaped my analysis by providing a framework to understand the intricate power dynamics within the waste picking community of tokai. His concept of power as pervasive and relational allowed me to explore how power is exercised in the waste picking sector, particularly in how tokai are positioned and how their roles are defined and constrained. This perspective enabled me to dissect the association between power and gender, revealing how patriarchal power structures further marginalise tokai women within this sector. By applying Foucault's ideas, I was able to scrutinise the mechanisms of control over tokai, such as societal norms, institutional practices, and discourses that dictate their status and limit their agency. This analysis brought to light the various ways tokai are subjected to and resist these power structures.

Furthermore, Foucault's emphasis on the potential for transformation of power relationships guided my focus on empowerment. This aspect of my research involved examining the strengths and capacities of tokai, seeking pathways for changing their subordinate status. This approach aligns with Foucault's view that power is not just repressive but can also be a source of positive change.

In summary, Foucault's Theory of Power shaped my analysis by providing a lens to view the multi-layered power relations in the lives of tokai, enabling an exploration of both their subjugation and potential for empowerment within the context of waste picking.

Chapter Nine highlighted the resilience, adaptability, and agency of tokai in navigating socio-economic challenges in a patriarchal society. Contrary to some societal assumptions that marginalized groups are passive victims, tokai exhibit a strong sense of agency. They make conscious decisions based on their circumstances, highlighting their autonomy in a challenging environment. The fluidity of identity emerges as a survival strategy for many tokai. By maintaining multiple identities, they can navigate different spaces and situations more effectively. This could mean portraying themselves differently in professional, personal, and public spheres

to leverage the advantages associated with each identity. The decision to hide their occupational identities can be viewed as a tactic to avoid stigmatisation or discrimination. By doing so, tokai can access resources or opportunities that might be denied to them if their true occupation was known. This concealment underscores the societal prejudices they face and their astute ability to negotiate these prejudices.

Cash employment provides tokai with tangible benefits. It gives them a degree of financial independence, which can be instrumental in altering power dynamics in their favor. Economic self-sufficiency can lead to greater empowerment and reduce dependency on male figures or the broader patriarchal system. With the financial power they gain, tokai are in a position to negotiate or even challenge the established patriarchal norms. This economic strength can be a tool to question or manipulate the traditional systems that have historically subjugated them. The findings reiterate the interconnectedness of economic independence and shifts in societal power dynamics. When tokai have economic agency, they can start rewriting the narratives of their lives, challenging societal norms, and building a new, empowered identity. Their strategies, which include maintaining multiple identities and leveraging economic opportunities, underscore their resilience and resourcefulness in the face of systemic challenges. The chapter also emphasizes the transformative power of economic liberation in challenging and renegotiating the structures of patriarchy.

The engagement of tokai in the workforce, particularly in cash-based roles, has far-reaching implications beyond the mere economic transaction. Despite the hardships faced, the entrepreneurial spirit of these women shines through, offering them a means to challenge and redefine societal norms (Chowdhury, 2010). As Halim (2020) and Salway et al. (2005) posit, the choice of work by these women, driven by economic necessity yet devoid of stringent educational prerequisites, marks a significant stride in urban development and women's empowerment. This juxtaposition of their challenges and achievements paints a vivid picture of the evolving landscape of women's roles in Bangladesh. Such participation has been pivotal in not only providing financial sustenance but also in reshaping their social dynamics. McCarthy and Feldman (1983) underline the significance of work as a conduit for increased access to information. This enhanced information flow can equip these women with knowledge that was previously unattainable due to societal and economic barriers. Moreover, as highlighted by Amin (1997) and Salway et al. (2005), active labour participation amplifies the tokai's social interactions, fostering relationships with co-workers and carving out a support system that is indispensable for their well-being and continued employment. This networking can serve as a lifeline, facilitating an exchange of resources, opportunities, and experiences.

Furthermore, there is an invaluable psychological dimension to this participation. Earning an income, having a role in a larger community, and forming networks contribute to a fortified sense of self-worth among the tokai. They transition from passive bystanders in their lives to active decision-makers, influenced by their newfound economic and social agency. This metamorphosis underscores the multifaceted benefits of their integration into the workforce, redefining their societal footprint and asserting their indispensable presence in the community.

Gender stereotyping, as Heilman (2012) points out, acts as a potent tool for undermining women's potential and narrowing their spectrum of rights and opportunities. Such stereotypes not only define societal expectations but also shape the self-concept of many women. Agarwal (2001) and Ellemers (2018) emphasise the profound impact of these stereotypes on women's self-perception, often leading them to undervalue their contributions and potential. This internalization of stereotypes serves the patriarchal narrative, transforming women from merely being the oppressed to becoming active participants in their own subjugation. However, the dynamics are not universally bleak. While society may conventionally view women's labour as secondary or supplementary, the experience of the tokai paints a picture of resilience and strategic negotiation. The present study sheds light on the capacity of these women to reframe the narrative. Instead of being confined by stereotypes, they tactically navigate them, using societal assumptions as a smokescreen while steadily forging a path toward autonomy. Their endeavours challenge the pervasive view of women's work being auxiliary, positioning their labour and contribution as central to their community's economy. Furthermore, their ability to mould a distinct social identity in their villages, despite the weight of traditional expectations, is a testament to their adaptive skills. It becomes evident that while patriarchy might endeavour to stifle their growth, the strategic navigation of societal norms by tokai showcases their resilience and agency.

In a patriarchal context, gendered lenses often overshadow genuine capability and potential, relegating women to roles and labels that rarely capture their entirety. The categorization of tokai as subordinates or as less-skilled workers is a manifestation of such systemic gender stereotyping. However, the lived experiences of the tokai defy these simplistic, reductionist assumptions. Their role as waste pickers is not just about survival; it is a declaration of independence and a conscious subversion of the societal norms that seek to confine them. The journey of the tokai showcases a shift from the traditional, passive roles dictated by the patriarchal system to proactive, self-reliant positions. By diving into the realm of informal waste picking, the tokai have carved out a niche for themselves, free from the suffocating grip of male dominance. Their entrepreneurial spirit, propelled by a desire for autonomy, symbolizes their transformative

journey from mere workers to decision-makers in their own right. Their ability to negotiate and redefine their positions within the constraints of patriarchy, turning challenges into opportunities for empowerment, exemplifies resilience. The study underscores a vital point: the inherent strength and adaptability of tokai, and women in similar positions, are not just about withstanding the pressures of a patriarchal society, but actively reshaping the narrative, charting a path of self-determined growth and empowerment.

Structural Influences on Waste Picking

Bronfenbrenner's multi-layered environmental approach significantly influenced my analysis of the various environmental stressors affecting tokai. By employing his framework, I was able to dissect and understand the complex interplay of different layers of the ecological systems impacting the lives of tokai, ranging from immediate personal environments to broader societal contexts. At the micro-level, I focussed on the immediate environments of tokai, such as their family dynamics, interpersonal relationships, and daily interactions within their communities. This level allowed me to examine how personal and direct relationships contribute to the stressors tokai face, such as domestic responsibilities, interpersonal conflicts, and the immediate impact of societal norms and expectations on their lives.

The meso-level analysis involved examining the connections between the various micro-systems in tokai lives, including the relationship between their family environments and community institutions (e.g., waste dealers). This helped in understanding how these interconnected environments create unique stressors, such as navigating the expectations of both family and work roles or dealing with societal attitudes within their local communities.

At the exo-level, we saw how external environmental factors that indirectly affect tokai, such as urban policies, the economic conditions of the waste picking industry, and local governmental actions that push and pull tokai into waste-picking. This level was crucial for understanding how larger socio-economic and political structures create systemic stressors that shape the conditions and opportunities available to tokai.

Finally, the macro-level allowed me to explore the overarching societal and cultural norms, beliefs, laws, and traditions that form the backdrop of the lives of tokai. This exploration included examining how broader societal attitudes towards waste picking, gender roles, and class and caste systems contribute to the environmental stressors faced by tokai, shaping their overall social and economic marginalization.

By utilizing Bronfenbrenner's framework, I was able to analyse the multi-layered environmental stressors in a comprehensive manner, considering how factors at each level interact and impact the lives of tokai. This holistic approach was instrumental in revealing the complexity of the challenges faced by tokai and the interdependencies of the various ecological systems in which they operate.

The issue of violence against women, as demonstrated in the chapters, is multifaceted and deeply entrenched in socio-cultural, religious, and economic structures. The tokai, already navigating the perils of a male-dominated society and workplace, find themselves caught in a web of oppressive marital relationships, societal expectations, and deep-rooted patriarchal norms. While existing studies have often attributed violence against women to factors like dowries, early marriages, and financial constraints, this research elicits more complex dynamics that exacerbate the situation for tokai.

The institution of marriage, often considered sacrosanct, presents its own challenges for tokai. The multiple rights granted to men within the context of an Islamic marital framework, along with issues stemming from arranged marriages, caste and class divisions, and an inherent male privilege system, amplify their vulnerabilities. Their status as informal workers further predispose them to acts of violence and harassment in public places. The alarming regularity with which males perceive their female colleagues as sexually available, as described by Mosse (1993), is reflective of a deep-rooted gender bias. Kulsom's experience underscores the audacious advances made by males who often misconstrue the intentions of tokai and their mere presence in public spaces. Such advances, laden with undertones of power dynamics, are sadly typical of patriarchal societies, where women's mobility and economic independence are still viewed with suspicion. However, amid these grim realities, the resilience and adaptability of the tokai shine through. Whether it is Momotaj's courageous confrontation with a harasser or Nasrin's preventive measures to safeguard herself, these women exemplify agency and strength in the face of adversity. Their strategies, detailed in Chapter Nine, are a testament to their indomitable spirit and determination to reclaim their dignity and space.

Yet, the systemic issues persist. The broader societal inclination to victim-blame, especially within authoritative structures, creates a vicious cycle that impedes justice and supports perpetrators. This study's revelations emphasise the dire need for a paradigm shift in societal attitudes, and for structures that ensure safety and justice for these women.

The health sector is often regarded as a fundamental reflection of a nation's commitment to its citizens. Access to quality healthcare is an intrinsic right of every individual, irrespective of their

socio-economic or professional background. However, the experiences narrated by tokai, such as Tania, shed light on the systemic biases deeply rooted within the healthcare ecosystem. Her reluctance to disclose her profession, the subtle financial extortions in the form of 'additional tests', the unsettling advances of professionals - all these paints a bleak picture of healthcare accessibility for marginalized communities. What exacerbates these experiences is the inherent power dynamic between the tokai and healthcare professionals. This dynamic is not just confined to personal interactions; it extends to the very core of healthcare infrastructure where the 'social status' of a patient determines the quality of care they receive, as seen in Tania's experience of being denied a bed. The psychological trauma, resulting from such discrimination, often leads to self-exclusion from healthcare facilities, putting their health further at risk. Her inclination towards spiritual solace in the face of systemic negligence reflects a broader trend among marginalized communities. When institutional structures fail them repeatedly, they tend to place their faith in higher powers, hoping for divine intervention.

This pattern of healthcare discrimination is not confined to the tokai community. The discrimination against Dalits, for instance, is emblematic of how deeply entrenched societal hierarchies permeate the healthcare sector. The caste system, which has been prevalent in the Indian subcontinent for millennia, has engendered severe healthcare disparities. Colonial-era policies further institutionalized these divides, cementing power structures and further marginalizing the Dalits. As studies by Sabharwal et al. (2014), Sharma Gautam and Hearn (2019), and Verma and Acharya (2018) indicate, caste-based discrimination has had a profound impact on the health outcomes and access to care for such communities. The parallels between the experiences of the tokai and those of the Dalits underscore a pressing need for structural reforms. Such reforms should aim not only at better healthcare infrastructure but also at sensitizing healthcare professionals to the diverse socio-economic backgrounds of patients. It is essential to ensure that every individual receives equitable treatment, both medically and socially, within healthcare settings. This nexus between caste or class-based discrimination and the quality and accessibility of healthcare is an important issue in all South Asian countries. Dalits face multifaceted barriers in accessing health services, ranging from direct discrimination by healthcare providers to indirect barriers like lack of knowledge, societal isolation, and lack of financial resources. This is not only an indictment on the healthcare system but also underscores the embedded cultural and systemic bias against marginalized communities.

Desai and Dubey (2011) move beyond the simplistic equation of healthcare accessibility with financial resources. Their research emphasizes the importance of social networks and proper information as pivotal elements in accessing quality health care. If an individual or community is

isolated, lacking robust social networks or access to accurate information, their health-seeking behaviour is adversely impacted, regardless of financial capability. Such barriers are further complicated by the social position of marginalized groups. As highlighted by Borooah (2010) and Kabir et al. (2015), the societal position of a group, often determined by caste or class, plays a significant role in the level of care they can access. However, the present study's critique of the predominant focus on caste-based discrimination in extant literature adds a significant dimension to the discourse. The issue is not just about caste; class and political influence are equally impactful determinants of healthcare access. Discrimination does not operate in a vacuum; it is multifaceted and influenced by a confluence of societal factors.

Moreover, the phenomenon of self-segregation by the tokai, fuelled by experiences of discrimination and feelings of social isolation, is noteworthy. The creation of their own leadership systems is a resilient response to systemic neglect. These leadership structures provide them with a semblance of representation and agency, a way to navigate a system that consistently marginalizes them. While this study provides a comprehensive overview of the healthcare challenges faced by marginalized communities like the tokai, it also underscores the importance of a broader, more nuanced examination of healthcare disparities. Delving into the power dynamics between informal workers and healthcare professionals across various cultures could further illuminate the underlying causes of these disparities, driving reforms that truly address the roots of the issue.

Theoretical Contributions of the Present Study

The overarching themes of your study delve deep into the complex matrix of gender, caste, class, autonomy, and the socio-political dynamics within an urban informal workplace. By focusing on the daily lives of informal female workers, the present study brings to light the nuances of gender dynamics in informal sectors, a topic often side-lined in mainstream discourse. This perspective not only adds depth to the understanding of gender roles but also illuminates the resilience and adaptability of women in challenging environments.

Employing Giddens' theory of structuration as a unifying framework, I effectively tie together the insights from Foucault's power dynamics, Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological model, and Walby's conceptualization of patriarchy to form a cohesive analysis of the experiences of tokai in Bangladesh. Giddens' emphasis on the duality of structure - where social structures are both the medium and the outcome of practices - enables a nuanced understanding of how the tokai are influenced by and influence the social structures they inhabit. In integrating these theories, Giddens' framework highlights how the social structures, encompassing rules and resources, not

only constrain but also enable the actions of tokai. It brings to the fore the complex interplay between individual agency and broader societal structures, including caste systems, gender norms, and economic conditions.

A significant contribution of my thesis, illuminated by Giddens' structuration theory, is the idea of social attribution of caste based on occupation/work rather than solely inheritance. This aspect explores how the occupation of waste picking, traditionally seen as a low-status job, contributes to the social construction and reinforcement of caste identities for tokai. Giddens' theory provides a theoretical lens to understand how this occupational identity interacts with existing caste structures.

This occupational lens on caste is not just a reflection of the existing social order but also a contributor to its perpetuation and evolution. By engaging in waste picking, tokai not only experience the realities of how they have been structured into their caste position but also, through their daily practices, reinforce and occasionally challenge these social structures. Giddens' concept that structures are both enabling and constraining allows for a recognition of the potential agency of tokai in this context.

My thesis, situated firmly within this theoretical matrix, emphasises the role of occupation in the social construction of caste, offering a fresh perspective on the traditional understanding of caste as a rigid, inherited system. This perspective contributes significantly to the discourse on caste and occupation, highlighting how everyday practices and societal roles contribute to the shaping and reshaping of social identities.

In conclusion, Giddens' structuration theory not only ties together various theoretical perspectives but also reinforces the central themes of my thesis. It situates the discussion of caste and occupation within a broader context of social structures and individual agency, offering a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the experiences of tokai in Bangladesh.

Autonomy, often seen through the lens of formal workplaces, gets a fresh perspective in your study. The significance of autonomy, especially in an environment as precarious as informal waste picking, is a crucial addition to the literature. By delving into how informal workers establish occupational networks and the significance of their daily tasks, your study provides valuable insights into the socio-economic ecosystem of informal sectors.

The cultural significance of waste and its relation to caste and class hierarchies is a unique exploration. Understanding this relationship provides a more profound comprehension of how entrenched power dynamics perpetuate social inequalities. The concept of displacement,

especially in the face of traditional societal structures, gives an understanding of the challenges tokai face. Their resilience and ability to reclaim their occupational space against such odds showcases their tenacity and the dynamic of power resistance.

Offering a template for understanding the experiences of other marginalized groups is a valuable contribution. This model can serve as a baseline for future studies and policy recommendations. The nexus between informal workers and modern urban waste governance mechanisms is a crucial topic. It underscores the paradox of how city mechanisms, while ignoring these workers, also indirectly rely on them. Advocating for a re-evaluation of urban solid waste practices, your study highlights the need for a more inclusive approach, one that recognizes the invaluable contribution of informal workers. By critiquing deeply entrenched societal systems like the informal marriage system and the dowry practice, your study boldly challenges the status quo, fostering a platform for change.

In essence, this research not only provides a comprehensive view of the lived experiences of tokai but also advocates for a re-evaluation of societal norms, urban policies, and the broader understanding of informal sectors. This work serves as a foundational resource for policymakers, social activists, and future researchers in the realm of urban studies and gender dynamics.

Answering the Research Questions

My research undertakes an exhaustive exploration into the multifaceted lives of the tokai, particularly in the urban landscape of Dhaka City by posing a series of research questions. The data have allowed me to develop comprehensive and nuanced responses to these questions.

What are the socio-political factors influencing tokai (Research Question 1): The study, primarily explored in Chapter 5, brings to light various drivers behind the tokai's involvement in informal waste picking. Among them are socio-economic factors, work conditions, personal relationships, socio-cultural standing, and the unique opportunities and challenges of the landfill environment.

Caste, Class, and Structural Controls (Research Question 2): Detailed in Chapter 6, this dimension delves deep into how socio-cultural norms, notably those stemming from caste and class structures, influence the tokai. It further explores how societal constructs like male privilege, early marriages, and religious beliefs play a role in shaping their lived experiences.

Health Risks, Social Barriers, and Access to Health Care (Research Question 3): Chapter 7 describes the myriad challenges tokai face in terms of health and well-being. From mental health struggles and gender-based disparities to the impact of significant global events like Covid-19, the chapter casts light on the complex health milieu the community navigates daily.

Policy Constraints and Governmental Strategies (Research Question 4): Chapter 8 critically examines the official stance, including governmental policies and initiatives, towards the tokai. It reveals the gaps and inadequacies in policy, outlining how many of these can inadvertently further marginalise the community instead of uplifting them.

Survival Strategies, Empowerment, and Resilience (Research Question 5): Brought into focus in Chapter 9, this dimension celebrates the indomitable spirit of the tokai. Despite the odds stacked against them, they employ a range of survival strategies, tapping into socio-economic empowerment avenues and showcasing resilience that's nothing short of inspirational.

Overall, the research paints a comprehensive picture of the tokai, blending their challenges with their strengths. It underscores the pressing need for a more inclusive policy framework and societal understanding. Importantly, by highlighting the community's resilience, it sends a potent message: that the tokai are not just passive recipients of societal neglect but are active agents charting their own destinies. The insights provided by this research can be instrumental for policymakers, activists, and researchers aiming for a more equitable society.

In the conclusion and theoretical contributions section of my thesis, I draw upon the ideas discussed in the literature review, demonstrating how they informed my analysis and led to the development of new theoretical insights, such as the concept of attributed caste based on occupation. The literature review laid the groundwork by exploring key theories like Foucault's power dynamics, Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological model, Walby's framework on patriarchy, and Giddens' theory of structuration. These theories provided a multifaceted lens to examine the complex realities of tokai in Bangladesh, focusing on the interplay of power, environmental factors, gender dynamics, and societal structures.

My analysis integrated these theories to understand the lived experiences of tokai, especially how societal structures like caste and gender norms shape and are shaped by their occupation. Giddens' structuration theory, in particular, facilitated a deeper exploration of the reciprocal relationship between individual actions of tokai and the societal structures they navigate.

A significant extension of these theories is the idea of attributed caste based on occupation. This concept emerged from observing how tokai, through their occupation in waste picking, navigate and often reinforce the social structures of caste. This insight builds on the existing literature by demonstrating how caste identity can be influenced and reshaped by occupational roles, moving beyond the traditional view of caste as solely inherited. This new concept of attributed caste provides a fresh perspective on the intersection of occupation and social identity. It challenges

conventional understandings of caste as a rigid, immutable, and heritable system, suggesting that occupational roles can play a significant part in the social construction of caste identities. This contributes to the broader discourse on social stratification, offering a nuanced understanding of how caste and occupation interrelate in contemporary societies. The idea of attributed caste based on occupation opens up new avenues for research into how different occupations impact social identities and structures. It suggests that changes in occupational patterns could potentially influence traditional social hierarchies, highlighting the dynamic nature of social structures.

In conclusion, the theories discussed in the literature review not only informed my analysis but also led to the development of new theoretical insights. The concept of attributed caste based on occupation is a significant contribution of my thesis, extending existing theories and offering a novel perspective on the relationship between occupation and social identity. This theoretical contribution enriches our understanding of social stratification and has implications for future research on the dynamics of caste and occupation in societal contexts.

Conclusion

This research has provided invaluable insights into the lives of the tokai, unveiling the intricacies of power dynamics, discrimination, and resilience within urban waste-picking settings. Below is a summation of the final statements and pointers for future research directions. This study underscores the pervasive influence of male privilege, hidden biases of the Muslim caste and class systems, gender disparities in waste labour markets, and imbalances in power dynamics, all of which perpetuate discrimination and uncertainty for the tokai.

The intricate narratives of female tokai at the crossroads of patriarchy, capitalism, and colonial systems offer profound insights. Their resilience, despite immense challenges, showcases their desire for a better future and their willingness to endure hardships for autonomy and self-determination. While the research is deeply rooted in the Bangladeshi context, the findings resonate globally. The essential role of tokai in waste management calls for recognition and respect. Their resilience and adaptive strategies offer lessons for understanding and working with informal waste workers worldwide.

This research exemplifies the importance of immersive methodologies. By forging alliances with waste management workers, researchers can glean richer insights, understanding them holistically rather than just through a lens of problems.

While capitalism and colonialism have significantly shaped the informal waste management landscape, many, especially women, have ingeniously navigated and leveraged these legacies for

their benefit. The lessons drawn from these experiences can be instrumental in fostering inclusive economic systems.

Insights from this research can guide the development of better urban solid waste governance practices. Recognizing the pivotal role and potential of the tokai can lead to more sustainable and inclusive waste management solutions.

While this research has touched upon gender dynamics, there is potential to delve deeper into the unique experiences of male tokai and how their experiences diverge or converge with their female counterparts.

Drawing comparisons between the tokai in Bangladesh and informal waste workers in other countries can offer a broader understanding of global waste management challenges and opportunities.

Research can explore how technology, especially digital platforms, can be harnessed to uplift the tokai, from providing better market access to enhancing their safety. A longitudinal study to understand the impact of any policy changes resulting from this research can provide insights into the efficacy of such interventions and areas of improvement.

This research project stands as a testament to the strength, resilience, and agency of the tokai community. By shedding light on their experiences, challenges, and aspirations, it paves the way for more inclusive, empathetic, and sustainable waste management practices and policies.

The research paints a vivid picture of the challenges faced by the tokai, with the long-standing influences of male privilege, deeply rooted biases of the Muslim caste and class systems, and gender disparities in waste labour markets. These factors converge to sustain a system that continues to oppress and marginalise the tokai. Their lived experiences shed light on the nuances of these challenges and make a compelling argument for structural and societal change.

The intersectionality of the experiences of female tokai is profound and complex. Their stories, which are set against the backdrop of patriarchy, capitalism, and the aftereffects of colonial systems, provide an intimate look into their lives. While they face numerous obstacles, their resilience is commendable. The tokai women's aspirations for a brighter future, despite enduring adverse relationships and enduring discrimination, are a testament to their indomitable spirit. Their pursuit of autonomy and self-determination, even in the face of overwhelming odds, is deeply inspiring.

While this research is anchored in the Bangladeshi context, the challenges and triumphs of the tokai resonate on a global scale. The tokai are not just Bangladeshi workers; they and their global

counterparts play a pivotal role in waste management. Their stories underscore the need for broader recognition, respect, and inclusivity in waste management practices worldwide. Their resilience offers a lens through which we can understand the strategies and tactics of informal waste workers globally, and the lessons we glean can influence policy and practice in diverse settings.

The research methodology employed here underscores the importance of an immersive approach. Instead of merely examining the tokai from a problem-oriented perspective, this research delved deep into their lives, capturing their hopes, aspirations, and challenges. By closely aligning with the tokai, the research presents a holistic view, allowing for a multi-dimensional understanding of their world.

Capitalism and colonialism have historically shaped, and at times distorted, the informal waste management sector. Yet, the stories of the tokai, especially the women, reveal a remarkable ability to navigate, adapt to, and even leverage these complex systems. This resilience and ingenuity present an opportunity for transformative change. By understanding and learning from their experiences, there is potential to mould more inclusive and empathetic economic structures.

The findings of this research make a compelling case for a more inclusive approach to urban waste governance. Recognizing the roles, challenges, and potential of tokai is a significant first step. By integrating their experiences and insights, policymakers can devise sustainable waste management practices that benefit all stakeholders. This research, thus, not only highlights the gaps in current practices but also charts a potential path forward for better urban waste governance.

This research offers an in-depth exploration of the tokai community's life, shedding light on their unique challenges, resilience, and aspirations. It stands as a testament to their spirit and paves the way for future research, policy changes, and sustainable practices. The lessons learned can inform broader discussions on waste management, societal structures, and inclusive governance, both in Bangladesh and globally.

Empirical and Theoretical Findings

One of the primary contributions of this study lies in its focus on the gendered experiences of informal waste workers, specifically women, in the urban milieu. The urban development paradigm often overlooks these vital cogs in the waste management ecosystem. This study, through its detailed inquiry, not only brings their stories to the fore but also underscores their significance in the larger scheme of urban sustainability and livelihoods.

A key feature of this research is its conceptualization of autonomy in informal workspaces, particularly in the context of waste picking. Autonomy, as this study reveals, is not merely about the freedom to work. It is deeply intertwined with the challenges and threats these workers face every day. Recognizing and understanding this autonomy becomes essential for policy formulation and advocacy.

The occupational nuances of informal waste pickers have been delved into with a fresh lens in this study. By closely observing their activities, networks, and interactions, we can now better comprehend their daily dynamics and the unique challenges and opportunities therein.

Another feature of this study is the quest to understand how tokai imbue their lives with meaning. Despite working in an environment that many might find challenging or even degrading, the tokai find purpose, underscoring their resilience and spirit.

The study's exploration into the cultural interpretations of waste is novel. It joins the dots between waste, caste, and class, especially within the South Asian context. This social construct of waste helps elucidate the deeply entrenched socio-economic hierarchies that influence the lives of tokai and other informal waste pickers.

By dissecting the established norms - from traditional patriarchy and the male-dominated labour market to the nuances of male marriage privilege - this study brings clarity to the multiple layers of discrimination faced by tokai. The displacement of tokai from their livelihoods is not just an economic challenge; it is deeply rooted in socio-cultural biases.

This research does not stop at just diagnosing problems. It also lays the groundwork for inclusive urban waste governance. By linking the lives of informal waste pickers with modern urban waste governance mechanisms, it provides a roadmap for making these systems more responsive and just.

By questioning deep-seated practices like the informal multiple marriage system and male marriage privilege, this study goes beyond the confines of waste management. It ventures into the realm of societal norms, urging us to reconsider and challenge these age-old practices.

This study, with its empirical depth and theoretical breadth, is an opportunity for policymakers, researchers, and activists to recognise, respect, and integrate the contributions of informal waste pickers into our urban narratives and policies.

Research Implications

As noted above, while rooted in the Bangladeshi context, the intricate web of experiences and narratives surrounding tokai finds resonance in global discourses on informal waste picking. The term 'tokai' might be geographically constrained, but the essence of their lives and struggles reverberates in the alleyways of many developing nations.

A significant departure this study brings to conventional perspectives on waste-pickers is its strengths-based approach. Rather than viewing them merely as marginalized individuals, the study emphasizes their resilient character. The tokai, despite the absence of formal education, possess an uncanny ability to navigate the treacherous waters of urban living. Their sense of autonomy is not a merely an ideal but a tangible strategy employed daily to ensure survival. Such insights compel us to reframe how we view informal workers globally, recognizing their inherent strengths and skills that have often been overshadowed by their socio-economic conditions.

While earnings are undeniably a significant facet of their lives, this study delves deeper. It unravels the myriad other motivations that drive tokai and other informal workers. In the tangled heap of waste, they find more than just discarded items; they discover a sense of purpose, dignity, and autonomy. Such findings resonate globally, challenging the often uni-dimensional portrayal of waste pickers as mere earners.

In the informal waste-picking ecosystem, one can discern the sparks of entrepreneurialism. The forays of tokai into the waste world are not just about subsistence; they reflect a deeper quest for economic self-reliance. They leverage the autonomy and flexibility that comes with their profession to craft a life that offers them a semblance of stability and meaning. Such entrepreneurial traits, often neglected in policy discourses, deserve attention, for they offer cues on how to foster a supportive ecosystem for these workers.

The study makes it evident that informal work is more than just an economic endeavour. It is an intricate dance of work-life balance, where the boundaries of productive and reproductive work blur. The flexibility and freedom that come with waste picking, often misconstrued as constraints, emerge as assets in the eyes of tokai. They shun the rigidity of formal jobs, seeking solace in the fluidity of their profession. Such insights have profound implications for urban planning and social policies, urging stakeholders to reconsider their stance on the informal sector. While this study anchors its findings in the Bangladeshi context, it has global implications. It invites scholars, policymakers, and activists to re-imagine informal waste-picking, not just as an economic activity, but as a realm brimming with tales of resilience, entrepreneurialism, and quests for meaning.

Further Areas for Research

The narratives and lived experiences of tokai provide a lens into the complex socio-economic and cultural fabrics that define informal waste picking. Based on the findings of this study, several intriguing areas of research present themselves. Each of these builds on our existing understanding and paves the way for a more nuanced comprehension of the world of tokai and waste pickers globally.

- Delving into how dominant classes in various cultures employ informal waste pickers to maintain the privileges of the elite, thereby reinforcing socio-economic hierarchies.
- Investigating the multifaceted impact of polygamous practices in Muslim-majority countries on women, particularly exploring how this might either oppress or empower educated women.
- Analysing power imbalances between healthcare professionals and informal workers across cultures, shedding light on prevalent healthcare inequalities and attitudes.
- Evaluating curricula in medical institutions concerning service provision to marginalized communities. This could highlight areas of ignorance and potential bias in healthcare delivery.
- Investigating the strategies adopted by NGOs and INGOs in Bangladesh to aid marginalized communities and questioning if such strategies inadvertently perpetuate marginalization.
- In the backdrop of events like the Covid-19 pandemic, there is an imperative to understand the safety mechanisms, or the lack of them, for women working in public spaces, particularly waste pickers.
- Spirituality, religion, and work: Understanding how religious beliefs and practices become coping mechanisms for workers in precarious occupations across diverse cultures.
- Role of government: Examining how waste pickers and other informal workers might be under the indirect control of local governments or waste business industries in different global contexts.
- Privatisation impact on waste picking: Understanding the implications of privatizing waste management, especially on marginalized waste picker communities.
- Addressing the often-ignored mental health needs and challenges faced by female workers in urban landscapes.

- Researching other forms of employment that might bolster resilience and autonomy for women in marginalized sectors.
- Debating potential regulation mechanisms for informal work environments to enhance the overall health and wellbeing of workers.
- Studying waste labour across various cities to understand the stigmatization based on multiple identity axes. This can help uncover deep-seated biases that uphold social hierarchies.

By branching out into these areas, researchers can further elucidate the intricate world of informal waste pickers. Such endeavours will not only enrich academic understanding but can also pave the way for more inclusive and empathetic policy-making.

Policy Recommendations

Having noted that any meaningful changes must emerge from tokai themselves, there are nevertheless clear policy recommendations that emerge from this study. The intricate challenges and potential solutions related to the tokai community unearthed in the findings chapters underscore the necessity for a holistic and culturally nuanced policy approach.

- Recognising tokai as key stakeholders in urban waste management and policy-making. Their insights and experiences are invaluable for designing effective solid waste management policies.
- Harnessing religious beliefs and practices to uplift the tokai community. Any policies rooted in religious principles should adhere strictly to established religious doctrines.
- Redefining marriage policies to protect the rights of tokai women, especially against oppressive practices like forced marriages, hidden marriages, and multiple marriages without the consent of existing spouses.
- Developing policies that empower single mothers, widows, and divorced women towards self-employment and entrepreneurship.
- Addressing gender disparities in the labour market and fostering an environment where women have equal opportunities, training, and pay.
- Revamping healthcare provisions for marginalized communities. Ensuring that healthcare providers treat the tokai community with respect and dignity, offering them equal access to medical care, housing, and educational opportunities.
- Promoting the enrolment of tokai children in schools and particularly encouraging religious education for female members of the community.

- Prioritizing the health and safety of the tokai community by ensuring sanitary conditions and providing safe drinking water in landfills.
- Advocating for sustainable waste management policies that include perspectives of the tokai community by collaborating with both local and international stakeholders.
- Implementing stringent policies against harassment and abuse of women in all spaces. Additionally, engaging in campaigns and programs that change societal perceptions and attitudes towards marginalized communities.
- Facilitating access to resources, such as microloans and training, for tokai community members interested in entrepreneurship, without over-relying on international donors.
- Recognising the significant contributions of the tokai community to the urban ecosystem and providing pathways to formalise their roles.

These comprehensive recommendations, when implemented with sensitivity and understanding, can lead to a transformative change in the lives of the tokai community and similar marginalized groups. This will not only elevate their social and economic status but will also contribute to sustainable urban development in Bangladesh.

I want to complete this thesis by referring the participant Kajol's experiences about government policy and services. She stated:

গরীব মানুষ সরকারের সাহায্য এর আশায় বসে থাকে না। আমরা ভাল করেই জানি সরকার আমাদের কুন সাহায্য করবে না কারন আমরা জানি সরকারের সাহায্য করার মন মানসিকতা আমাদের প্রতি অনেক কম। সরকার আমাদের রান্না করার জিনিস দেয় কিন্তু লবণ আর তেল দেয় না, এবার বলেন আমরা কিভাবে তাইলে রান্না করবু তেল আর লবণ ছাড়া। তারাতু সুধু আমাদের একজন ভিনদেশি আর অপরিছন্ন কর্মী ভাবে। আমি যদি কারও কাছে সাহায্য চাই, সে কি আমাকে সাহায্য দিবে। আমি কিছুই আশা করি না। আমার ভবিসাং পরি কল্পনা হচ্ছে একটা ভাঙ্গারিৰ দুকান দেওয়া আমার ছেলেকে সাথে নিয়ে করার ইচ্ছা আছে। আমি গ্রামে একটা জমি রাখছি, ছেলের ভবিসাং চিন্তা করে। আমার এখন আর কুন ঋণ নাই। আমি আমার ছেলে কে বলব কখন যেন কার ও ওপর নির্ভর করে না চলে।

Poor people in Bangladesh, like me, don't wait for government help. We know well that the government will not support us because we know that the helping mentality and ability of our government toward poor people is limited. Government provide cooking items but they do not provide salt and cooking powder. Just think, how can we cook without salt and power. They are treating us an alien and untouchable. If I ask for help or any support from others, will I get this? I expect nothing... my future plan is to build a recycling shop with my son, now I am saving money and waiting for my son to grow up. I have kept one piece of land in my village for his future. I do not have any debt. I have taught my son to never rely on other supports.
(Kajol)

Kajol's words paint a picture of the everyday realities faced by the marginalized tokai community in Bangladesh. Her voice reverberates with the collective frustrations, hopes, and aspirations of

countless others who grapple with challenges but remain resilient in the face of adversity. Kajol's observations about the government's approach towards the impoverished offer a critique of the bureaucratic processes and the seemingly tokenistic assistance provided. While the government might offer some basic necessities, the absence of essential items like salt and cooking powder highlights the lack of foresight and understanding of their actual needs. Such oversights underscore the vast chasm between policy formulations and their actual implementation on the ground. Her expression "they are treating us as an alien and untouchable" is a reflection of the deep-seated societal biases that the tokai community encounters daily. This sentiment encapsulates the overarching theme of social exclusion, where the marginalized feel they are perceived as less than human and unworthy of basic rights and dignity.

Yet, amidst the disheartening narrative, Kajol's resilience shines through. Her determination to carve out a better future for her son, her meticulous planning to set up a recycling shop, and her desire to ensure her child does not rely on external support are indicative of the indomitable spirit that many in her community embody. It is a testament to the fact that despite systemic challenges, individuals like Kajol strive for autonomy and a better future. Kajol's narrative serves as a powerful reminder for policymakers, highlighting the gaps in their strategies and urging them to devise plans that are more attuned to the ground realities. Her story exemplifies the need for more inclusive, participatory, and empathetic policy formulation. My hope is that Kajol's voice, and those of countless others like her, will not fall on deaf ears, and their stories will pave the way for a more equitable and just society.

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Appendix
MUHEC ethical approval

HOU Review Group

Reviewer Group
Prof Mark ~~Henrickson~~

Researcher: ~~Sajedul~~ Khan
Title: Socio-political and caste factors in waste picking and waste management in Bangladesh.

Dear ~~Sajedul~~

Thank you for the above application that was considered by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Human Ethics Northern Committee at their meeting held on 16/12/2020.

On behalf of the Committee I am pleased to advise you that the ethics of your application are approved.

Approval is for three years. If this project has not been completed within three years from the date of this letter, reapproval must be requested.

If the nature, content, location, procedures or personnel of your approved application change, please advise the Secretary of the Committee.

If you wish to print an official copy of this letter, Please logon to RIMS (<http://rims.massey.ac.nz>) , and under the Reporting section, View Reports you will find a link to run the Ethics Committee Report.

Yours sincerely
Professor Craig Johnson
Chair, Human Ethics Chairs' Committee and
Director (Research Ethics)