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Vulnerability, risks and coping: a case study of female street waste pickers in Mashaeng, Free State, South Africa

RAMOLELLE Manchee Joyce and XWESO Mzukisi

ABSTRACT

As a result of high levels of unemployment in South Africa, many unskilled people are forced to resort to a variety of income-generating activities in the informal economy, such as picking waste left on streets, which makes them vulnerable and involves risks. Collecting and selling recyclables has become an income-generating activity, as it presents employment for many of the unemployed around the world. However, in the midst of trying to survive on the fringes of the informal economy, street waste pickers are faced with unfavorable working conditions, characterised by marginalisation and indecency. The study described in this article adopted a qualitative research approach and investigated 20 female street waste pickers. It explored the challenges encountered by street waste pickers in Mashaeng, in the Free State province of South Africa and how they coped with them. Resilience theory provided the theoretical basis for the study. The study acquired information through semi-structured individual interviews. The data that the interviews generated were analysed by means of thematic analysis. The study findings revealed that street waste pickers are subjected to risks in the context of their work. Moreover, they lack the skills and education that would enable them to secure better employment. The authors recommend that transformative social policy be formulated in the interests of waste pickers. Furthermore, community-based approaches that ensure street waste pickers' social inclusion should be prioritised.

KEY TERMS: informal sector, livelihoods, street waste pickers, South Africa, challenges, unemployment

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Author/s details

RAMOLELLE Manchee Joyce, Department of Community Development, University of the Free State, South Africa, Email: 2016234615@ufs4life.ac.za
 XWESO Mzukisi, Social Development Professions, Nelson Mandela University, South Africa, Email: Mzukisi.xweso@mandela.ac.za

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INTRODUCTION

Regardless of the circumstances that street waste pickers face in the course of their work, collecting and selling waste remains a source of income. The research looked into the work and lives of street waste pickers in Mashaeng, South Africa's Free State province. The goal was to explore the realities of vulnerable street waste pickers who make a living on the margins of South Africa's informal economy, and to draw the attention of those at the forefront, such as social workers and community development workers, to their plight. As a result, the study investigated the difficulties that street waste pickers face and how they deal with them. Furthermore, the study sought to depict the context of unemployment as the source of South Africa's expanding informal unemployment activities. The study's background, methodology, and data analysis are all covered in this article. It also includes a discussion, recommendations, and a conclusion.

BACKGROUND

The socio-political instability in South Africa post 1994 has negatively affected the realisation of inclusive economic development. As a consequence, the formal sector in South Africa has been unable to provide adequate employment opportunities (Mahadea & Simson, 2010), particularly for the youth. However, it is worth noting that the South African government post-apartheid has responded with many initiatives to deal with employment creation. Although some are no longer in effect, these initiatives include the Growth, Employment and Redistribution Strategy (GEAR) (1996); the Special Development Initiative (SDI) (1995); the Umsombuvu Youth Fund (2002); small, medium and micro enterprises (SMMEs) development institutions (1995); the National Skills Fund (NSF) (1999); the Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) (2000); the National Empowerment Fund (NEF) (1998); the Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative of South Africa (ASGISA) (2005/2006); and expanded cabinet responsibilities to deal with development and employment.

Despite all these initiatives, the unemployment rate in South Africa remains high at 34.5% (Statistics South Africa, 2022). As unemployment increases, the informal sector grows as a source of employment for the unemployed. The informal sector tends to be made up largely of people who are vulnerable to poverty and have few prospects for entering the formal sector of the economy (Bernabè, 2005; Van der Berg, 2014:8). In many countries, including South Africa, a proportion of people in the informal sector without decent jobs are a result of migration of people from various parts of the world or other provinces in search of better opportunities for employment.

Nzima, Duma and Moyo (2016) maintain that people often migrate in a bid to diversify their resources such as labour and self-insure against livelihood risks. Botea, Chakravarty and Compernelle (2018) note that migration is driven by economic 'push' factors, such as shocks to the family or household, job loss, death, and education. In the context of South Africa, the ever-increasing appalling socioeconomic conditions force a number of unemployed people to relocate to the urban areas of large cities and towns for employment opportunities. According to Schenck and Blaauw (2011), the absorption of the unemployed population into the labour market is minimal. This is because of the lower demand for semi-skilled and unskilled workers (Viljoen, Blaauw & Schenck, 2015) and the rising population of the urban economy, which decrease the number of employment possibilities. However, it is evident in the literature that institutional failure is not the only reason why unemployed people are unable to move into the formal sector. Certain inherent characteristics may also contribute to their inability to find employment, which include individual circumstances that relate to poor levels of education and apathy from the unemployed young people who are dissatisfied owing to the appalling socioeconomic conditions.

Because of a lack of education, the majority of unskilled people are forced to resort to a variety of income-generating activities in the informal economy such as street waste picking (Viljoen, Blaauw & Schenck, 2015), which involves the collecting and selling of recyclables. According to Women in Informal Employment, Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) (2020), street waste picking is a vital source of income for many people around the world, South Africa included. Street waste pickers are variously referred to in the literature as reclaimers, garbage pickers, recyclers, scavengers, solid waste collectors and waste salvagers (Schenck & Blaauw, 2011; Marelllo & Helwege, 2014; Viljoen et al., 2015; Samson, 2020; Njoroge, Wokabi, Ngetich & Kathuri, 2013).

Street waste pickers are broadly defined in the available body of literature as small-scale, self-employed people who survive from collecting and selling waste and are mostly active in the informal economy (Schenck & Blaauw, 2011). In the jobless atmosphere of South Africa and other parts of the world, street waste pickers have endeavored to create their own employment. Waste is collected either for their own use or to sell (Samson, 2010). Street waste pickers are prevalent in cities of South Africa. However, although their actions help to protect natural resources and reduce pollution and greenhouse gas emissions (Schenck, Blaauw, Viljoen & Swart, 2019), they are not recognized as valid contributors to a clean environment.

The unfavorable circumstances of street waste pickers' lives are similar in many countries. These include the inability to find employment in the formal and informal sector of the economy, dislocated family lives, low levels of education (Schenck & Blaauw, 2011; Viljoen et al. 2015; Njoroge, Wokabi, Ngetich & Kathuri, 2013), poor

human capital development (Viljoen et al. 2015), health risks, and hazardous work (Schenck, Blaauw, Viljoen & Swart, 2019; Njoroge et al. 2013). Viljoen, Blaauw and Schenck (2018) report that the income that street waste pickers receive from selling recyclables is relatively low, and they do not make enough to buy food and other basic needs. The disparities in the waste picking in relation to gender are also notable challenges such as burden of having to deal with reproduction of hierarchical gender relations at home, disrespected in the workplace and in their respective communities (Dias & Fernandez, 2013). Furthermore, in addition to the challenges outlined above, Samson (2020) reports the lack of recognition of informal waste pickers for inclusion in the formal waste management sector in some of the regions in South Africa. Nevertheless, Samson (2020) acknowledges a shift towards recognition and social inclusion of waste pickers in the waste management sectors of some regions because of an understanding that they make an essential contribution to the environment.

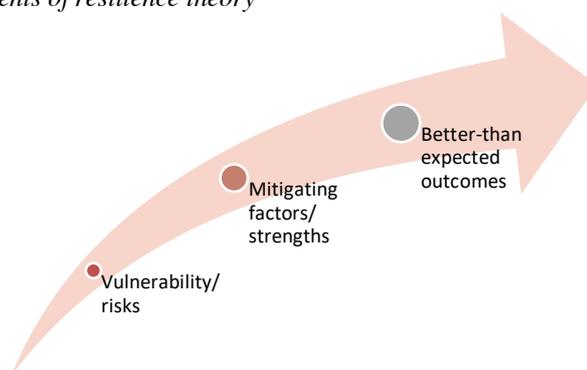
Despite some appreciation of the value of waste pickers, the harsh reality of their lives remains apparent and calls for solutions to this social problem that has been neglected. On the basis of this contention, the study explored the challenges encountered by street waste pickers. In addition, the study added to the literature on the phenomenon of street waste pickers in South Africa to enable social scientists to utilise the findings in their research and interventions. In particular, the study aimed to encourage social and community development workers to adopt a social inclusive approach when formulating policies to address the plight of vulnerable populations such as street waste pickers.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Resilience theory

The study was guided by the resilience theory, as explained by van Breda (2018). According to van Breda (2018), resilience is a multilevel process whereby systems engage to obtain better-than-expected-outcomes in the face or wake of adversity. Life is full of difficulties, through which people have to transition in an attempt to survive. The ability to cope with and transition from one adverse situation to the next is what van Breda calls ‘resilience’ (van Breda, 2018). The components of the resilience theory are presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Key components of resilience theory



Adapted from van Breda (2018)

It is clear from van Breda’s (2018) contention that resilience allows an individual to transition through the difficulties of life. The major question of interest to researchers and practitioners dealing with vulnerable groups is *what allows people who face adversity to continue to move ahead?* In other words, why do some individuals cope with adversity, when others succumb to it, are broken down or disabled by it? To answer this question, the authors propose van Breda’s (2018) three components as shown in Figure 1 above that explain the resilience of vulnerable groups.

The first component is the context of vulnerability or adversity and the risks involved. The second component comprises factors that mitigate (lessen) vulnerability and risks. The third component is the better-than-expected outcomes, which are the result of the mitigating factors, such as an ability to access resources and bounce back in the face of adversity. Consequently, the resilience theory, as explained by van Breda (2018) articulates the way systems (individuals) recover in the aftermath of stress, which is particularly relevant to an analysis of the resilience of street waste pickers in the informal sector of the economy.

van Breda’s resilience theory reflects on transitions that people go through in difficult times. In addition, van Breda (2018) posit that, it is the ability of the individuals in the wake of adversity to use resources that will better their lives. Within the developmental approach and social work practice, Ubuntu fits very well with van Breda’s notion of mitigating factors in the face of adversity. Mitigating with other people in the struggles purely reflects a sense of Ubuntu. In the plight of waste pickers, Ubuntu can bring a sense of resilience as it manifests

interconnectedness of human beings to address their own challenges (Sekudu, 2019). Thus, this points to the Ubuntu-informed social work practice that reinforces better outcomes and resilience for poor people in South Africa.

METHODOLOGY

Research approach, design and sampling

The study adopted a qualitative approach, as it focused on individual experiences by capturing the perceptions and opinions of the research participants regarding their lives and work as street waste pickers in Mashaeng, in the Free State, South Africa. An exploratory research design was preferred, as the study investigated a phenomenon, which is not well known, known enough or well defined (de Vos, Strydom, Fouche & Delpont, 2013). Furthermore, the exploratory design was used to study the circumstances of street waste pickers and understand the severity of their challenges. The study's sampling approach was determined by Blaauw and Schenck's (2011) observation that street waste pickers move from one location to another, frequently collecting and sorting waste, which makes it difficult to sample them. Therefore, the researchers used convenience sampling, which meant that the sample consisted of all subjects who were available and willing to be interviewed (Bless & Higson-Smith, 2006).

A sample of 20 female street waste pickers who were willing to be part of the study and fulfilled the criteria listed below were interviewed. The criteria were as follows:

- 18 years and over
- Working as street waste pickers longer than six months who had experienced and were aware of the hardships, as participants who had little experience of waste picking would be likely to be unaware of the nature of many of the challenges which are associated with the work

The study acquired information through semi-structured individual interviews, which allowed the researcher, who is the leading author of this article, to understand the challenges facing female street waste pickers in Mashaeng, in the Free State, South Africa. The researcher conducted all interviews at the sites where the women were picking waste to sell it. The women were picking cans, plastics and cardboard to sell to the Buy Back Centers (BBCs) or recycling companies in Mashaeng. An interview guide was used for the interviews that were conducted in Sesotho by the researcher, who is fluent in this language, as it was that of the participants. The data collected were thematically analysed.

Ethical considerations

Quality assurance of the study was conducted by the Department of Community Development of the University of the Free State. Prior to the conducting of the interviews with the participants of the study, the first author explained to the participants the purpose of the research as she understood the Sesotho language predominately spoken by the participants. All concerns and questions of the participants were clarified by the first author using the Sesotho language of their choice and they understood. All the participants signed the written informed consent forms before the start of the data collection process. The researcher also upheld the ethic of confidentiality and anonymity by concealing the true identity of the research participants. Pseudonyms were used to identify the participants during the data collection, analysis and presentation of the findings. The benefits of the study had to be explained to the participants, who were informed that the findings of the study might be presented at national and international conferences/colloquia, published in accredited research journals and most importantly, shared with key stakeholders dealing with vulnerable groups. As the research was conducted, the researchers were guided by the values of social work incorporated in social research, such as Ubuntu, confidentiality, and respect for the human being. In the contact with the participants, these values allowed the researchers to form very strong connections with them, avoiding dehumanizing them in the process.

FINDINGS

The analysis of the participants' demographic data revealed that they were originally from Lesotho, and their ages ranged from 35 to 45 years. In addition, the data analysis indicated that the majority of the participants had low levels of education owing to different constraints, which meant that they were not suitable for employment in the formal labour market. All the participants had completed secondary school but had not completed post-school qualification. Of the twenty participants, 6 were married, 11 were cohabitating, and the other 3 were single. The themes that emerged during the data analysis were family economic hardship and poverty; a lack of education and skills to secure better employment; health hazards and associated risks; animosity expressed by residents towards

waste pickers; and coping strategies. These themes, which indicate the vulnerability and risks experienced by the participants as well as their ways of coping with adversity are explained in the following sections.

Family economic hardships and poverty

The participants interviewed in the study mentioned that one of the reasons that they had engaged in waste picking was the economic hardship experienced by their family. Furthermore, their poverty at home in Lesotho had forced them to look for opportunities to make a living elsewhere, and street waste picking had been an option. Participants had the following to say:

We were suffering at home with no jobs, that pushed me to start collecting and selling waste in order to support my children (Waste Picker 1).

I had to provide for my family, looking for something to give me money was the best thing I could do because financial status of my family was terribly bad, at least I can make money from collecting cans around and sell them (Waste Picker 6).

At home, we are not working, and we have no enough food...for us to have food, we only rely on social support from neighbors or people who have means (Waste Picker 9).

The above finding suggests that collecting and selling waste is a survival strategy to escape dire poverty and find employment.

A lack of education and skills to secure better employment

A lack of education is a common topic of research on those who work in the informal economy because it is associated with the struggle to find decent employment. The following remarks made by the participants indicate their perceptions about a lack of education and access to formal employment:

I had no formal schooling and training documentations to look for work, so collecting waste works for me, I can survive (Waste Picker 7).

I never completed school at matriculation level, I am struggling even to find something better (Waste Picker 13).

Having no education in these days does not guarantee you a good job hence we resort to collecting waste for our own survival (Waste Picker 16).

The above finding indicates that inadequate education precludes informal waste pickers from obtaining better prospect of employment. In addition, the available literature confirms that in other countries, waste pickers have low levels of education and this is result from varying socioeconomic conditions faced by day labourers. Providing this human capital would assist street waste pickers in securing better employment.

Poor working conditions

The participants in the study reported that the conditions in which they work under exposes them to the health risks. The sentiments shared by the participants in this regard are as follows.

The data analysis revealed that the street waste pickers were aware that their work involved risks to their health. However, they did not take precautions to protect themselves and in particular, did not have protective equipment for handling poisonous waste material. The participants made the following remarks:

We get sick as we collected old things, and sometimes we are affected by the bad smell coming from what we collect (Waste Picker 10).

I am now getting the treatment for arthritis from the local clinic because we walk around long hours collecting old boxes for selling (Waste Picker 13).

I have asthma because of the dust coming from the things we collect (Waster Picker 2).

Some of the waste things we collect we are allergic to and we get the rash and must be treated at the clinic (Waster Picker 18).

This finding proves that street waste pickers are particularly exposed to health risks, although they have no alternative as a source of income and a means of survival.

Animosity expressed by residents towards waste pickers

The data analysis revealed that residents of the areas where they worked were antagonistic towards the street waste pickers. Participants maintained that they always received discouraging comments from community members about their collecting and selling waste. The participants stated the following:

We like what we do but people do not respect us, they say we are really reveling our suffering we should consider doing other jobs, one thing that they do not know is that we survive from what they think is dirt (Waste Picker 13).

People who live around are always discouraging and breaking our energy to continue doing this work. (Waste Picker 11).

They call us batho ba phuthang matlakala [people who collect dirt], we do not like the sound of that but what bring us joy is that little we get from collecting waste helps us a lot (Waste Picker 17).

The above finding suggests that street waste pickers are looked down upon by members of the community where they work. Although waste collection and selling helps them earn a living, it is considered dirty work by residents.

Poor nurturance of children owing to involvement in waste picking

The data analysis revealed that the interviewed street waste pickers have faced challenges with regards to domestic responsibilities, in particular nurturing their children owing to their involvement in the waste picking activities. The sentiments that are supporting the findings were shared as follows:

I am unable to be a full parent at home looking after my children as I have to be on the street collecting waste so that I can sell it and bring food at home if I happen to get the money from selling the things I collected (Waste picker 17).

I leave my children alone at home and go collect the waste, the older ones are at school, so there is no one to look after them (Waste picker 8).

I come here with children, I have no person to support me to look after them, I am always here, so I have decided the best way is to work with them (Waste picker 3).

The above findings appear to suggest that the nurturance and the upbringing of children is in jeopardy as the mothers are not able to provide adequate attention in terms of childcare. This finding raises an important aspect of fatherhood in the nurturance of children while mothers are actively involved in the waste picking activities.

Coping strategies

The data analysis revealed that street waste pickers had mutually beneficial and supportive relationships with one another. The participants interviewed in the study revealed that in spite of the hardships they encountered, they worked very well with other street waste pickers, which helped them to continue working and be resilient. The participants shared the following sentiments:

The only thing that keeps us going, even though it is difficult, is the good cooperation between us who do the work of collecting the waste (Waste Picker 18).

You know during difficult times bakgotso baka [my friends] always supports me, and I do the same to them, we struggle together, sometimes we do not make enough money to buy food, but we assist one another (Waste Picker 9).

Participants in the study also shared that they had ties with other groups of women street waste pickers with a view to them helping one another. A participant, (Waste Picker 2), stated the following: *Nna le bakgotsi baka re kenela stokfel* [me and my friends we are part of stokvel]. This finding shows that social capital is a mitigating factor for risk and increases the resilience of street waste pickers.

DISCUSSION

The study conducted amongst the street waste pickers in Mashaeng, in the Free State, South Africa, revealed that they were determined to do their work because it guaranteed a livelihood, in spite of the hardships they experienced. The findings revealed that waste pickers are vulnerable owing to family economic circumstances and extreme poverty. According to Bauer and Wieszorek (2016), vulnerable families like those of street waste pickers experience problematic living conditions and lack financial support.

Xweso (2019) refers to the lives of day labourers, such as the street waste pickers who operate in the informal economy, as challenging. Schenck and Blaauw (2011) concur with the finding of the study that street waste pickers encounter problems such as hunger, which force them to collect and sell waste. However, despite their family circumstances and poverty, the waste pickers interviewed in the study perceived themselves as responsible people trying, in the face of a great deal of adversity, to support their families. In the study conducted by Muringa (2021) in Durban of South Africa on the survival strategies of waste pickers under the covid-19 pandemic it was evident that despite the vulnerability in which waste pickers find themselves, the waste pickers are resilient and able to sustain themselves for better livelihoods.

Another research finding was that a lack of education precludes waste pickers from finding formal or other informal employment. Fryer and Hepburn (2010:6) confirm that there are few job prospects for uneducated people because as Njoroge *et al.* (2017) maintain, employees believe that that education qualifies an individual for formal employment. Moreover, the finding corresponded with that of Schenck, Blaauw and Viljoen (2019), who point out that the education level of attainment of levels of waste pickers in South Africa is low, which means that escaping poverty by finding better employment is unlikely. Viljoen *et al.*'s (2015) study confirmed that the low level of street waste pickers' human capital development, which includes their level of education, language proficiency and previous full-time work experience, contributes to their inability to find employment in the formal or other sectors of the informal economy.

The study revealed that the work of street waste pickers is dirty, toxic and hazardous to their health, as confirmed by Schenck *et al.* (2019). A study conducted by Jerie (2016) in Zimbabwe on the risks associated with solid waste management, validated the results of the current study that showed that occupational risks occur at every stage in the waste management process for the worker (waste picker) during collection, recycling and ultimate disposal. However, although these risks add to their vulnerability, their resilience encourages them to keep working to secure their livelihood.

This study found that the activities of women street waste pickers are undercutting their ability to look after their children. A similar study of another group of women involved in the informal street vending conducted by Mbulayi, Makuyana and Kang'ethe (2020), found that street vending mothers who were interviewed in their study were not able to fully provide adequate attention in terms of breast feeding, changing diapers or simply having quality mother-baby interaction because of their daily involvement in street vending as a livelihood activity. Mbulayi *et al.* (2020) concluded that the inability of street vending mothers to have limited care of their children affects the growth and the upbringing of the children. From the lens of the resilience theory, the street vending mothers have opted to do concurrent parenting activities and street which points to the component of mitigating factors in the wake of adversity.

The study revealed that the strengthening of social networks helps waste pickers to cope with their challenges. According to the Department of International Development (DFID) (2000), social networks reflect the ability of people to work together and expand their access to wider resources, thereby sustaining their livelihoods. This finding relates to the second component of resilience theory that comprises the mitigating factors and the strengths of individuals, which enable them to achieve outcomes that seem impossible in light of their vulnerability and the risks they face. The study found that social networks, which mutually benefit those who belong, help the street waste pickers to cope with adversity.

This finding correlated with that of the national study conducted by Viljoen (2014) in South Africa, which focused on the socioeconomic circumstances of street waste pickers. The national study found that street waste pickers were in a mutually beneficial relationship with other recycling groups. According to Schenck *et al.* (2019), 68% of the street waste pickers in their study indicated that forming social groups and working together helped them succeed in their work. This shows that social change and capacity building can be achieved through expanding social networks, which will enable individuals, particularly those who are vulnerable and at-risk, to access resources for achieving better-than-expected outcomes (Van Breda, 2018). Using street waste pickers as examples of social capital reflects Ubuntu which encourages sharing among one another (Ndlovu, 2016).

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COMMUNITY AND SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

Social service practitioners, such as social and community workers, are key stakeholders in interventions aimed at helping vulnerable groups such as waste pickers. Social and community workers should reinforce policies of social inclusion in economic development programmes to assist street waste pickers to sustain their livelihood. As the street waste pickers are vulnerable and require psychosocial assessment, it is recommended that social workers be actively involved in assessing the well-being of vulnerable persons, especially those affected by poverty. The department of social development, in particular the special programmes, should have aftercare programmes for children of the waste pickers as this would be of great assistance as women waste pickers need to be on the street in pursuit of a livelihood for their children.

Until social service practitioners recognise their vulnerability and the risks they face, the problem will remain unsolved. Community development should be linked to a programme that focuses on empowering street waste pickers and equipping them for work in formal and other informal economic sectors. The programme could involve providing them with opportunities to build SMMEs to improve their livelihood. Moreover, the programme could include skills development programmes to address the problem of the street waste pickers' lack of education and employment prospects.

CONCLUSION

The global economic crisis has forced the unemployed to resort to the use of survival tactics in the informal economy such as street waste picking to make a living. However, despite the adverse working conditions that exacerbate the vulnerability of street waste pickers, with the support of their own social networks, they persist in pursuing their particular livelihood. Although attempts have been made to prioritise social inclusion in the waste management sector, recognition of street waste pickers in South Africa is minimal. Therefore, the developmental fraternity needs to pay attention to their plight. In addition, as the phenomenon of street waste picking is prevalent all over the world and increasingly becoming a livelihood for many people, their work should not be denigrated, and they should not be dismissed as "*batho ba puthang matlakala*".

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