

Women Waste Managers: Case Study of Stree Mukti Sangathana

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Stree Mukti Sangathana (SMS) is one of Maharashtra's oldest and most critically acclaimed organisations working in the sector of urban waste management, employment and women's rights. Apart from raising awareness through cultural programs, sensitisation, family counselling, and campaigns in the communities, the nonprofit organisation runs a Parisar Vikar program since 1998 which addresses waste management problems, environment-friendly practices like composting, and gardening in the Mumbai Metropolitan Region. When it was first launched, the program employed over 3,000 women as waste pickers in the urban areas of Mumbai, Navi Mumbai, Thane and Dombivli. Almost all of these women, called Parisar Bhaginis, are from Dalit and Bahujan communities, illiterate and single parents. They belong to different age groups, from as young as 18 to as old as 60-70.



Stree Mukti Sangathana's employees at Organic Waste Converter centre at Kharude market, Worli where about 900 kg of wet waste is shredded in about 4 hours everyday

SMS works for the recognition of these workers and to provide them with identification cards that would help them access benefits from the government. The women are also given health check-ups, medical and financial assistance, and training in alternate skills like composting, gardening, and leadership. SMS's zero-waste management process includes collection of waste from source, dry waste recycling, wet waste segregation and composting and disposal of hazardous waste.

One of the foremost challenges of managing waste in the city, as many others have pointed out on the ground, is the lack of space. However, SMS has proved that it is possible to utilise the available space efficiently. The Swachh Worli Koliwada project of the SMS in collaboration with the BMC, which is being implemented since January 2020, is a model of zero-waste management in one of Mumbai's most populated Koli (indigenous fishing community) villages.

Worli Koliwada is divided into 13 zones for waste collection and management. Every zone, consisting of a narrow gallis, is populated by 1,100-1,500 families. 40 waste management workers, supervisors and chief supervisors employed in this project, collect waste from over 10,000 houses every day, raise awareness about how to differentiate wet waste from other waste, sort waste at the collection centre, send dry waste to recyclers, process wet waste into compost and distribute packed compost in bags back to the community. This is broadly the work undertaken by SMS' Swachh Worli Koliwada initiative. The workers do a shift of eight hours, of which three hours are spent just segregating the waste at the collection centre.

On the challenges in waste collection and segregation in the Koli villages, project coordinator, Karuna Dhendhe, said: "About 40 per cent of the houses in the Koliwada are segregating their waste currently. Despite the awareness campaigns that we carry out with the BMC, the challenge remains the question, 'Why should I segregate?' Kitchen waste is thrown into the sea from the windows here because that is easy. The other challenge is space. 'Our houses are small,' they say. There are many joint families here, and they don't want to keep their waste inside the house. Then, the Koliwada people

eat fish. They ask us to pick up their waste three times a day! So, we also need to account for people's behaviour and habits"

Dhendhe added that the project supervisors are now planning to collect fish waste separately. They have also begun working on conducting a survey and mapping all the waste generated in the Koliwada. SMS' waste collection methods also included setting up of 21 waste kiosks at strategic spots in the Koliwada, where working people could drop their waste.

(This is an excerpt from the chapter "WOMEN WASTE - MANAGERS: CASE STUDY OF SMS" in the report "State of Urban Agriculture in Indian Cities: Mumbai". Read the full report [here](#))