Publisher

African Journal of Social Work
Afri. j. soc. work
© National Association of Social Workers Zimbabwe/Author(s)
ISSN Print 1563-3934
ISSN Online 2409-5605

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Indexed& Accredited with: **African Journals Online** (AJOL) | **University of Zimbabwe Accredited Journals** (UZAJ) | **SCOPUS** (Elsevier) | **Directory of Open Access Journals** (DOAJ) | **Society of African Journal Editors** (SAJE) | **Asian Digital Library** (ADL) | **African Social Work & Development Network** (ASWDNet) | **Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET)** - South Africa | **SJR** | **CNKI** – China | Journal Publishing Practices & Standards (**JPPS**) | **EBSCO** | **DOI**

*"He left us in the dark forest and unloaded us off the truck": W*ork and health related vulnerabilities of female scrap collectors in rural Eastern Cape and the implications for women's rights

Mzukisi XWESO and Catherina SCHENCK

ABSTRACT

Social work has long been at the forefront of advocating for women's rights, striving to ensure their access to dignity, economic empowerment and social protection. However, despite these efforts, many women in South Africa remain trapped in precarious informal employment, such as scrap collection, which exposes them to significant vulnerabilities. This study explored the work and health-vulnerabilities faced by female scrap collectors in the rural Eastern Cape communities. Using a case study design that incorporates both quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques, the research was conducted in two phases. The first phase developed a socioeconomic profile of the scrap collectors, while the second phase explored the specific work and health-related vulnerabilities experienced by women. Findings reveal that female scrap collectors face multiple hardships, including hazardous working conditions, and a lack of social protection, all of which undermine their rights to human dignity and decent work. The Longwe Women's Empowerment Framework was employed to analyse the levels of disempowerment and identify strategies for promoting the economic and social empowerment of female scrap collectors. The study highlights an urgent need for policy interventions and social work advocacy to enhance the protection, recognition and empowerment of women engaged in scrap collection.

KEY TERMS: *Eastern Cape, health risks, human rights, Longwe Women's Empowerment Framework, scrap collectors, unemployment, women, work-related vulnerabilities*

KEY DATES: *Submitted: July 2025; Reviewed: August 2025; Accepted: December 2025; Published: February 2026*

KEY DECLARATIONS: *Funding: National Research Foundation | Conflict of Interest: None | Ethics Approval: Ethics Number: HS20/5/27*

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HOW TO REFERENCE USING ASWDNET STYLE

Xweso M. and Schenck C. (2026). *"He left us in the dark forest and unloaded us off the truck": W*ork and health related vulnerabilities of female scrap collectors in rural Eastern Cape and the implications for women's rights. *African Journal of Social Work, 16(2), Special Issue on Women and girls in conflict: intersections of victimization, criminalization, and justice,* 18-30. https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ajsw.v16i1.3

INTRODUCTION

The multifaceted vulnerability of women engaged in the waste picking sector has emerged as a growing concern across numerous global contexts, with South Africa being no exception. These vulnerabilities manifest through precarious working conditions, limited access to healthcare and social protection, and heightened exposure to exploitation and marginalisation. This article critically explores the work and health related vulnerabilities faced by female scrap collectors in the rural Eastern Cape, situating their experiences within broader socioeconomic discourses in the informal economy. Particular attention is given to the implications for women's rights, illuminating the structural and systemic barriers that hinder their agency and well-being. The discussion further engages with the theoretical lens of African feminism, underscoring the importance of recognising and supporting the resilience, autonomy, and transformative potential of these women within their everyday transitions. In doing so, the article advocates for an inclusive and contextually grounded approach to social justice in the informal economy.

CONTEXT AND THE BACKGROUND

Social work, underpinned by a commitment to social justice, human dignity, and equity, has long been dedicated to promoting the rights and well-being of marginalised groups, including women engaged in precarious forms of labour. The profession's mandate aligns with international human rights instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), both of which affirm the right to work under just and favourable conditions, including remuneration that ensures dignity and adequate living standards (United Nations, 1948; United Nations, 1966). Additionally, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 5 (gender equality) and SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth) (UN, 2015), call for the eradication of gender-based inequality and the promotion of inclusive economic participation (UN, 2015). Despite these international commitments, the lived realities of women in South Africa, especially those working in the informal economy often stand in stark contrast to these ideals.

South Africa's informal sector is a vital, yet undervalued, component of the national economy, employing millions of individuals who are excluded from formal employment due to structural inequalities, limited educational opportunities, and spatial disadvantages (Asmal, Bhorat, Lochmann, Martin & Shah, 2024). According to Statistics South Africa (2023), approximately 2.9 million South Africans are employed in the informal sector, with women making up a substantial portion of this group. In rural areas such as the Eastern Cape, high levels of poverty, unemployment, and underdevelopment further exacerbate the vulnerability of women, who often resort to informal economic activities like scrap collection as a means of survival (De Lannoy Mudiriza, & Hall, 2022).

Scrap collection, while offering a source of income, is physically demanding, poorly remunerated, and frequently undertaken in hazardous environments (Schenck et al., 2017). Female scrap collectors in the Eastern Cape, particularly those operating along N2 highway and in rural settlements, face a unique constellation of challenges: they must traverse long distances, often with inadequate transport, they work without protective gear, and they operate in spaces rife with physical, environmental, and social risks (Xelelo, 2018; Schenck *et al.,* 2017). These conditions not only undermine their right to safe and dignified work but also expose them to health complications, emotional distress, and social stigma (Govender & Smit, 2021; Mkhize, 2023).

Importantly, these vulnerabilities are not merely occupational; they are gendered. The intersectionality of gender, poverty, and informal labour means that female scrap collectors experience compounded disadvantages (Wilson, Kootbodien, Made, Mdleleni, Tlotleng, Ntlebi & Naicker, 2022). Their invisibility in labour statistics, exclusion from labour rights protections, and absence from policy dialogues reflect a broader systemic failure to recognise and value women's contributions to the economy (Patel & Hochfeld, 2022). Moreover, informal work such as scrap collection is not covered by occupational health and safety legislation, social insurance schemes, or labour rights enforcement mechanisms (Chen, 2022; ILO, 2022). This exclusion reinforces a cycle of economic insecurity and health vulnerability, particularly for women who bear the dual burden of earning income and caregiving within their households (Ramolelle & Xweso, 2021). The decision to focus this study on the rural Eastern Cape is deliberate. Rural women in this province face disproportionate barriers to economic inclusion due to historical patterns of underdevelopment, apartheid-era spatial planning, and the current lack of investment in infrastructure and services (Booysen & Van Der Berg, 2023). Many of these women are single mothers or elderly caregivers who have limited access to formal employment, skills development, or micro-finance opportunities (Schenck *et al.,* 2018). Consequently, they are compelled to participate in informal recycling as a livelihood strategy. This form of labour, while offering autonomy and income, frequently occurs under conditions that violate their human rights, particularly their right to health, safety, dignity, and gender equality.

Recent studies emphasise the urgent need to foreground the experiences of women in the informal economy within human rights frameworks. For example, Alfers, Lund and Moussie (2020) highlight that informal women

workers globally experience widespread denial of rights related to occupational health, safety, and social protection. Similarly, Blaauw and Pretorius (2023) argue that South African policymakers have consistently failed to integrate informal workers into labour policy frameworks, thereby perpetuating economic marginalisation and vulnerability. This neglect not only violates the socioeconomic rights enshrined in South Africa's Constitution (Section 27) (SA, 1996) but also contravenes international human rights obligations.

Human rights are indivisible, interdependent, and universal. The right to work under fair and safe conditions is directly linked to the right to health, education, and freedom from inhuman or degrading treatment. When women in rural Eastern Cape are compelled to engage in hazardous and unregulated scrap collection due to poverty and lack of alternatives, their rights are systematically eroded. This study seeks to highlight these violations and to argue for a human rights-based approach (HRBA) to informal work policy, particularly in social work practice, policy advocacy, and developmental interventions. The HRBA emphasises participation, accountability, and non-discrimination principles that are critical to addressing the gendered injustices experienced by female scrap collectors (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2021).

In this context, social work has a vital role to play. As a rights-based profession, social workers must advocate for the recognition of informal women workers, facilitate their access to health and social services, and challenge structural injustices that perpetuate their marginalisation. This includes partnering with grassroots organisations, engaging in policy reform efforts, and developing community-based interventions that empower women economically while ensuring their dignity and safety are upheld. Without such engagement, the *status quo* will persist, and the rights of vulnerable women will continue to be disregarded. This study, therefore, explores the work and health related vulnerabilities of female scrap collectors in rural Eastern Cape through a human rights lens. By documenting their lived experiences and analysing the systemic barriers they face, the research aims to inform both social work practice and public policy, with the goal of ensuring that no woman is left "in the dark forest" isolated, invisible, and unprotected.

Setting in which the study was conducted

The study was conducted in three rural towns of the Eastern Cape province Mthatha, Qumbu, and Xhora (also known as Elliotdale). The interest in these research sites stemmed from the presence of women who were identified as actively engaged in scrap collection. These towns are situated in a region grappling with high unemployment rates. In the first quarter of 2025, South Africa's unemployment rate stood at 32.9%, reflecting the continued difficulty many South Africans face in securing employment (Stats SA, 2025). The Eastern Cape, in particular, has been severely affected, leading many residents, especially women, to engage in activities like scrap collection to sustain their livelihoods. This underscores the pressing need for economic development and job creation initiatives in these communities.

The geographical location of the study site is illustrated in Figure 1.

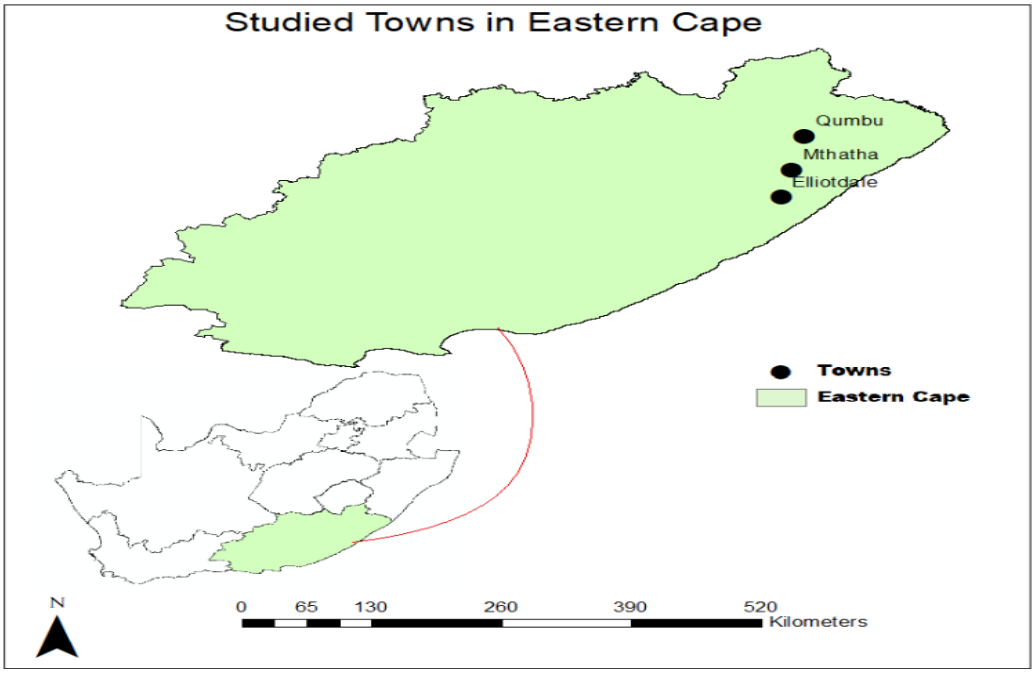

Figure 1: *Map of the Eastern Cape indicating the location of the three towns in question (Source: Nelson Mandela University, Geography Department)*

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research design and approach

The study adopted a case study design integrating quantitative and qualitative methods, enabling methodological triangulation and a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Yin (2017) supports the use of multiple methods to enhance rigour and depth. Conducted in two phases, the design allowed the researchers to address specific objectives (see Figure 21) and to generate rich, contextualised insights. Consistent with Creswell (2007), it facilitated an in-depth investigation of a bounded system within its real-life setting.

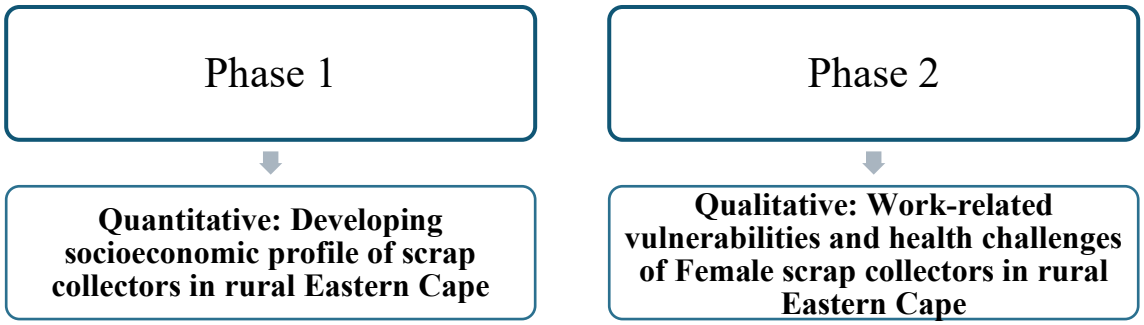

Figure 2: *Two phases were used in the study to collect data from scrap collectors at the selected study sites in the Eastern Cape*

Phase 1 focused on developing a socioeconomic profile of the scrap collectors to provide a comprehensive demographic overview of the population. Phase 2, which explored the work-related vulnerabilities and health challenges of female scrap collectors in rural Eastern Cape, serves as the foundation of this article.

Sampling procedure and techniques during each phase

The first phase of the study involved the quantitative collection of data to develop a socioeconomic profile of female scrap collectors. The research population consisted of available scrap collectors residing in the rural areas of three towns: Mthatha, Qumbu, and Xhora. For this phase, participants were required to be 18 years or older, willing to take part in the study, and have been involved in scrap collection for more than six months. A total of 126 female scrap collectors were interviewed during Phase 1. An observation made during data collection revealed that all participants were women (100%), with the exception of one male in Mthatha who only assisted women by carrying scrap. Interestingly, he had never engaged in selling scrap and, therefore, could not be included in the study. As such, the study population consisted exclusively of women.

In the second phase, qualitative data were collected to gain deeper insights into the lived experiences behind the socioeconomic profile established in Phase 1. The sample population again comprised female scrap collectors residing in Mthatha, Qumbu, and Xhora. The first author-maintained contact with women who had participated in Phase 1 and purposively selected 12 participants for Phase 2, ensuring that they met the same eligibility criteria used earlier. Semi-structured individual interviews (Fouche et al., 2021), were employed to create a safe space for participants to share personal and sensitive information that might not have surfaced in a group setting.

The first author conducted all interviews, as he is fluent in both isiXhosa and English, the languages participants understood. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participants' consent. In Mthatha and Qumbu, the women were visibly located along the N2 highway, which extends towards Durban; interviews were therefore conducted at their designated waiting points along this route. In contrast, in Xhora, the interviews were undertaken within the rural Mnyameni village where the participants reside. Trustworthiness in the study was ensured by strictly adhering to the study's objectives, without adding or omitting any information, thereby guaranteeing that the data remain authentic and verifiable. The second author, as supervisor, provided oversight throughout the research process, ensuring methodological rigour and adherence to ethical standards.

All reasonable measures were taken to adhere to the ethical code of conduct governing professional research in the social sciences. Approval for the study was obtained from the Senate Research Ethics Committee of the University of the Western Cape (Ethics Number: HS20/5/27). Participants were assured that their participation was strictly voluntary and that their privacy would be protected. Confidentiality was maintained, and scrap collectors signed an informed consent form, which was explained in isiXhosa to ensure they fully understood the study's purpose and could provide informed consent based on clear understanding.

Results from Phase 1 (Quantitative) of the Study)

Demographic characteristics of the participants in Phase 1 of the Study (Sample of 126)

Presenting the demographic characteristics of the participants is crucial, as it provides insight into who these women are and, more importantly, deepens the understanding of their social and economic vulnerabilities. The sample comprised exclusively African females (100%), all isiXhosa-speaking and South African-born, originating from the Eastern Cape, with an average age of 55 years, reflecting limited opportunities for reintegration into the formal labour market. In terms of marital status, 37 percent were never married or single, 22 percent married, 22 percent widowed, 8 percent separated, and 6 percent cohabiting, a distribution that underscores the predominance of women managing households without reliable spousal or partner support. Educational attainment was strikingly low, with most participants having only primary schooling or less (see Figure 3), a limitation that significantly diminishes prospects for stable employment in a context of persistently high national unemployment. This structural disadvantage was further compounded by the fact that only 24 percent reported having previously held full-time employment, thereby demonstrating that scrap collection is less a matter of choice than a survivalist strategy shaped by intersecting barriers of age, gender, marital status, and limited educational opportunities.

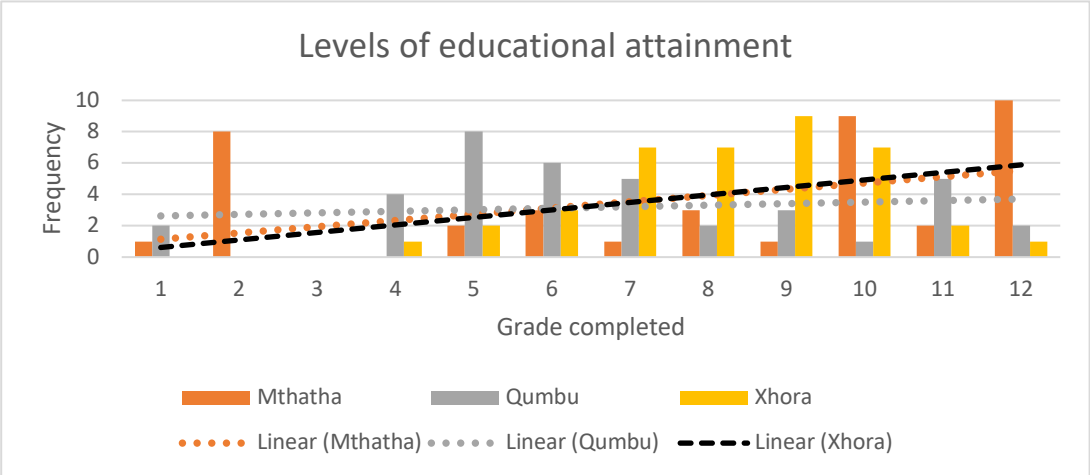

Figure 3: *Levels of education which the participants had attained*
Source: Survey data

Levels of earnings of the 121 Scrap Collectors in Phase 1 of the Study

It was challenging to determine the exact earnings of female scrap collectors in rural Eastern Cape, as their income is neither fixed daily nor monthly. As a result, earnings were estimated based on participants' responses to questions about the amounts they had earned on the previous day, during the past week or month, as well as their comparisons between what they typically earned in what they considered to be "good" versus "bad" months. The income levels of scrap collectors across the three case study sites Xhora, Qumbu, and Mthatha varied significantly depending on whether it was a good, bad, or average month. In the previous month, most participants reported earnings of R1,500.00 or more, with a median income of R2,000.00 and a maximum of R4,000.00, particularly with higher frequencies recorded in Xhora. When selling scrap to BBCs in Durban, loads were typically valued between R1,000.00 and R2,500.00, though never exceeding R5,000.00. However, substantial transportation costs such as R600.00 for a one-way trip and R450.00 for the return journey often consumed nearly half of their earnings. In a good month, incomes improved, with median earnings rising to R3,000.00 and the maximum reaching R5,000.00, though only one participant (from Qumbu) achieved this upper limit. Most collectors fell within the R2,000.00–R3,000.00 range, with Mthatha participants rarely exceeding R3,800.00. In contrast, bad months revealed severe income reductions, with the majority earning between R350.00 and R1,000.00. The most common income in Xhora and Qumbu was R1,000.00, while in Mthatha, it was R800.00. The highest income recorded in a bad month was R2,000.00 by one participant in Xhora. These fluctuations forced many collectors to work daily (collecting scrap) during bad months to make ends meet.

Findings and Themes from Phase 2 (Qualitative) of the Study

In this section, the work-related vulnerabilities and health challenges experienced by the women will be discussed, with a focus on the implications for women's rights.

Table 1: Themes that emerged from the qualitative phase (Phase 2) of the study

Theme 1: A lack of safety equipment and adequate working tools
Theme 2: Lack of protective infrastructure for scrap collectors in adverse weather conditions
Theme 3: Abandoned by truck drivers along N2 highway detours
Theme 4: The risks of transportation: women exposed to danger while loading and riding in trucks
Theme 5: The experience of harassment and violence by '*amaphara*' while collecting scrap and waiting along the N2 road
Theme 6: The health risks encountered by female scrap collectors

Source: Research data

Theme 1: A lack of safety equipment and adequate working tools

In the studies by Neitzel *et al*. (2013), Schenck *et al.* (2018) and Walby & Kohm (2020) on the challenges faced by scrap collectors, or what they term 'metal collectors', it is evident that these individuals lack proper safety equipment during their work. They often collect scrap metal by bare hands, which exposes them to significant risks. Similarly, in this study, it was found that women also collect scrap without the necessary equipment or tools to protect and assist them.

> *It is hard to work without protective equipment, such as gloves., I get cuts every day because of not having gloves. We would appreciate help from the people that offer help.* (Scrap collector 1)
>
> *We need clothes that will protect us from getting skin damages that we usually get from the scrap we collect. We do not have those things.* (Scrap collector 3)
>
> *You know things like boots are important to have and they would even protect us from the snakes because of their strong quality. When we collect the scrap, we look for it even in untidy places* (Scrap collector 6)

According to Uhunamure, Edokpayi, and Shale (2021), most landfill waste pickers in their study face inadequate health and safety measures, including limited or no access to personal protective equipment (PPE), which increases their vulnerability to hazards and negatively impacts their health. This study also found a similar observation among the waste pickers, highlighting the lack of PPE materials for them. While municipalities are obliged to provide PPE for formal waste collection structures, this group of waste pickers is left without such protection.

Theme 2: Lack of protective infrastructure for scrap collectors in adverse weather conditions

In Xelelo's (2018) study on scrap collectors in Mthatha, Eastern Cape, it was evident that women wait along the N2 highway for transportation without any structures such as mini recycling hub to ensure their safety. They rely on trucks to transport them to Durban, but there is no certainty about when these trucks will arrive, exposing them to significant risks. Furthermore, the findings of this study corroborate the observations of Xelelo (2018), as previously outlined, which are presented here for reference. In this study, it is evident that upon arriving in Durban to sell scrap metal, often around midnight, the women scrap collectors lack designated sleeping arrangements, rendering them vulnerable to harsh weather conditions. Their experiences and perspectives regarding this challenge are presented as follows:

> *We suffer a lot, my child. When we are in Durban, we do not have a place to sleep when we get in Durban; we sleep next to the road.* (Scrap collector 10)
>
> *We don't have a place to sleep when we get there. It's hard, there are no people to help us give us a place to sleep.* (Scrap collector 4)
>
> *Even if we arrive at the retail in Durban, for example, we arrive in the dark, we will not be allowed to sleep inside the retail, we will sleep outside* (on the street). (Scrap collector 2)

Participants in the case studies conducted in Mthatha and Qumbu reported that the lack of shelter while waiting for trucks next to the N2 exposes them to verbal attacks and stigma from community members passing by. These women face frequent insults and derogatory remarks, which they believe could have been mitigated if they had a designated shelter. According to them, the absence of a safe waiting space not only affects their physical well-being but also violates their right to human dignity, as enshrined in Section 10 of the South African Constitution (1996), which states that *"everyone has inherent dignity and the right to have their dignity respected and protected*". The following sentiments shared by participants illustrate the emotional toll of these experiences.

> *We see people all day who are insulting us here along the road. We do not stay peacefully here.* (Scrap collector 12)

> *People here think we are mad; they always call us with bad names. They do not know we want money and not that we are crazy.* (Scrap collector 8)

> *You know what people do? They do bad things to us like calling us things we do not like. It would have been better if we had a shelter where we can wait for the trucks and hide ourselves from the people we know, but we do not have a choice we must be here.* (Scrap collector 3)

Drawing from these reflections, it is evident that women engaged in scrap collection perceive their work primarily as a necessary strategy for survival rather than as a voluntary occupational choice. Their participation in this livelihood should not be subjected to ridicule or social stigma, as it represents a deliberate effort to sustain themselves and support their families. As Parez (2019) argues, waste pickers engage in this work as a means of securing their livelihoods and therefore should not be demeaned or marginalised for doing so. This aligns with the fundamental human right to work and economic participation, as outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 23), which asserts that everyone has the right to earn a livelihood under just and favourable conditions. Respecting their agency in this informal labour sector is essential in upholding their dignity and right to economic *'self-determination'*.

Theme 3: Abandoned by truck drivers along N2 highway detours

The women in the study collect scrap by waiting along the road with an 'ND' sign, which is a hitchhiking signal for Durban. They hitch rides with truck drivers, a practice they have been engaging in for some time. At these 'hitchhiking spots', they negotiate with truck drivers for a fair price to transport their scrap to Durban. Many truck drivers willingly load the scrap, as they also seek additional income.

However, a significant challenge arises when some truck drivers become greedy along the way. In an attempt to steal the scrap and sell it themselves upon reaching Durban, they force the women out of the trucks, often in the middle of the N2 highway at night. This leaves the women stranded and vulnerable, putting their lives at risk. The women have shared their experiences of these incidents as follows:

> *We gave one of the truck drivers R650 for everyone's load of scrap... we drove with him to Durban, and it was the night he left us in the dark forest and unloaded us off the truck saying he would not go with us, and he did not give us back our money.* (Scrap collector 4)

> *Truck drivers are bad sometimes… one of them left us in the middle of the night and we were all alone, he took our money and sold our scrap*. (Scrap collector 5)

Some study participants suggested that truck drivers' misconduct occurred because they knew the women were powerless to report incidents to the police, especially since they did not know the truck drivers personally. This created a risky working relationship, as the women lacked the truck drivers' personal details or information about their companies. The following quotations illustrate these findings:

> *The only thing I think is the reason they dump us at night in the middle of nowhere is because they know we have nowhere to report them because we do not even know their names.* (Scrap collector 9)
> *It is sad because we are afraid of the truck drivers, we do not even know them, but we want to take our scrap to Durban... so, we do not have a choice*. (Scrap collector 7)

> *These children who are driving the trucks, they are doing it on purpose to leave us in the strange places and take our money because they know we do not even know where they work, and we do not even know their names.* (Scrap collector 1)

The power exerted by truck drivers, as illustrated in the excerpts above, underscores the violation of women's agency and their fundamental right to make decisions and be heard. In a country where domestic violence remains a persistent issue, this problem is rooted in the broader neglect of women's autonomy. The right to say "no" is rendered meaningless if it is not respected in practice. Ensuring that women's voices are recognised and their choices honoured is crucial for their safety, especially in vulnerable situations like these. The philosopher Nancy Fraser's (2008) concept of Participatory Parity emphasises the importance of recognising marginalised voices, asserting that women should have equal opportunities to assert their choices without coercion, thus promoting their empowerment and safety.

Theme 4: The risks of transportation: women exposed to danger while loading and riding in trucks

The women who participated in the study rely on commercial delivery trucks to transport their scrap to Durban due to the lack of having their own transport. These are typically trucks that have delivered goods such as furniture or other commodities to East London and are returning empty to Durban via the N2 national road, which connects East London and Durban. The women wait along this route and negotiate with drivers to have their scrap loaded for transport. In some instances, the trucks do not have canopies, forcing the women to ride on top of the scrap, thereby exposing themselves to considerable danger. Despite these risks, these trucks serve as a vital link in their informal supply chain, enabling the movement of scrap to Durban and playing a crucial role in sustaining their livelihoods. Figure 4 below illustrates how women use a truck to transport their scrap to Durban.

Figure 4: *A photograph of a female scrap collector in Mthatha, Eastern Cape, standing beside the collected scrap, ready to be loaded onto a truck by the drivers (Source: Researcher)*

The following comments shared by participants highlight their experiences with the dangers associated with these trucks.

> *When we take a truck to Durban, when it rains it is difficult for us because we are stuck in the back* (of the truck) *in the rain, and we get sick with flu.* (Scrap collector 8)

> *One day I got in the truck, I was alone, other women where not there, I wanted to go to Durban and they said they are also going that direction, I was shocked when I saw the truck taking a different direction, I asked the drivers where it was going now because it was not the road to Durban and they did not respond to my question, that day I said to myself now they will do a bad thing to me, lucky along the road there were road constructers, I screamed so that they can hear me, they came near the truck and helped me.* (Scrap collector 6)

> *We do not feel safe when we are on the truck: it is risky, the rain is affecting us when we are on the truck.*

(Scrap collector 10)

This study confirms the findings of Schenck, et al (2018) regarding N2 scrap collectors in the rural Eastern Cape. Their research highlighted that while trucks serve as a crucial means of transporting scrap to Durban, they also pose significant risks to the women using them. Women often suffer from suffocation inside the trucks, sustain cuts, and are exposed to harsh weather conditions, including rain. Moreover, transporting scrap in this manner violates South African road laws, putting the women at risk of being stopped by the traffic police before reaching Durban. Beyond legal concerns, it is inhumane for women to travel in trucks carrying contaminated materials, which endangers their health.

Importantly, this situation is not caused by truck drivers but rather reflects the broader socioeconomic realities these women face. Their reliance on such precarious survival strategies indicates that this population remains largely unnoticed. Despite South Africa's democratic progress, many still endure indecent working conditions and lack of protection and care, even though they have the right to access services that could protect them from such risks. It is also important to note that, despite these circumstances, the scrap collectors demonstrate bravery and resilience in undertaking these journeys.

Theme 5: The experience of harassment and violence by *'amaphara'* while collecting scrap and waiting along the N2 road

The participants highlighted the presence of '*amaphara'* a term that directly translates to parasites" as a significant challenge in the areas along the N2 highway where they wait for trucks. These individuals not only steal their scrap materials but also harass them, often demanding a share of the money they have earned from selling recyclables. In some cases, this money had been carefully saved to pay truck drivers for transport. Similar patterns of harassment have been documented in other studies. For instance, Mlotshwa *et al.* (2022) explored the experiences of female waste pickers in Durban, South Africa, and found comparable instances of intimidation and extortion. In that study, the perpetrators were referred to as *abatshana* (meaning the 'boys on the street'), reflecting a parallel dynamic of exploitation.

The following excerpts from this study provide a firsthand account of how *amaphara* disrupt and threaten the livelihoods of 'scrap collectors, exposing them to persistent harassment and financial insecurity.

> *Amaphara steal our money while we are waiting here for the transport to take us to Durban.* (Scrap collector 2)

> *We are in trouble because of people who wants to take the money we have kept for the transport to Durban*. (Scrap collector 4)

> *Yhoo! …Amaphara are all over this place they even steal even the scrap we collect, we sometimes do not go to Durban because they have taken our scrap.* (Scrap collector 1)

The findings suggest that the distress expressed by scrap collectors regarding harassment by *amaphara* is a significant concern, as it disrupts their pursuit of a livelihood and infringes upon their fundamental rights. This harassment may violate their right to security and dignity, as outlined in Section 12 and Section 10 of the South African Constitution (Republic of South Africa, 1996), which guarantee freedom from violence and the right to human dignity, respectively.

The Department of Environment, Forestry and Fisheries, along with the Department of Science and Innovation, emphasizes in the Waste Pickers Integration Guidelines (2020) that waste pickers should be protected from gender-based violence. While the harassment observed in this study has not yet escalated to physical violence, there is a risk that it could, if not adequately addressed.

Theme 6: The health risks encountered by female scrap collectors

The work of scrap collectors poses significant health risks, not only because of the physically demanding nature of their labour, but also due to the broader processes embedded in their livelihood activities, including the collection and transportation of materials, extensive travelling, and, in some cases, sleeping on the streets. Prolonged exposure to hazardous materials can lead to serious health issues, ultimately affecting their ability to sustain long-term engagement in scrap collection. Previous studies on waste pickers have similarly highlighted the health challenges they face, as their work involves handling dirty and potentially contaminated materials (Dalasile & Reddy, 2017; Zolnikov, Furio, Cruvinel, Richards, 2021; Mlotshwa *et al.* 2022). In this study, female scrap collectors specifically expressed concerns about the physical toll of their daily movements in search of scrap. Many reported experiencing various physical complications, which are reflected in the following accounts:

I have arthritis now because of the constant walking on the road collecting metals. (Scrap collector 12)
I am suffering from arthritis because of walking all over around. (Scrap collector 10)

My back hurts every day as I wander around looking for scrap metals. (Scrap collector 11)

Since I started doing this work my feet hurt and I have been going to the clinic, but I can't stop because there is no other way (Scrap collector 6)

The health challenges expressed by the participants appear to disproportionately affect women, as they not only engage in physically demanding scrap collection but also bear domestic responsibilities as mothers. This dual burden increases their risk of fatigue, particularly when they must continue performing household duties after strenuous labour. For instance, one participant mentioned suffering from arthritis, a condition that could severely impact their ability to continue collecting scrap and earning a livelihood. Additionally, for women of childbearing age, the physical strain of scrap collection may contribute to reproductive health complications. Despite these concerns, there is a noticeable gap in the literature regarding their access to healthcare services when they fall ill. Instead, Xelelo (2018) highlights that female waste pickers often lack access to essential health services, with no clear indication that such services are readily available to them when needed.

APPLYING LONGWE'S WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT FRAMEWORK (1995): PATHWAYS TO EMPOWERING FEMALE SCRAP COLLECTORS

To critically engage the implications of this study for advancing women's rights and empowerment, we apply Longwe's Women's Empowerment Framework, a widely used gender analysis tool developed by Longwe (1995). This framework identifies five progressive levels of empowerment: Welfare, Access, Conscientisation, Participation, and Control, which together offer a structured approach to examining and improving women's agency and equality within any given context.

In the case of female scrap collectors in the rural Eastern Cape, these five levels provide a useful lens for evaluating both their current disempowerment and the pathways through which empowerment can be achieved:

1. Welfare:
   At this basic level, the focus is on meeting women's immediate needs such as food, shelter, income, and health (Longwe, 1995). The findings of this study illustrate that female scrap collectors lack access to protective equipment, proper transport, safe sleeping arrangements, and basic health services, all of which directly undermine their welfare. Empowerment at this level would involve providing health and safety equipment (e.g., gloves, boots, masks), establishing safe collection shelters, and improving access to mobile health services.
2. Access:
   Access refers to women's ability to obtain resources like education, land, and income-generating opportunities (Longwe, 1995). The participants' limited formal education and lack of access to formal work opportunities signal deep structural inequalities. Enhancing access would require municipal recognition of their work, inclusion in local economic development plans, and access to training programmes, microcredit schemes and cooperative support.
3. Conscientisation:
   This level involves raising awareness among women that their marginalisation is socially and structurally constructed, not a result of personal failure or fate. Many participants blamed themselves or accepted degrading conditions as unchangeable. Social work intervention can play a transformative role here by facilitating consciousness-raising workshops, rights-based education, and peer support groups rooted in African feminist principles. These spaces would allow women to reflect critically on their oppression and begin envisioning change.
4. Participation:
   This level pertains to women's involvement in decision-making and collective action. Currently, the scrap collectors lack formal representation in policymaking processes and are not included in municipal waste planning or safety dialogues. Empowerment would require forming women-led scrap collector cooperatives or associations that liaise directly with municipalities, NGOs, and recyclers to negotiate better terms of work and support structures.
5. Control:
   At the highest level, empowerment means women have full control over their lives, decisions, and resources. For female scrap collectors, this would involve not only having decision-making power over their work conditions and income but also the ability to challenge unsafe practices (e.g.,

exploitation by truck drivers or harassment by "amaphara") and to demand accountability. Legal literacy campaigns, access to legal recourse, and protection under labour and GBV laws are essential at this stage.

The researchers note that Longwe's Empowerment Theory was originally developed to address gender inequalities within formalized or structured contexts. A potential shortcoming of the theory is its limited applicability to informal work such as scrap collection. Specifically, it may not adequately account for structural and systemic barriers, including unsafe working conditions, lack of sanitation, and exploitative practices by buyers, all of which directly impact the livelihoods and well-being of scrap collectors. However, this study highlights potential strategies for addressing these challenges, particularly at the 'Access' stage of empowerment, though practical implementation may be difficult without targeted interventions. This underscores the need for a social justice approach to ensure that empowerment initiatives are effectively realized in practice.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawing from Longwe's framework and the study findings, the following social work and policy recommendations are proposed:

- Integrate female scrap collectors into local development planning through the formal recognition of their labour, provision of PPE, and designated safe workspaces.
- Facilitate collective organisation, such as cooperatives or support networks, to enable participation, advocacy, and peer-led change. These could be facilitated by practitioners at the Department of Small Business Development and Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs.
- Promote rights-based and feminist conscientisation initiatives facilitated by social workers and community development practitioners to build awareness of gendered oppression and labour rights.
- Ensure access to essential services, including mobile health units, psychosocial counselling, legal support, childcare facilities and access to safety nets such as social protection.
- Advocate for gender-sensitive policy reforms that include informal workers in health and safety regulations and provide protection against gender-based violence.

CONCLUSION

The Longwe Framework reveals that the vulnerabilities faced by female scrap collectors in rural Eastern Cape are not only economic or occupational but deeply gendered and structural. Social work, with its mandate for social justice and empowerment, must actively engage at all five levels of the empowerment framework. This involves addressing immediate welfare needs while facilitating consciousness, participation, and control over work conditions and life choices. Ultimately, empowering these women means restoring their dignity, agency, and rightful place in the economy, a transformative act that aligns with both African feminist ideals and global social work principles. As Lombard and Twikirize (2022) remind us, empowerment in the African context must be rooted in local realities, collective resilience, and the decolonisation of marginalised voices. In responding to the structural injustices these women face, social work practice must centre their lived experiences and co-create solutions with them ensuring they are no longer left "in the dark forest" but instead lead the way to a more just and equitable society.

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