

RESEARCH SUMMARY

Psychosocial Determinants of Perceived Well-Being Among Informal Waste Workers at Reppie Landfill Site (Koshe) in Addis Ababa

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Publication Notice: *This summary is shared to inform key partners about the research rationale, findings, and recommendations. The full research report is owned by Addis Ababa University and will be published upon approval by the University Senate.*

The Issue: Why This Research Matters

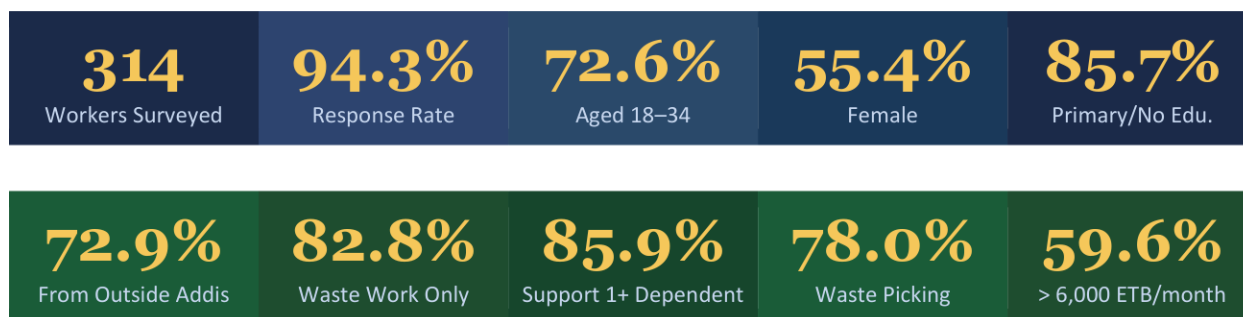
Addis Ababa generates over **3,000 tons of solid waste every day**. At the Reppie Landfill Site (Koshe), approximately **2,000 informal waste workers** recover recyclable materials, divert waste from landfills, and support the circular economy. They are, in practice, essential actors in the city's waste management system — yet they remain largely invisible in policy, research, and public discourse.

These workers face not only hazardous physical conditions and income insecurity, but also a quieter, more persistent burden: **occupational stigma**. They are socially excluded, publicly devalued, and routinely treated as less than dignified workers. Yet the psychological toll of this stigma — its effects on self-esteem, perceived social support, and perceived well-being — has remained almost entirely unstudied in the Ethiopian context.

The core question this study sets out to answer: *How does the stigma attached to waste work shape the perceived well-being of the people doing it — and what role do self-esteem and perceived social support play in that relationship?*

Who Was Studied

A convergent parallel mixed-methods study was conducted at the Reppie Landfill Site. Quantitative data were collected through structured face-to-face interviews with **314 informal waste workers** (response rate: 94.3%), using four validated psychological scales. Qualitative insights were gathered through key informant interviews with government institutions (AACMA, EPA) and non-state stakeholders (Soil and More Ethiopia, Eco Justice Ethiopia, HIDO).



The profile of participants reveals a predominantly young, female, low-educated, and migrant workforce shouldering significant household financial burdens — a population group that is simultaneously economically active and socially marginalized.

What We Measured

Four validated instruments were adapted and used:

Instrument	Measures	Items	α
Stigma Consciousness Scale (SCS)	Perceived stigma from waste work	10	0.875
Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES)	Self-worth and self-acceptance	10	0.781
MSPSS	Perceived social support	12	0.889
WEMWBS	Perceived well-being	14	0.853

All scales demonstrated good to acceptable internal consistency ($\alpha \geq 0.78$). Key descriptive finding: stigma scored highest ($M = 3.90$ out of 5) and self-esteem scored lowest ($M = 2.43$) — a telling juxtaposition.

What We Found

Quantitative Findings

01

Stigma Directly Harms Well-Being

Every one-unit rise in stigma reduces perceived well-being by 0.33 units ($B = -.330$, $p < .001$). The effect is consistent and significant across all conditions.

02

Self-Esteem Mediates the Harm

Stigma erodes self-esteem, which in turn reduces perceived well-being. Indirect effect: -0.072 (95% CI $[-.118, -.029]$). Self-esteem is a critical psychological pathway.

03

Social Support Helps, But Cannot Buffer Stigma

Perceived social support improves perceived well-being directly ($B = +.257$, $p < .001$), but does NOT significantly reduce the impact of stigma (interaction $p = .697$).

The model explains 35% of variance in perceived well-being ($R^2 = .3503$, $F(4,309) = 41.648$, $p < .001$) — a strong result for a psychosocial model in this population context.

Qualitative Findings (Key Informant Interviews)

Four major themes emerged from interviews with government, NGO, and civil society stakeholders:

Pervasive Psychosocial Challenges	Chronic stress, anxiety, and depression are common. The unresolved trauma of the 2017 Koshe landslide continues to affect workers. Women face compounded vulnerabilities including harassment and caregiving burden.
Deeply Embedded Stigma	Stigma is structural, not just social. Workers are excluded from formal governance, criminalized by authorities, and rendered symbolically invisible in policies and programs.
Inadequate Institutional Responses	Programs focus on operational efficiency — not worker dignity. No formal psychosocial support systems exist. NGO interventions are short-term and project-based.
Critical Role of Informal Networks	In the absence of formal support, peer solidarity and mutual aid are the primary sources of resilience. Cooperatives offer potential but face governance challenges.

What This Means

Taken together, the findings reveal a **"Policy-Psychosocial Gap"** — a structural disconnect between how waste management is governed and what workers actually need. Current policy frameworks prioritize trucks and bins. They do not address stigma, self-esteem, or mental health.

The quantitative evidence confirms what qualitative informants observed: stigma is not just a social inconvenience. It is an active force eroding self-worth and perceived well-being. And while perceived social support helps, it cannot alone counteract stigma that is embedded in institutional discrimination and structural exclusion.

"To build a truly sustainable and inclusive urban future, policymakers must first recognize and respect the dignity of the workers who sustain the city's waste management system. Only by restoring the self-esteem and social recognition of these essential workers can Ethiopia achieve genuinely sustainable, inclusive, and socially just urban development."

The Way Forward — Recommendations

For	Actions
AACMA & EPA	• Integrate counseling and trauma support services into worker formalization programs • Implement dignity-centered occupational training to rebuild occupational pride and self-esteem
Policymakers	• Shift to human-centric circular economy policy frameworks that treat well-being as integral to waste governance • Align climate action commitments with social protection schemes for informal workers
Civil Society & NGOs	• Launch sustained public stigma-reduction campaigns that reframe the social value of waste work • Strengthen peer support networks and cooperative governance structures
Future Research	• Conduct longitudinal studies to assess long-term psychosocial impacts on this workforce • Test the effectiveness of dignity-based versus income-based interventions • Expand geographic scope to other Ethiopian cities and comparative African contexts

Why This Study Matters

This is the first empirically rigorous psychosocial study of informal waste workers at Reppie Landfill Site, using validated psychological instruments and a mixed-methods design. It contributes to Social Psychology scholarship by providing evidence on the stigma–perceived well-being nexus among a marginalized occupational group in Ethiopia.

For practitioners and policymakers, it offers a concrete evidence base to justify psychosocial investment. The "Policy-Psychosocial Gap" is no longer an assertion — it is a documented finding.

Acknowledgments

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- **Soil and More Ethiopia** — for financing the research
- **Eco Justice Ethiopia** — for shedding light on the issue and providing valuable input

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