

Social Inequality and Survival Strategies: Stories of Women Scavengers' Struggle in Bengkulu City

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ABSTRACT: Women waste pickers face one of the most obvious inequalities caused by social inequality in urban areas, particularly in the informal sector. Through a case study of Nurjani, a waste picker in Bengkulu City, this research seeks to understand how women waste pickers cope with health and financial constraints. Her personal experiences are investigated using a qualitative research methodology that includes documentation, in-depth interviews, and participatory observation approaches. The research findings show that women waste pickers' economic and health circumstances are exacerbated by structural poverty, limited access to formal employment and health care, and low social capital. To overcome these constraints, Nurjani created a survival plan that relies on social cooperation among waste pickers, economic flexibility, and hard work. Her economic resilience was further strengthened by social support from the local community, and her health condition deteriorated due to limited access to medical care. To address the disparities experienced by women waste pickers and improve access to more inclusive healthcare, this study highlights the need for social justice and community empowerment-based initiatives.

KEYWORDS: Women waste pickers, social solidarity, survival tactics, socioeconomic inequality, and access to health care

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I. INTRODUCTION

Economic dynamics and uneven development result in social disparities in urban areas (Nisyak et al., 2023). Urban growth often leads to polarization between vulnerable and empowered groups, according to the idea of urbanization and social stratification (Sutarji, 2022). While low-income groups become marginalized, the middle and upper classes usually have access to resources including quality jobs, education, and health facilities (Tinggi et al., 2025). As part of the informal sector, waste pickers are one of the groups most affected by this situation, especially women who experience social constraints that worsen their status in society in addition to economic instability.

As a result of low scavenger wages and lack of social protection, women scavengers are often forced to work in hazardous conditions (Syakrani, 2016). According to research (Maulida et al., 2021) on the informal economy, workers in this sector are particularly vulnerable to financial hazards as they usually lack access to social benefits, health insurance, and job stability. In addition, there are many risks associated with their profession, including exposure to toxic waste, cuts from sharp objects, and negative health effects from environmental pollution (Sibagariang et al., 2023). To support their families, women waste pickers also work longer hours under unfavorable working conditions due to income instability. This is exacerbated by the persistence of traditional gender roles, which place a double burden on them by requiring them to handle both domestic tasks and work outside the home (Ginting, 2018).

A case study conducted in Bengkulu City shows how women waste pickers try to live in a very restricted environment. Nurjani, a waste picker who has to deal with social and economic problems at the same time, is one example. According to structural feminist theory, this situation results from an unfavorable economic system that forces lower-class women to do menial work for very low wages and without protection (Fajar & Prasetyo, 2022). Female waste pickers are socially stigmatized in addition to economic pressures, as their work is looked down upon by society, which makes it more difficult for them to obtain better economic prospects (Ira et al., 2024). This study shows that urban social inequality stems from social and cultural systems that continue to exclude vulnerable groups, especially women working in the informal sector, in addition to economic factors.

Understanding the survival tactics used by women waste pickers in the face of financial and health limitations is the aim of this study. This research examines Nurjani's lived experiences while carrying out her work as a waste picker using qualitative methodology and case study method. To get a full picture of the social

and economic circumstances she faced, information was collected through participant observation and in-depth interviews. The research findings show that the main element that reinforces Nurjani's cycle of poverty is structural poverty. Groups like Nurjani are forced to rely on informal work as a means of economic adaptation due to their lack of access to formal employment, health care and social support. However, these restrictions impact their health and quality of life in addition to the economy.

Through perseverance, economic adaptation, and social solidarity with the local community, Nurjani was able to create a survival plan despite facing various challenges. Social capital that helps overcome obstacles in life is created through the existence of social networks and connections with other waste pickers or the local community. This shows that social interactions in the environment as well as individual characteristics influence survival strategies. Therefore, this research shows that poverty is a social problem that needs to be addressed by a number of stakeholders in addition to economic issues. Addressing this imbalance requires policy strategies based on social justice and community empowerment. It is hoped that this research will advance knowledge about the circumstances faced by women waste pickers and be taken into consideration by governments and policy makers when developing more inclusive approaches to reducing poverty.

II. METHODOLOGY

To understand the survival tactics of women waste pickers in the face of financial and health limitations, this research combines a qualitative approach with case study methodology. As case studies allow for a thorough examination of an individual's experience within a specific social setting, a case study was chosen (Abdussamad, 2021). Nurjani, a female waste picker with three years of experience, is the main subject of the research conducted in Bengkulu City. Purposive sampling was used to select participants based on a number of factors, including the length of their scavenger work, the challenging financial conditions, and the health issues they face on a daily basis. Three main methods were used to obtain data: documentation, in-depth interviews, and participant observation (Adhi Kusumatuti and Ahmad Mustamil Khoiron, 2019).

To understand Nurjani's work habits and social relationships in her daily scavenging activities, observation was conducted. To learn more about her life experiences, financial hardships, and survival tactics, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted. To gain a more comprehensive perspective, interviews were also conducted with neighbors and scrap collectors other than Nurjani. The authenticity of the information collected was supported by documentation in the form of field notes, photographs, and interview recordings (w. Lawrence Neuman, 2016).

Thematic analysis, which includes data reduction, categorization, and interpretation phases, was used to analyze the data (Sugiyono, 2018). The selection of relevant material for the study and its categorization into major themes such as survival tactics, economic hardship, and social support needs was how data reduction was conducted. The research findings were interpreted by relating them to relevant sociological ideas, namely social inequality and social capital theories. The research used source and method triangulation to ensure the authenticity of the data, which entailed comparing interviews from multiple sources and integrating documentation, interview and observation approaches to gain a more thorough knowledge.

Research ethics considerations, such as informed consent, anonymity and transparency, must also be taken into account (Nizammuddin, 2021). Prior to the interviews, Nurjani and other informants were informed about the purpose of the research and asked for their consent. To maintain their privacy, informants' identities were kept confidential. The findings of this study will also be applied to academic research and social advocacy initiatives that aim to raise public awareness about the difficulties faced by women waste pickers. It is hoped that this approach will provide a comprehensive picture of how urban women waste pickers manage to survive despite the barriers and social variables that perpetuate the cycle of poverty.

III. DISCUSSION

This paper uses the case study of Nurjani in Bengkulu City to highlight the complex social realities that women waste pickers have to face. As it effectively demonstrates how social inequality in the informal sector directly affects women's well-being, especially in terms of economics and health, the research is highly relevant. Some of the main ideas from the research findings will be outlined in this discussion and linked to theories and the wider social environment.

This study emphasizes that women waste pickers are a vulnerable group who experience multiple forms of discrimination: as women, as the poor, and as workers in the informal sector. These inequalities are compounded by low levels of education and skills, and limited economic capital, and are caused not only by economic factors, but also by social structures that place women in subordinate positions without job security, security, or access to basic services. In many cases in Indonesia, women in the informal sector, such as waste pickers, do not have access to social security, health, or education.

The explanation of Nurjani's survival strategy, which relies on social collaboration among the waste picker community, is one of the key achievements of this research. It shows that social solidarity is essential for survival in very difficult situations. Pierre Bourdieu's social capital theory, which states that people's social

networks and interactions can be valuable resources for survival, can help to understand this idea (George, Ritzer Douglas J, 2019). Informal networks are a major source of assistance, despite the lack of formal access to health services and employment. In addition, economic adaptability also emerged as a tactic. Nurjani does not rely on a single source of income, but performs various types of informal work, which demonstrates the dynamic character of economic resilience.

Nurjani's declining health is indicative of a larger problem regarding the poor's access to health services. This study highlights the fact that Indonesia's healthcare system is far from comprehensive, especially for those who work in the unorganized sector and do not have insurance or BPJS coverage. Apart from cost, other factors contributing to this limited access are the location of health facilities, lack of preventive health education, and the stigma attached to waste pickers' occupation which results in discrimination in services.

The study concludes that social justice-based strategies are needed to solve the problems faced by women waste pickers. This includes changing laws to make it easier for people to find formal employment, providing better social protection to workers in the unorganized sector, and making health services more accessible and affordable. Empowering communities is critical to bringing about change. In this case, creating collective power and defending the rights of waste pickers can start with strengthening local neighborhoods and forming cooperatives or community-based working groups.

IV. FINDINGS

1. Financial Difficulties Faced by Women Waste Pickers

According to this study, Nurjani and other women waste pickers face a variety of complicated financial problems, which are not just limited to money. Her mediocre daily wage as a scavenger ranges from Rp40,000 to Rp50,000, which is certainly not enough to fulfill needs such as food and simple shelter. This instability is caused by a number of external variables, including shifts in the market price of old products influenced by demand from the recycling sector, and increased competition from other waste pickers who are also experiencing difficulties in the informal sector.

According to Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social inequality, Nurjani's situation is a reflection of her limited access to economic capital, which prevents her from investing in more promising opportunities, such as small businesses or her children's education, and keeps her trapped in a cycle of structural poverty. Her limited access to social capital, which includes networks that can offer better opportunities, and cultural capital, which includes education or specialized skills, further limits her chances of escaping this situation.

Her limited access to economic capital, which prevents her from investing in more promising opportunities, such as small businesses or her children's education, traps her in a cycle of structural poverty. In addition, her limited access to social capital, which includes networks and relationships that can offer better economic opportunities, further narrows her possibilities for social mobility. This social capital, according to Bourdieu, plays an important role in providing access to economic resources and employment opportunities, which are unfortunately difficult for marginalized groups such as women waste pickers to obtain (Maria Matildis Banda, n.d.). On the other hand, limited cultural capital, which includes education, work skills and knowledge that can increase competitiveness in the labor market, is also a factor that limits Nurjani's economic options.

In Bourdieu's view, low cultural capital makes a person less able to navigate social structures dominated by those with greater capital, thus reinforcing the reproduction of social inequality (George, Ritzer Douglas J, 2019). Nurjani, as part of a group of informal workers, experiences these obstacles due to the lack of access to training or education that can improve her skills and help her get out of poverty. Thus, the conditions faced by Nurjani are not solely caused by economic factors, but also by complex interactions between economic, social and cultural capital, which in Bourdieu's theory are interrelated in shaping and maintaining social stratification. Without structural interventions, such as community-based economic empowerment programs or increased access to education for informal female workers, this cycle of inequality will continue from one generation to the next.

Furthermore, social mobility is also affected by these limitations in addition to economic limitations (Aqmal, 2023). The position of women waste pickers like Nurjani is further marginalized in a culture that still relies on economic capital to build social status. Due to her low education and skills, she lacks the flexibility to move into more established fields of work. This situation shows that the poverty she faces is caused by a societal framework that does not provide equal access to the poor to improve their standard of living, in addition to low income.

2. How to Survive When Facing Obstacles

Nurjani created a number of individual and group survival techniques in response to health and economic hardships. Her initial tactic was economic adaptation, which involved drastically increasing working hours. He only stopped when it got dark, having started his work before dawn, even before sunrise. To increase the likelihood of making more money, this involved collecting additional scrap items that could be sold.

However, this tactic took its toll, especially on his health. His health condition deteriorated over time due to excessive physical activity, lack of rest, and exposure to hazardous waste and pollutants.

Using social networks as a means of adapting to limited financial resources is Nurjani's second tactic. Borrowing a cart from a neighbor or another scavenger is a clear example of this tactic that demonstrates the practice of social capital in her community. Strong social ties within a community can support the economic resilience of the underprivileged, according to Robert Putnam's social capital theory (Bernard Raho, 2021). Important mechanisms that enable waste pickers to survive in the face of economic instability include community support, which can take the form of lending work tools, exchanging knowledge about the location of valuable second-hand products, or simply helping to transport scavenged goods.

Furthermore, social solidarity among waste pickers is also important in the face of increasing economic pressure (Aqmal, 2023). In the face of competition for scrap, cooperative practices such as information sharing and protection from outside threats, such as violence at scavenging sites or repressive measures by authorities, continue. Solidarity reflects collective defense, where people in similar situations form unofficial support networks to survive (Restyan F.M & Jacky, 2013). In this situation, social ties between waste pickers are not only limited to working relationships but also become part of a larger survival strategy.

3. Limited Access to Health Services

Nurjani faces serious health issues in addition to extreme financial pressure. She suffers from hyperthyroidism, a chronic disease that affects the body's metabolism and requires ongoing treatment to manage her symptoms. Many problems, including fatigue, severe weight loss, heart problems and difficulty controlling body temperature, can result from hyperthyroidism. Given that scavenging work requires physical strength and high mobility, her work as a scavenger became more challenging as her physical condition worsened.

However, Nurjani found it difficult to get the best treatment due to financial constraints. She needs to take medication every day to manage her illness, but due to the ever-increasing cost of medication and her unstable income, she often has to forgo medical treatment to pay for other necessities such as food and shelter. Nurjani was faced with a common dilemma faced by the poor in this case: choosing between long-term health care and financial survival. She is forced to seek alternatives due to her inability to obtain sustainable and reasonably priced health care, such as using traditional medicine or buying drugs at retail stores that do not always match the doctor's recommended dosage.

From the perspective of Karl Marx's structural inequality theory, Nurjani's situation shows how the capitalist economic system limits the access of lower-class groups to health resources. Only those with sufficient financial resources can obtain quality medical care in this system, where healthcare services are often privatized and regulated by market forces. Meanwhile, underprivileged populations like Nurjani are forced to make do with limited resources, which ultimately worsens their health and exacerbates the cycle of poverty.

Furthermore, this condition shows the inability of the state to fulfill its responsibility as a health service provider for vulnerable communities. According to Marxist theory, the state often supports the interests of the ruling class in a capitalist economy, meaning that the rich benefit more from current health policies than the poor (Diva Raya, Rihan Rizky, Cucu Robiatul, Jasmine Az-zahra, Wardatul Azizah, 2024). Although the government offers health assistance programs, the reality on the ground shows that there are still many barriers to access, including a lack of medical facilities, bureaucratic red tape, and the inability of low-income people to continue paying administrative and transportation costs to get health care. Women like Nurjani have to fight alone to get the care that should be their fundamental citizenship right. As a result, Nurjani's illness is a sign of larger structural inequalities in addition to being a medical problem. The poor are still trapped in situations that make them more vulnerable in terms of health and economy as current social policies and economic systems fail to offer them any solutions.

4. The Function of Social Support in Survival

Community social support for Nurjani was crucial to her survival during times of health and financial hardship. Although Nurjani had to face challenging social and economic situations, she did not struggle alone. Neighbors and other waste pickers provide her with useful support in the form of loans of work equipment, including carts or bags for collecting waste. She was able to work more effectively, simplify her tasks, and reduce the financial burden of having to buy or rent such equipment. In addition, it is important to share information about possible places to find valuable used items. Nurjani's opportunity to make more money is directly driven by the knowledge that other waste pickers often provide about newly discovered locations or locations that sell second-hand goods at cheaper prices.

In his theory of social structure, Emile Durkheim introduced the idea of mechanical solidarity, which is highly relevant to this social support (Andi Haris, 2020). According to Durkheim, there are two types of social solidarity: organic solidarity and mechanical solidarity (A et al., 2023). In more straightforward traditional civilizations, when social relations between people are characterized by a high degree of similarity in terms of occupations, values, and standards, mechanical solidarity emerges (Diva Raya, Rihan Rizky, Cucu Robiatul, Jasmine Az-zahra, Wardatul Azizah, 2024). Since there is no clear job specialization and everyone in the

community plays a complementary function, people in this culture depend on each other for survival. The mutual dependence between Nurjani and her fellow scavengers, as well as her neighbors, is an example of this mechanical solidarity in action. They work together to help each other, mitigate each other's challenges, and support each other despite their limitations. In addition to offering useful advice, this solidarity offers emotional support that is essential for coping with difficult circumstances such as concerns about one's health or financial future.

Moreover, mechanical solidarity in this situation offers a sense of emotional connectedness in addition to useful support. Nurjani, who felt alone in her struggle against poverty and illness, found strength in this encouraging group. She feels less psychologically burdened, has a stronger sense of community, and has emotional security—all of which are important in difficult times thanks to this social support. Strong bonds between community members can give them the resilience to persevere and get through difficult times in an economically divided society. Overall, the mechanical solidarity that has formed within this waste picker community not only offers useful information and tools, but also provides emotional support, which allows Nurjani and other community members to survive under very difficult circumstances. For people living in uncertainty, this solidarity is a great source of comfort and an important social mechanism for maintaining physical and mental health.

5. Implications for Society and Policy

This study emphasizes that the poverty faced by women waste pickers, such as Nurjani, is a structural problem that is strongly linked to larger social injustices, not just an individual problem that can be solved by self-help. Their opportunities to move out of poverty are limited due to inequalities in the broader social, economic and political structures. Therefore, deeper social interventions based on legislative changes that can reduce these disparities are needed to solve this problem.

The term “structural poverty” refers to the ways in which social and economic structures produce and maintain disparities between different social groups, such as between women waste pickers and wealthier groups (Pawit Fadila Rika Farisa et al., 2023). Due to their limited access to social and financial resources, women waste pickers in this situation are trapped in a cycle of poverty. Despite their efforts, they are stuck in low-paid and erratic jobs and their income is not enough to cover their basic expenses. This is the result of a social system that limits their access to greater possibilities, not just a personal inability or failure to succeed.

One way to reduce this imbalance is through community-based economic empowerment initiatives. Skills training, access to business capital, and network building are some examples of programs that can provide women waste pickers with the opportunity to earn a higher and more stable income. This empowerment has the ability to increase social capital in their communities in addition to giving women the opportunity to improve their household economy (Linda Safitra, 2023). Stronger and more supportive social networks allow them to exchange knowledge, collaborate on projects, and encourage each other in improving their life circumstances. By involving people in decisions related to their well-being, these community-based initiatives can help drive more inclusive social change.

Furthermore, more inclusive health policies are needed to ensure that women waste pickers have access to adequate health care; without such care, women waste pickers will continue to struggle to maintain their health, which worsens their socioeconomic situation. An inclusive health policy will ensure that women waste pickers and other vulnerable groups in society have equal access to affordable and high-quality health care, enabling them to receive necessary treatment, improve their quality of life, and have greater opportunities to engage in economic activities.

It is important to note that these measures have a strong intellectual foundation in John Rawls' notion of social justice. According to Rawls, social justice can be achieved if the law provides equal opportunities to everyone, especially the most disadvantaged members of society (Linda Safitra, 2023). According to Rawls' “difference principle”, social injustice is only acceptable if it ultimately helps those who are most disadvantaged (Arkadius, Norbertus Jegalus, 2024). Just policies should address the disparities experienced by women waste pickers and give them more access to financial and medical resources. In other words, social policies should be created to reduce current inequalities and guarantee that underprivileged populations, such as women waste pickers, have more opportunities to improve their circumstances.

Overall, this study shows that the structural issues of poverty faced by women waste pickers require more comprehensive and methodical legislative changes. Important measures to reduce the social injustices they face include inclusive health policies and community-based economic development. Equitable policies that adhere to Rawls' principles of social justice will give women waste pickers more equal access to resources, improve their living standards, and enable them to take an active role in social and economic life.

V. CONCLUSION

This study highlights the financial difficulties experienced by women waste pickers like Nurjani as they have limited access to social, cultural and economic wealth, which keeps them in structural poverty. Their low and unstable income makes it difficult for them to improve their living standards. In response to these

challenges, Nurjani created individual and group survival plans by working longer hours and using social media to encourage scavenger hunts. To sustain their lives, scavengers must also support each other.

Nurjani also suffers from hyperthyroidism, which poses serious health problems, but she finds it difficult to get proper treatment due to her limited access to health facilities. In this situation, health problems are not just medical issues; they are also systemic injustices in social and economic structures. Nurjani's survival was aided by social support from the local community, who provided emotional and practical care. In general, greater social and economic disparities are to blame for the poverty experienced by women waste pickers like Nurjani. Therefore, to reduce these disparities, more inclusive policy measures and community-based empowerment are needed.

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