WOMEN IN URBAN SOLID WASTE MANAGEMENT IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT: Waste disposal has been an issue of major concern and a problematic phenomenon facing most Nigerian cities today. A major source of urban solid waste in Nigeria is the domestic waste, largely generated through the activities of women as they carry on their daily domestic chores. The waste is dumped indiscriminately in open spaces, gutters and on the main roads. To effectively manage its disposal, attention should be directed to women, who supervise and control the dumping of wastes. Governments should ensure that they equip and train women on proper disposal methods; provide facilities for waste disposal to suit their peculiar needs; consult them on waste disposal management, and involve them in policy-making.

INTRODUCTION

The disposal of urban solid waste is without doubt a striking problematic phenomenon facing Nigerian cities today. The literature is correspondingly replete with articles that describe the nature of urban solid waste management problems together with several attempts of its solution. An important contention in this paper is the need to incorporate gender sensitive analysis at attempts to find solutions to these nagging problems. Moreso, various waste creation and disposal activities revolve around the domestic work schedule of the women and their children.

This paper thus attempts at examining the contributions women can make in the management of urban solid waste problems. The paper is structured in three parts. The first deals with the nature of urban solid waste disposal problems, the second examines the efforts so far at the management of these problems, while the third part critically examines the place of women in improving the overall efficiency in waste disposal and management.

NATURE OF URBAN SOLID WASTE PROBLEM

"Solid wastes are unwanted materials that are thrown away or disposed by individuals, industries and communities and they can be in solid or semi-solid form". (Dorfman, 1994:1). Solid wastes are generated in our everyday life in an attempt to process raw materials into goods for consumption. According to Uchegbu (1988), they range from household waste to chemical and industrial wastes. Data have shown that waste generated per capita in Nigeria is 0.5kg per day,

Cite as: Bisong, N. N. (2001). Women in urban solid waste management in Nigeria. *West Africa Journal of Educational Research, 4*(2), 127–132.

Retyped from the published version with its wording and data unchanged. Numbers in the margin mark the original page breaks. Archived on Zenodo: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.24521379.

while per capita generation per annum is 20kg. This is equivalent to 1.8 million tones. (Salau, 1993).

The focus in this paper is household waste. This is generated as a result of daily domestic activities of women and their families. Household waste constitutes about 70% of total solid waste generated in Nigeria (Nest, 1991). In a study by Anyakoha and Igboeli in Anyakoha (1997), they classified household wastes into six groups in relation to their rate of generation in the Nigerian urban cities. He found out that plant and vegetable materials ranked highest with 65.1% and [128]
71.6%, plastic materials and related goods 39.7% and 44.1% respectively followed by paper, rags and related materials; fourth were animal remains 22.4%; broken bottles, plates, cans and related objects trailing behind with scores of 1.69% and 1.4% respectively.

Solid waste disposal is fraught with a lot of problems like population explosion, consumption patterns, population distribution, inadequate infrastructure and equipment, lack of personnel and the physical structure of the urban cities. In Nigeria, cities are regarded as centres of production, commerce and industry. The magnitude of investment and developments in the urban cities have attracted and influx of migrant settlers from the rural areas, thereby swelling the populations of cities. The thickly populated nature of our cities has compounded the problems of solid waste disposal. Much of the solid waste generated in the households is biodegradable through the action of microorganisms such as fungi and bacteria. But the rate of population explosion in the cities has increased the volume of waste generation far more than the rate of its decomposition and evacuation. This has resulted to a physical assault on the environment, which inevitably leads to pollution of water, air and soil, thereby proving hazardous to health.

Consumption patterns and population distribution in Nigerian cities constitute problems to waste disposal. Changes in the pattern of consumption are associated with modernization. This has given rise to the packaging of foods, which has replaced the use of leaves as wraps. These packs come in the form of plastics, cans and polythene bags, which constitute a nuisance in disposal. Since wastes are not sorted at source, it encourages the dumping of biodegradable and non-biodegradable wastes together. The mixing up of the two heterogeneous items becomes difficult to dispose. In most cities, like Lagos, Ibadan, Onitisha and Port Harcourt just to mention a few, population distribution ranges between the high and the low-density areas. In the low-density areas of our cities, wastes generated in the homes are collected in incinerators sometimes and burnt. Many a time, the wastes in the incinerators are treated; they keep piling up in mounds and over a period of time, become a breeding ground for disease vectors. Swarms of flies, mosquitoes and cockroaches cluster on the waste, animals like cats and dogs scavenging on the wastes mess up the environment.

In the high-density areas, household wastes are indiscriminately littered all over the neighborhood. Very often provisions are not made for the dumping of these wastes. Usually, they are dumped in gutters, open spaces, near-by bushes and abandoned buildings. Much of the wastes are peels from foodstuff and wraps of all kinds ranging from cellophane bags to leaves, broken and unused plastic containers and rags.

The reckless manner in which wastes are littered all over the environment has resulted in its degradation over time. Passing through major cities of the country like Aba, Onitsha, and Lagos, one is struck by the awful sight of huge volumes of rubbish blocking roads and gutters, and conscripting them into single lanes. This has become a characteristic feature of these cities (Ologbobo, 1991).

Inadequate infrastructure and equipment have also added to the problem of solid waste dis- [129]
posal in Nigeira. According to Sada and Omagbemi in Sada and Odemerho (1988), a lot depends on the quantity and quality of the equipment at the disposal of the personnel by the management.

They found out in a study, that the 25 vehicles at the disposal of a local council in Benin city for solid waste was unable to cope with the 350 metric tons of solid waste generated daily.

Lack of personnel to evacuate waste has also hindered the efficiency of waste management, commonly evidenced by the rising volumes of wastes in our cities. This is because solid waste are generated faster than they are disposed. Sada and Odemerho (1988), also maintain that even if adequate infrastructure is in place, that the structure of our urban cities alone poses great problems to waste management. The physical layouts are characterized by inaccessible roads, which hinder refuse collection and evacuation. Often, garbage collectors may not reach core areas of the city. Predominantly these are areas occupied by the poorer segment of the urban society.

Over-riding institutional factors militating against solid waste disposal are finance and institutional structures. Usually, the local government and municipal councils who are directly responsible for refuse evacuation are financially incapacitated and unable to provide adequate manpower, infrastructure and equipment.

Institutional structures set up by the government to tackle environmental issues are very weak. They have not been able to efficiently sensitize the citizens on the appropriate sanitary habits and also mobilize them in participating to maintain a clean environment. They have no adequate enforcement mechanisms to facilitate compliance and ensure defaulters do not go scot-free. No effort has been made to carry along women who are the target group responsible for generating wastes.

EFFORTS AT MANAGEMENT OF HOUSEHOLD WASTES

Much of the solid wastes generated in our urban cities are domestic wastes form private homes. Domestic wastes are the result of domestic activities that daily go on in our homes under the direct auspices of the wife and mother who controls and supervises its disposal. In past years, some efforts have been made by government to manage waste disposal. In 1985, in an effort to build into the consciousness of Nigerians, the need to keep their environment neat, and promote healthy living, government introduced the environmental sanitation day, in which every Nigerian was made to clean his environment and evacuate wastes every last Saturday of the month. This succeeded as long as law backed it up. (Okpala, 1997; Nest, 1991; Anyakoha, 1997).

Another effort towards waste management was the creation of 'waste disposal units'. According to Sada and Odemerho (1988), these units were housed in the health departments in local governments. They existed in Benin-City, Enugu, Warri, and Kaduna. Their duty was to collect and dispose of wastes, but it was short-lived.

A further attempt made by government was the setting up of an environmental sanitation task force in state capitals by the Buhari's administration in 1985. The task forces, among other functions, were to manage solid waste disposal. (Sada and Odemerho 1988).

A major federal government effort towards waste management is the establishment of the [130]
Federal Environment Protection Agency (FEPA), now metamorphosed into the Ministry of Environment. One of its functions is to devise strategies to control and avoid wastes.

The Federal Ministry of Housing and Environment had also organized a hybrid arrangement for solid waste disposal. The state and local governments in collaboration with a private firm on a contractual basis were authorized to evacuate wastes from houses on a token fee. This method was practiced in some major cities like Port Harcourt, Aba and Owerri. (Sada and Odemerho, 1988). This hybrid arrangement is still practiced in some cities presently, for example Calabar, where the municipality in collaboration with private firms collects and disposes wastes from house to house. Many state and local governments also made concerted efforts towards waste

management by the purchase of vehicles and other equipment like incinerators for refuse disposal (First National Rolling Plan, Vol. 1, 1990-92).

PLACE OF WOMEN IN WASTE DISPOSAL AND MANAGEMENT

In tackling the problem of domestic waste in our urban centres, the role that women play in waste disposal is strategic and must be given adequate attention. Women are the agents of social change. According to Rodda (1991), they influence the entire family circle and all the activities that take place in it. Since women are directly involved in the generation and disposal of household wastes, if they are sufficiently enlightened on the need to keep the environment neat and beautiful and are educated on how to safely dispose of household wastes they will influence the whole family in the right direction.

Women are directly involved in the management of household waste. They control a chain of activities with high propensity to generate wastes, ranging from purchase of food and household products from the market, their preparation and use, and ultimate disposal. Women are great educators, their environmental re-awakening can in turn affect their children and the rest of the family. They can help in training them in environmental perception, by inculcating in to the members of their families the right values, attitudes and approach towards waste disposal. Uchegbu (1998), feels that women take many domestic decisions that affect the household. For example, food, water and health matter. Therefore, they can be more qualified to suggest ways of disposing various types of wastes. To enhance the efficiency of women and ensure effectiveness in their role-performance in waste disposal and management, the following recommendations are made:

Efforts should be made to awaken environmental consciousness in women through campaigns and mass mobilization by local and state governments. Since they are directly connected with waste generation and disposal through their daily domestic activities, government should ensure that they are adequately trained on waste disposal and management. Part of the training given to them on waste disposal should include sorting out wastes from the biodegradable like peels from foodstuffs to the non-biodegradable like broken glasses and plastics. Sorting may also be made between the recyclable and the non-recyclable wastes. The sorted out waste has the potential of being recycled to generate new products, enhance income from their resale and improve environmental quality by reducing significantly the volume of waste disposed. [131]

Women can be made to pay a token sum to waste collectors for evacuation of wastes on weekly basis. On the alternative, there could be a collection point where every woman within particular vicinity is made to dump her wastes for final evacuation by municipal authorities. They can also organize themselves within a residential area to engage in bi-weekly or monthly clean up exercise. The local agency in charge of waste management should always be in touch with women at all times. This will enable the authorities assess the progress made in waste disposal by establishing a forum whereby women can freely lodge complaints or make suggestions on how to effectively dispose wastes.

Mothers in turn are expected to train their children and other members of the family and also supervise them on how to dispose of waste. Women should be consulted widely by the local agency on waste needs, because they are directly involved in its management. Facilities for waste disposal should be designed by the local agency in charge of waste having in mind the peculiar nature of household wastes and waste recycling objectives. This will go a long way in assisting women in their waste disposal tasks.

Efficient planning of urban residential districts with accessible roads will enhance waste collection and disposal. In the high rise urban residential districts, the waste collection points

should be increased to enable easy access and shorten commuting distance by the women in their effort to dispose waste at the collection points. For an effective domestic disposal system to be successful in Nigeria, it must not be divorced from the women. They should be sufficiently challenged and empowered by government to carry out this responsibility of safe disposal of refuse.

CONCLUSION

Solid waste disposal has become an intractable problem in most Nigerian urban cities. Its effects on the environment are innumerable from pollution to health hazards. Several efforts have been made by the state and local government councils to manage waste. Local governments councils have been statutorily empowered by the constitution with the responsibility of collecting refuse. All these efforts seemed to have failed, because the institutionary structures were weak, and government did not have any strong policy backing refuse disposal. More so, all attempts to manage wastes by government grossly undermined the involvement of women, who themselves generate waste by virtue of their daily chores. Other government efforts, should lie in the active participation of women in policy-making and waste management issues. Government should also involve women societies and organizations. They need to form their opinion on this, and in turn, raise the consciousness of the Nigeria women on the need to maintain a clean environment by disposing wastes properly. This invariably, will promote the health and socio-economic well being of the society at large and the women in particular. Women as agents of change, will re-order the perception and right attitudes of people towards waste management.

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