

Scrap by Scrap

Capturing the Lives of Ragpickers in Park Circus and Topsisia

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United Bustee Development Association



Ragpickers live in temporary shelters or sheds situated a few feet from a road, canal, or railway line, and they often lack access to water, toilets, and electricity.

The Government of West Bengal recently recognized ragpicking as a profession, thus granting ragpickers the eligibility to apply for benefits under the State Assisted Scheme of Provident Fund for Unrecognized Workers (SASPFUW) scheme and other government programs. However, many ragpickers do not have a permanent residence and lack the necessary documents to apply for these schemes.



Rabia is one of the many widows living in Topsisia's slums. Her husband died ten years ago. She works as a ragpicker and typically earns Rs. 50/day. She not only supports herself, but also supports three of her daughters and their families. (Her daughters' husbands deserted them.)

Here, she is sitting in the doorway of her shelter—a space with an area less than 80 sq. feet. She travels across Kolkata—often times walking more than 4 km each day—and collects bottles made out of various materials (glass, plastic, etc.) Then, she cleans and sorts them at home before selling them to recycling companies. Having no other choice, she sleeps next to the trash she collects and is often surrounded by flies.

Rabia suffers from cataracts in her right eye but has not yet been able to receive medical treatment.

These two widows share a shelter in Topsisia. The widow on the right originally lived in Park Circus but was evicted when the Government of West Bengal began renovating a nearby flyover bridge. The government did not offer any assistance or compensation for her rehabilitation.





“This is the queue,” he said. I looked up from my notebook, expecting to see a line of people. Instead I saw buckets and steel containers—all of them empty, none of them clean. Mr. Alamgir then explained to me that water is only available twice a day in Topsisia—once at 7 am and once at 4 pm.



It's not uncommon to see women cutting strips of rubber in Topsisia. These strips are used to make *chapals* (sandals). Women typically cut 10-12 hours/day and earn between Rs. 100 and Rs. 200.



Children living in slums and squatter areas lack access to education. Because parents are daily wage laborers, children are often left unsupervised at home.



This widow has been living alone for thirteen years. Her daughter and son-in-law died, leaving behind four children (ages 6,8, 10, and 12). She supports herself and her grandchildren by selling snacks.

Ninety percent of ragpickers are Muslim women who earn Rs. 50-100/day to support their children and grandchildren. Many of their husbands engage in substance abuse, often wasting the hard-earned income of their wives. In some cases, fathers abuse their children or desert their families.

These children were abused by their father, who is now in jail. Their mother, Rabia, supports them.





The United Bustee Development Association empowers ragpickers to advocate for their rights and improve their livelihood.

UBDA's support and training enabled Meena Mallick to improve the lives of many children living in Topsisia.

Meena is a ragpicker and earns Rs. 60-70/day. Her husband is a sweeper. Despite living in poverty, she has been able to send many children to hostels. There, children are taught basic literacy and vocational skills.

Meena has become an asset to her community and is capable of training more community leaders. Supporting her and other community leaders is essential to improving the lives of ragpickers.