



## CASE STUDY

# Breaking Barriers Rehana Akhtar's Journey as a Waste Worker in Dhaka

Rehana Akhtar, 59 years old, lives in Kallyanpur, Ward 30, Dhaka. Originally from Itna Upazila in Kishoreganj, she moved to the capital 50 years ago with her husband. When they first arrived, the couple took up work as daily labourers to make ends meet. Rehana began with earth-cutting labour, known locally as "Mati Katar Kaj," a physically demanding job. Through hard work and determination, she managed to save enough money to invest in an embroidery shop. She not only worked there but eventually became a business partner, marking a significant step forward in her life. Tragically, a devastating fire razed the shop to the ground, leaving her with severe injuries that impaired her ability to bend properly and shattering her dreams of financial stability.

With few options left, Rehana turned to waste collection to support her family, an exhausting task she took on out of necessity. After her husband passed away, she became entirely dependent on this work, relying on it as her sole means of survival. Her story reflects a life shaped by resilience in the face of relentless hardship.



Rehana Akhtar, a 59-year-old waste collector in Dhaka's Kallyanpur area

## Journey as a Waste Worker

Rehana initially worked under the city corporation but later transitioned to working independently. She collects plastic waste and sells it to local sorting centres (Vangari). Although Rehana has no formal contract, she regularly sells to two specific sorting shops that offer her reasonable prices. She earns approximately BDT 3,000 per month and she is the primary breadwinner for her family, supporting her son and daughter.

To facilitate her work, Rehana pulls a waste rickshaw van, which she purchased from the city corporation office. Given her physical condition, she sees waste collection as her only viable source of income. Despite her significant contribution to keeping the community clean, Rehana faces social exclusion. She is often not invited to social events, and neighbours hesitate to associate with her or her family. However, she remains steadfast in her work, stating, "I am doing something for the community by collecting waste and keeping the area clean. Even if people mistreat me, I take pride in my honest work because my family depends on it."

## Challenges and Discrimination

Rehana faces various challenges in her profession. She experiences gender-based wage disparities, as sorting centres pay women lower prices for waste materials than men. Additionally, her lack of knowledge about different types of plastics often results in receiving unfair prices. Financial manipulation is another major challenge that relies on her son to sell plastics for better pricing, but sometimes, he withholds money by providing vague calculations. Furthermore, she had never received formal training on waste collection, protection, or bargaining techniques, making navigating the industry difficult.

## Empowerment through RedOrange's Waste Pickers Training

Rehana participated for the first time in a waste worker training program conducted by RedOrange Limited. Through this training, she gained valuable knowledge on identifying different types of plastics and sorting high-value plastics for better pricing, bargaining effectively with sorting centres to ensure fair wages and taking personal safety measures, such as wearing gloves and protective gear to prevent injuries. She also learned about gender



Rehana Akhtar receiving safety gear for waste collection from DNCC and the RedOrang team.

wage equality and how to advocate for fair pay for women in waste collection. Rehana expressed her gratitude for the training, saying, "From now on, I will not sell all plastics randomly to the sorting shops. I have learned how to differentiate waste materials and argue for fair and appropriate prices. This training is essential, especially for women, as it teaches us how to protect ourselves and claim our rightful earnings."

## Conclusion

Despite facing physical challenges, gender-based discrimination, and social exclusion, she continues to contribute to community cleanliness while striving for economic independence. The RedOrange training has empowered her and other women waste workers by providing crucial skills and knowledge to improve their livelihoods. Through continued support and advocacy, waste workers like Rehana can gain the respect, fair wages, and recognition they deserve.

**" I take pride  
in my honest  
work "**

- Rehana Akhtar, Waste Worker

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