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Autonomy of informal waste workers in the Western province of Sri Lanka: A phenomenographic analysis

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Informal waste management is an important part of urban wastescapes in developing countries. Despite providing a valuable service to the society by recycling waste, informal waste workers are marginalized in many ways. Increasingly, informal waste workers within urban wastescapes are struggling to create alternative survival strategies, economic practices and social relations to resist the structures that marginalize them. One important concept highlighted and echoed in these struggles is the significant interest in gaining and maintaining autonomy by the informal waste workers.

This study investigates how people working in waste management in the Western province of Sri Lanka conceptualize autonomy of informal waste workers and how these conceptions progress toward resisting dominant structures of power. This study is part of a research to investigate the feasibility of a novel waste-based manufacturing project to improve the lives of informal waste workers by allowing them to convert waste plastics into useful products. This project concept is developed by the not-for-profit organization Waste for Life (WFL) which aims to open up pathways towards autonomy and genuine economic security for people who need it most.

In-depth interviews conducted with thirty individuals working in both formal and informal waste sectors in the Western province of Sri Lanka were analyzed using a qualitative research approach called phenomenography. This research approach is used to discover and organize the variation in which people experience and understand various aspects of their world. Six qualitatively different conceptions on how individuals within the wastescape of the Western province conceptualize autonomy of informal waste workers emerged from the analysis. These conceptions are mapped into a phenomenographic 'outcome space'. The conceptions include 1) autonomy of informal waste workers cannot exist in the dominant discourse 2) autonomy as freedom to act within specific boundaries 3) autonomy as the capacity to act 4) autonomy as benefiting both self and others 5) autonomy as broadening horizons and 6) autonomy as a transformation. We argue that understanding how social phenomena is perceived by people that we work with could facilitate in making informed decisions and developing meaningful projects that will yield better outcomes. This study also shows that phenomenography, a methodology predominantly used in education research could be used effectively to analyse complex social phenomena.

Keywords: *Autonomy, Informal waste workers, Wastescape, Phenomenography*