

SA's vulnerable out on the streets

*A recent conference on the informal economy highlighted the vulnerable nature of workers in waste-cleaning. **Melanie Samson** has completed research which confirms this and how the privatisation of waste management services affected men and women differently.*

International studies have shown the negative effects of privatisation on workers and communities but surprisingly little research has been done in SA despite ongoing campaigns against privatisation at a local and national government level. As part of the SAMWU – Municipal Services Project (MSP) on Gender and Local Government Restructuring Samson conducted research in three municipalities around the country – Thabazimbi (Limpopo); Sol Plaatje (Northern Cape) and Johannesburg (Gauteng) to see if privatisation affected men and women differently. The results are in a book titled *Dumping on Women: Gender and privatisation of waste management*.

Samson outlines how local governments increasingly have been privatising their waste management systems as part of an overall government push to get the private sector more involved in providing basic services. Councils privatise either by turning their municipal departments into private companies or contracting out the service.

In Thabazimbi the municipality privatised its entire waste management service while Sol Plaatje only privatised the service provided in the townships. Johannesburg was the first to turn its

entire waste management department into a private company (Pikitup) which the municipality owns.

Samson found privatisation of waste management services had not benefited workers or black working-class communities. Privatisation affected men and women differently and for the most part black women workers and women in black working class communities were worst off.

Overview of sector

Waste management is traditionally a man's world with the majority of workers being black men. Women only began entering the sector in the 1980s. When women entered the sector strong assumptions about gender roles led to women only being given jobs in street cleaning, as this was linked to the roles they play in the home. Samson's research found that privatisation increased the unpaid work that working-class women have to do at home. Poor collection and street cleaning services created health hazards. So women in the townships were forced to clean the streets in their neighbourhood for free (including women waste management workers).

A councillor in Thabazimbi acknowledged that women in the townships were providing the

municipality with a free labour force. Due to the gender division of labour in the home very few men waste management workers had to pick up this double load.

Changes in work practices

Samson found that privatised management changed past, proven, work practices in order to address staff shortages. Workers interviewed indicated that prior to privatisation work was organised in a 'fair and scientific way'. In Johannesburg, for example, each worker was responsible for cleaning particular streets and workers often worked in pairs. The private company, Pikitup, which took over the whole waste management function, required that some workers work alone. Aside from increased workloads, workers 'talked about the dangers they faced working on the streets.' Samson found that many women said they had been victims of crime.

Aside from working alone, workers were moved around to different areas and streets on different days. This affected workers. Samson explains that some workers had worked in the same areas for years and had built up relationships with people in the community. This helped them to enjoy

their work and made them feel safer. In this way people in the community also knew who was responsible for cleaning if any complaints were lodged. Aside from this new approach, management introduced a gang sweeping system. This was seen as a more efficient way of working. But workers disagreed, Samson claims. 'They said that gang sweeping provided a poorer service. Streets did not get cleaned regularly. Workers were only sent off to an area when it was in great need and the supervisor put it first.'

Working conditions

The contracting out of waste management services (as in the case of Thabazimbi) or the setting up of a private company (in the case of Johannesburg) led to changes in employment relationships. In Thabazimbi workers indicated that they would prefer to work for the municipality because it was more secure and the wages were higher than those paid by the contract company, The Waste Group. A similar view was expressed by workers employed by the private company in Sol Plaatje. They earned half of what the municipal workers earned. 'We are doing the same job... We do the toughest job.' Samson said the entrepreneurs (local black businessmen who ran the private company) acknowledged that they were not paying a living wage but blamed the council for this as they said the council paid them too little. 'The entrepreneurs said it was okay to pay the women lower wages than the men because the women "don't sweat".'

In Thabazimbi, many of the workers who moved over to the private company became permanent as opposed to being casuals with the municipality. Despite this the women's wages did not change. In Johannesburg the casuals were also made permanent. But for that they would only receive the same pay as

permanent workers after three years. Pikitup also made use of labour brokers and had contracts with private companies to deliver services. These workers earned much less than Pikitup's permanent workers with some earning as little as R30 per shift. This created a situation where you have different categories of workers working side by side earning different rates and having different employment relationships.

Collective bargaining

The study of the three municipalities revealed some serious shortcomings in the collective bargaining arrangements. The constitution of the local government bargaining council covers all workers employed in the sector. However, at present, such collective bargaining only covers those workers employed directly by municipalities and therefore, cuts out those employed by labour brokers or as a result of a private-public partnership (PPP) (as in the case of Sol Plaatje). This is why labour brokers and companies involved in PPPs can get away with paying workers such low wages. The contracts between the municipalities and the private companies do not include any reference to compliance with labour laws or bargaining council arrangements.

Black economic empowerment

In an attempt to promote black economic empowerment (BEE) some quality has been sacrificed, resulting in poor service delivery as in the case of Sol Plaatje. Some of the BEE companies were amongst the worst employers. Samson's research found that in supporting a BEE agenda, the municipality put the companies' interests above those of the communities' needs. 'Local governments saw BEE as being about creating a small black bourgeoisie, and they were willing to sacrifice black workers and the working class communities in the process.'

Public works programmes

The research revealed some interesting lessons around the introduction of public works programmes. The Northern Cape and Gauteng had poverty alleviation projects that hired unemployed township residents to clean the streets. These workers did the same job as those workers employed by municipalities or private companies and in Johannesburg they reported directly to Pikitup. For example, the Gauteng government established the Zivuseni poverty programme in 2002. As part of this it hired workers to do waste management tasks which were linked to Pikitup's Zondi depot in Soweto. Being part of a poverty alleviation programme these workers were not covered by labour laws. They earned less than permanent Pikitup workers but surprisingly more than those employed by some of the private companies contracted by Pikitup. Samson said the project helped Pikitup financially because it filled the gap left by workers it did not replace as the province was paying for the Zivuseni workers.

Conclusion

The research has shown that privatisation has reduced the quality of services while at the same time forcing black workers and women workers in particular, to 'pay the price'. From a broader policy perspective Samson's research has serious implications for the waste management sector. Whilst in the past it was firmly part of the formal economy, privatisation has eroded the rights of workers in the formal economy and pushed many others into the informal economy. The result is now two economies in one workplace.

Samson is a researcher with the MSP. The research was conducted as part of the SAMWU - MSP Gender and Local Government Restructuring Research and Capacity Building Project.