

Male and Female Waste Pickers on landfills in Johannesburg, South Africa: Divergence in health, socioeconomic status and chronic diseases

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Abstract

Introduction: Informal waste pickers are a vulnerable population as they are affected by poverty and exposed to multiple hazards which may affect their health with women experiencing a more inequitable health status. **Objective:** To describe the chronic and acute health of waste pickers by gender and adjust for confounders.

Methods: A cross-sectional descriptive study was conducted among waste pickers aged 18 years or older, working on the two major landfill sites in Johannesburg. Information on health, work hazards and health care access were collected through interviews in the workers' chosen language. Blood pressure, blood glucose, cholesterol and BMI were measured on the day of the study by trained nurses.

Results: A third (27%) of the 361 waste pickers interviewed in this study were female. The women were older by 8 yrs and earned on average 22% less per month than male waste pickers. Female waste pickers reported a higher prevalence of hypertension (30.9% vs 18.4%) and HIV infection (24% vs 7.0%) than men. Differences were assessed during screening where women had higher BMI's ($p < 0.001$), glucose blood levels ($p = 0.022$), cholesterol levels ($p = 0.001$) and diastolic blood pressure ($p = 0.0081$). These findings remained significant after adjusting for age, with OR 2.38 for women's chronic disease. More women than men accessed health care services in the last 12 months (54% vs 36%, $p = 0.003$).

Discussion: Women waste pickers suffer worse health outcomes than male waste pickers for lifestyle diseases and HIV infection. Further research is needed to confirm this and identify the factors involved. Responsive programs supporting health care, improved working conditions and income for waste pickers may also improve their health.