

13. What Lies in the Shadows of a Stakeholder Analysis? A Methodological Analysis to Contextualize the Lives of Women Workers in the Global South

Chinar Mehta

Abstract

To bring about social system change through action research, a study of the pattern of relationships between the paradigms of the system is essential. Such a stakeholder analysis, however, can deem invisible the human dimension that is fraught with cultural stigma, inequality, and precarity. At FemLab, we centre the lives of women workers to understand how digital communication tools can be leveraged to open up possibilities of work or to get better bargaining power by collectivizing. Through the “shadows of context” proposed by Eskerod and Larsen (2018), I argue that we can arrive at a more thorough understanding of the past, present, and future needs of women labourers. Through primary and secondary data from different sectors, I provide evidence of the challenges in a traditional understanding of stakeholder analysis. Additionally, I describe how contextual understanding can visibilize stakeholders and give a richer understanding of stakeholder intents and motives.

Keywords: stakeholder, women, labour, methodology, informal, work

Introduction

With hundreds of millions of people without regular access to toilets, India is ranked number one in open defecation globally (Rubin and Kapur-Gomes 2020). While measures have been taken to fix the broken sanitation system in India, like constructing new toilets in rural and urban areas, many of these

toilets remain unused and defunct (“Many Swachh Bharat Toilets Defunct, Unusable: MPs’ Panel,” 2019). Long power cuts and acute water shortages have rendered thousands of such toilets unusable in India (Akhilesh 2021). While the burden of maintaining the toilets falls on the sanitation workers, the sanitation system remains institutionally disconnected from the water or electricity system. Across India, the continued challenges to the *Swachh Bharat Mission* (Clean India Campaign) have thrown light on these institutional failures and the socio-cultural politics of sanitation work (Prasad and Ray 2019). This keeps many of the newly constructed toilets unused.

Rooted in typical project management terminology, system change is defined as

the emergence of a new pattern of organization or system structure... [t]hat pattern being the physical structure, the flows, and relationships or the mindsets or paradigms of a system, it is also a pattern that results in the new goals of the system (Brown 2021).

This pattern of relationships is essentially what can be understood to be a stakeholder analysis. As a methodology, stakeholder analysis is employed in a variety of industries and is tied to any kind of project management. It helps with understanding connections between things and identifying root causes. However, it often deems invisible the human dimension that is long fraught with cultural stigma, inequality, and precarity.

In this chapter, I explore the methodological possibilities of centring the lived experiences of women workers in India to alter the mainstream understanding of a project stakeholder analysis. A stakeholder analysis based on reductionism may help narrow down the parameters, thereby preventing data or cognitive overload. However, in changing circumstances, a detailed analysis of stakeholders helps develop a more nuanced response.

I provide evidence of a more thorough understanding through two data sources. My primary data comes from in-depth interviews with women workers loosely associated with the sanitation sector who work at a waste sorting company. This company offers services of collection of waste from residential colonies in Hyderabad, India, sorting according to recycling needs, and eventually the sale of sorted materials. It employs mostly women workers for most of the tasks involved in sorting and even collection, with male workers accompanying in tasks involved in the collection. Since the sorting facility is located at an industrial area in Hyderabad, most workers had previously worked in other manufacturing units nearby. I visited the sorting facility between October 2021 to January 2022, and spoke to women

workers performing various tasks at the facility. These tasks included tying empty bags used for waste collection, emptying bags full of plastic waste, sorting them, tagging them, and identifying the type of plastic. Factory jobs are predominantly marked by precarity due to various structural and personal issues. Factories sometimes shut down, work is outsourced depending on changing circumstances, or wages may be inadequate for the workers' needs.

Women face this precarity due to social and familial obligations that may restrict their eventual entry into the workforce on their terms. The FemLab project aims to study how digital communication technologies may aid in making working conditions better for women, either by opening up possible work opportunities or by collectivizing for better bargaining power with management. To this end, my secondary data source involves a literature review of the sectors which are part of the FemLab project, namely, construction, gig work, and sanitation. Given the limited research in women's collectives and the socio-technical arrangements in diverse sectors, this cross-sectoral approach allows for collaborative borrowing of empirical insights. This can foster easier transferences to these sectors for actual impact.

FemLab Stakeholder Management: In Pursuit of the Invisible

Informal sectors have a workforce that seems scattered. This means that identifying stakeholders can be a challenging task. Important stakeholders are usually identified from the following domains: international actors, governmental (ministries and local governments), political (legislators), labour unions, private or for-profit organizations, non-profit organizations (NGOs), and in some cases, civil society organizations (CSOs) (Schmeer 2000). Essentially, the analysis (usually) reveals the impacts of a state policy initiative on various parties, which may be individuals, aggregates of individuals, or organizations. Proponents of stakeholder analysis argue that it enables the efficient and effective completion of a policy or a project that is *most* acceptable to all parties involved (Andersen et al. 2009).

Stakeholder analysis is derived from a research paradigm that values the different experiences of stakeholders with the "same" reality. Take, for instance, the use of machines in sewer cleaning in India and Bangladesh. Sally Cawood and Amita Bhakta (2021), urban studies scholars, write that sewer-cleaning robots and machines have been rolled out somewhat effectively. Still, one of the issues that truck drivers and helpers face is that

the machine parts are not locally available. So, while the health risks of workers are seemingly solved using machines, the workers face a reality not accounted for by the policymakers. In part, our research also seeks to identify and amplify stakeholders whose voices have so far not been heard.

Entering the Rabbit Hole

I identify two key challenges in this process. Firstly, in India, where approximately 450 million workers are employed in the informal sector (Sharma 2020), revealing all the relevant stakeholders proves to be a monumental task that never truly concludes. The sectors that we have picked for this research have been based on the existing structures of terms and conditions, collectivization, and the precarity faced by women workers. Each sector has its unique circumstances. Moreover, some stakeholders, such as middlemen who supply labour or connect workers to potential markets, only appear as and when we examine the field. Making a stakeholder map, then, becomes a fraught but creative exercise. Consequently, a second challenge lies in estimating how localized we keep our stakeholder analysis. I examine this challenge in the next section.

Each sector has its unique networks of stakes, and a stakeholder analysis begins to reveal gaps in communication within these networks. Sanitation work, in which we largely focus on workers who are employed within the public infrastructure, includes cleaning and sweeping of houses, streets, roads, institutional premises, railway lines, train toilets, community, and public toilets, drains, and sewers. At the outset, the specific work we are looking at consists largely of government stakeholders at varying levels—national, state, and local. While local CSOs are crucial to understanding collectivization, advocacy efforts are also directed toward legislative policy formulation.

For instance, there are clusters of domestic workers in Hyderabad locally, but many issues faced by domestic workers may only be mitigated by a central law since workers commonly cross interstate boundaries (SEWA 2014). This is even more necessary considering that employers in this sector are largely individuals and scattered across the city. On the other hand, sanitation work undertaken by local governments, while formalized to an extent, is closely linked to private manufacturers, contractors, and research institutions. But each of these entities is diverse; for instance, while the role of contractors has largely to do with supplying labour, contractors may be corporations or individuals. Depending on the unique conditions

of contractual labour, CSOs channel their advocacy efforts toward the contractors. Moreover, manufacturers and research institutions have to collaborate closely to develop and produce machines that help in sanitation work. However, the presence of only a few large-scale manufacturers and scattered local suppliers makes product differentiation and development difficult. This points to a gap in communication within the stakeholder network.

We have noted that even though we have a stakeholder map from secondary research, many stakeholders only become visible as we go into the field. A preliminary analysis of the construction sector immediately reveals that while it is a sector that employs a significant number of workers in India, particularly women, it is highly diffused with organizations at the local level. Here, too, contractors and builders are a diverse group of stakeholders. As we begin to go into the field, we see that labour contractors in the construction sector are mostly those who got promoted from among the workers themselves and have strong ties with the community based on geographical and social location. Depending on these ties, the involvement of the contractors, and what they imagine to be their stake in the workers' welfare will emerge from the field. Similarly, in the sanitation sector, issues faced by those belonging to a particular state or culture are championed by groups from that region. These underlying ties transcend workplace identities *because* of workplace precarity; workers might switch jobs but stay connected to their neighbours, friends, and domicile village ties. Such stakeholders are rarely part of a formal or official network of stakeholders, but appear as parts of a rich social life beyond worker identities.

Pinning Down Emerging Stakeholders

Pinning specific stakeholders when digital tools are involved needs more thought; digital platforms seem simultaneously centralized and decentralized. For instance, the supply chain in platformized work is largely opaque. In the platform salon work, particularly, issues faced by women workers remain highly localized, depending on customer responses. Even so, platform policies are formulated at a much higher level in the corporation. As Sai Amulya Komarraju (2021) writes,

Customers and their experience and satisfaction are placed at the apex since they bring business, and software engineers enable “extra-legal” mechanisms (rating, tracking, etc.) to monitor the service partners through

the app in order to ensure the quality of services. Even though service partners are considered as a crucial resource (SDE 3), the oversupply of workers compared to the demand, and control mechanisms in the form of rating and reviews serve to maintain power asymmetries between the platform, customer, and the service partner.

Defining stakes then takes on the challenge of translating the language of the women workers to what can be included in the language that is actionable by developers and managers who develop the platform.

There may be emerging stakeholders that work in collaboration with traditional stakeholders. Take the sanitation sector as an instance. When the Nagpur Municipal Corporation (NMC) introduced watches with a global positioning system (GPS) to surveil sanitation workers (Shantha 2020), the workers and other activists opposed the move. What is important to note here is that NMC collaborated with a Bengaluru-based IT company to use these rented watches to track the movement of all sanitation workers. The IT company, in this case, is a relevant stakeholder that, until even a few years ago, would not have been associated with this sector. On the other hand, we also find that emerging stakeholders may introduce us to view digital collectivization as an alternative, as diffused as these stakeholders may be. For instance, Facebook groups where domestic workers across the world make a community help them to articulate their common concerns, fostering a sense of solidarity and community (Almendral 2020). The members of such groups and the platform corporation are all stakeholders of different kinds, and the stakes would have to be defined with the end goal of collectivization in mind.

What's in It for Me—Rethinking Stakeholder Logics

Previous work on stakeholder mapping exercises has critiqued the reductionist approach that this methodology may seem to encourage. Traditional stakeholder analyses assume that stakeholder behaviours are only guided by rational, individualized concerns (Eskerod and Larsen 2018). “What’s in it for me?” the stakeholder asks. Instead, the authors argue for an approach that takes into account the politics of “the history, the present, and the expectations of the future,” which they collectively operationalize as “shadows of the context” (Ibid., 5–6). Such an approach moves away from a study of individual projects and also includes “shadow of the past” and “shadow of the future” (Ibid., 6).

The move towards “shadows of contexts” has been propounded by researchers from the Global South in different disciplines, particularly those that have to do with software technology and design. Researchers from the Global South have pointed to the Western-centric approach to technology through the values and techniques it espouses (Winschiers-Theophilus and Bidwell 2013). Previously, there has been an attempt to design software for “different cultures.” Here, “other” cultures become analytic categories with certain seemingly fixed attributes. Rather, culture is about the everyday practices that may be marred with local tensions, negotiations, and fluidity. These tensions should remain at the centre of a thorough stakeholder analysis. By focusing on the everyday practices of women workers, I argue that we can arrive at stakeholders previously missed and a better understanding of their intents and motives.

A contextual understanding of women’s work in India and elsewhere reveals issues that a direct stakeholder analysis may miss. For instance, large-scale quantitative research shows that unemployed working-age women benefit from digital literacy programmes (Mukherjee et al. 2019). Similarly, the use of Unified Payments Interface (UPI), an instant bank transfer application developed by the National Payments Corporation of India, seems to be growing without refrain.¹ However, this technology remains largely unused by low-income women² (Menacherry and Jagannathan 2021). I found evidence of this during my time in the field from September 2021 to December 2021, in that even women who had their own smartphones did not manage their own bank account via UPI. Either they said that they did not need to, or that they did not know how to use it. Shailja,³ a thirty-seven-year-old worker originally from Odisha, said that it was her husband’s phone number that was associated with the bank account her wages were transferred to. She added that she was afraid of “doing something wrong” as she did not understand the system confidently. She was otherwise what can be considered “digitally literate,” i.e., knew how to use her smartphone to install applications, use instant messaging, and download videos and music for entertainment.

1 <https://www.timesnownews.com/business-economy/industry/upi-largest-retail-payment-transaction-platform-in-india-economic-survey-2021-22-article-89248444>

2 Menacherry and Jagannathan provide an interesting solution to this. They recommend that awareness should be brought about UPI at the level of Jan Dhan Yojana, a financial inclusion programme that provides access to financial services. Additionally, they also write that a UPI ID (in the format of “abc@xyx”) should be provided right at the time of creating a bank account and individuals should be taught how to use it.

3 All names used in this chapter have been changed to protect identity.

At the sorting facility mentioned earlier in this chapter, the workers may be tasked with scanning the barcodes of the materials they are sifting through. A rudimentary software that lists the products was used for this purpose. Despite the software being quite simple to use,⁴ few workers were trained for this task. Seema, a twenty-eight-year-old worker local to Hyderabad, informed me with a proud smile that she was able to pick up on the system in just two days. Those from the engineering team, who were responsible for training her to use a work-related technology, become important stakeholders in the process. Training for the use of technology at work itself may help low-income women gain confidence about using digital tools, instead of relying on a process largely disconnected from their experience of work. If the use of technology leads to growth in their work and some kind of upskilling, women workers are more likely to adopt it and feel joyful at having learned a new skill.

Even amidst emerging relationships in the sanitation sector, such as new entrants in the market who employ sanitation workers, social groups that already existed remain the primary form of support for women workers. For instance, Preeti, a thirty-year-old woman who moved from Bihar around three years ago to work in Hyderabad, spoke to me about an issue that her sister faced when she started working at the same company. Her sister did not have her Aadhaar card at the time of looking for employment. While it was mandatory at the aforementioned sorting facility to have an Aadhaar card, it was the existing group of workers from Bihar who appealed to management to hire her while she waited for her Aadhaar card, which was under process. This was the group of women who had their meals together while at work, knew each other outside of work, and some of them were even neighbours. The linguistic and cultural identity that they shared was an integral part of their workplace identity as well.

Conclusion

Through primary and secondary evidence, I explore the contribution that a concept such as “shadows of context” can make to stakeholder analysis. While systemic change may be necessary to see many social action projects through, an inclination to centre lived experiences helps reveal many

4 The procedure was simple; the worker would scan the barcode and the material would be listed. Most times, the worker simply had to wait for a success message to appear on screen. If that did not happen, either they would manually note down the material or put it aside for further investigation.

patterns that may otherwise remain invisible. Specifically, technologies that are made for the purposes of inclusion would benefit from design changes from everyday practices and articulation of needs by the very people it seeks to help. This methodological change is time-consuming; in-depth interviews and participant observation will require more time. Additionally, there is a risk of data overflow wherein the complexity of stakeholder motive, and intent may be difficult to sieve from large texts. However, the richness of data helps in responding well and in a timely fashion to changing circumstances in the field. Project representatives need to learn new tools to create these rich pictures which can draw out the “shadows of contexts” and provide a more holistic view of the field.

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About the Author

Chinar Mehta (chinar.dac@gmail.com) is a doctoral candidate at the Department of Communication at the University of Hyderabad. She has presented her papers at conferences organized by the Association of Internet Researchers, Society for Social Studies of Science, Point of View, and TISS, Mumbai. She has previously worked as a web developer.