

THE FUTURE OF WORK: WORKER ORGANIZING & POWER IN AFRICA'S INFORMAL ECONOMY

KENYA NATIONAL WASTE PICKERS WELFARE ASSOCIATION (KENAWPWA)

Building Blocks

In Kenya, about 22,000 tons³⁹ of waste are generated every day, equivalent to about 8 million tons annually, according to the National Sustainable Waste Management Policy (2021). Within this vast and under-resourced system, waste pickers perform essential environmental and economic work, recovering recyclable materials, keeping streets clean, and easing pressure on overflowing landfills. Their role is particularly critical as counties continue to face weak infrastructure, fragmented governance, and inadequate funding for sustainable waste management.

Despite this contribution, waste pickers in Kenya's informal economy remain largely invisible. They are often labelled with derogatory terms such as “chokoraa” (homeless scavengers), treated as intruders, and excluded from decisions that shape their livelihoods. Many work in unsafe conditions, facing violence, bullying, and sexual harassment, often without basic protective equipment. They also remain underpaid and excluded from decision-making. As one respondent noted, “we are earning peanuts... two, three hundred shillings a day, barely enough for survival.”

Just transition agendas seek to mitigate the socio-economic challenges of transitioning from fossil fuels to a green economy, yet the impact on livelihoods which rely on recyclable materials is not fully recognized. These shifts risk undermining livelihoods by restricting access to recyclable materials and weakening waste pickers' position within the value chain (O'Hare & Talbott, 2025). At the same time, formalization efforts and investments in modern waste infrastructure frequently fail to integrate informal workers, reinforcing systemic exclusion.

It is within this context that the Kenya National Waste Pickers Welfare Association (KeNaWPWA) emerged in 2022 as a unified worker voice. By consolidating previously fragmented workers into a national platform, the Association has strengthened associational power and built a shared identity across landfill and household-level waste pickers, supported by elected leadership across counties.

In response, KeNaWPWA is mobilizing multiple forms of power. It is strengthening institutional power through engagement with policy processes, advocating for legal recognition, labor rights, and inclusion in governance structures. It is also working to enhance structural power by pushing for fair pricing, improved access to markets, and support through Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) schemes. At the same time, it is building coalitional power through partnerships with civil society organizations and

international networks, while expanding discursive power by reshaping narratives around waste and labor. As Chairman Brian Gisore Nyabuti noted ahead of global negotiations, waste pickers in Kenya “collect, sort, and recycle up to 60% of the plastics that would otherwise choke rivers, pollute soils, and harm communities.”

Achievements and Enabling Environment

The association has made notable gains. Membership has grown to approximately 46,000 waste pickers across seven counties, representing an increase of nearly 40 percent since 2022. This reflects strong internal legitimacy in a historically fragmented sector. Growth has been driven by grassroots mobilization, local leadership, and digital coordination, reinforced by a shared understanding that “this is a job like any other job.” This associational strength has translated into influence. Waste pickers have organized protests and rapid mobilizations to defend their interests, including shutting down a major trans-African highway, prompting swift government response. These actions demonstrate how collective organization can be converted into structural leverage.

The association has also been the defense of livelihoods from dispossession, particularly through resisting landfill land grabbing. As one leader noted, “since our inception... we put the land grabbers in bay,” despite the fact that “there have been a lot of people grabbing landfills.” These sites are not marginal spaces but large, economically valuable areas, with members working in 40-50-acre landfills. This achievement has been enabled by strong grassroots leadership and collective vigilance rooted in lived experience. Leaders emerge from within the waste picker community, allowing them to anticipate threats and mobilize quickly to protect access to these critical workspaces.

The association is advancing a cooperative-based economic model that strategically reconfigures its power resources by institutionalizing collective market participation. By positioning itself to access municipal contracts, the model strengthens institutional power, while simultaneously consolidating associational and structural power through enhanced bargaining capacity and coordinated service delivery. This transition marks a shift from fragmented, informal survival activities toward more formalized and recognized waste management services.

In parallel, KeNaWPWA is developing a worker-owned digital platform that further deepens these power transformations. By enabling the tracking of recyclable volumes, standardizing pricing, and enhancing transactional transparency, the platform reduces information asymmetries and limits



intermediary extraction, thereby reinforcing workers' market (structural) power. Collectively, these innovations signal a deliberate move toward embedding waste pickers within formal governance and value chain systems while retaining worker control over the terms of inclusion.

Through strategic storytelling, partnerships, and public engagement, the Association has amplified visibility and reshaped narratives around waste picking. Initiatives such as the photography exhibition *Unseen Frontliners: The Invincibles in Plastic Recycling* and the film *A Waste Picker's Story* by Greenpeace Africa have highlighted the significant role of waste pickers in the recycling ecosystem. These efforts demonstrate the Association's leveraging discursive power, influencing public perception and policy discourse around dignity, recognition, and inclusion.

Securing visibility and early inclusion in just transition processes has also been a significant achievement. The Association has engaged in international forums, including the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee (INC) processes on plastics, where waste pickers have increasingly been recognized as stakeholders. As one participant noted, "most of our officials were involved in the meeting... that was the first time to hear things of just transition." They have since pushed for formal recognition within legal frameworks both in Kenya and internationally. Institutional power is being strengthened through sustained engagement with policy processes, including interactions with the National Environment Management Authority (NEMA), participation in Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) frameworks, and efforts to draft a national bill to secure formal recognition and rights. This progress has been enabled by strategic advocacy, policy engagement, and coalition-building with civil society organizations such as Tearfund and Greenpeace Africa, alongside international networks, particularly the International Alliance of Waste Pickers. However, leaders emphasize that progress on just transition remains largely rhetorical, with the transition still "easier said than done," underscoring that current gains

are foundational rather than transformative.

Finally, the KeNaWPWA has made important strides in advancing gender inclusion by ensuring women's representation in leadership and addressing gender-specific vulnerabilities. There is near gender parity in national leadership, with similar efforts replicated at the county level. Women's voices are actively incorporated, with structures that ensure "every woman is comfortable working... and can report if they are being abused."

As one participant noted, "without women... the association cannot work." These efforts are particularly important given the scale of risks faced by waste pickers. Evidence shows that 53% have experienced or witnessed violence, often linked to competition over recyclables and conflicts at dumpsites, 43% have experienced bullying, including harassment and intimidation, and 13% have experienced sexual harassment, disproportionately affecting women and newcomers.⁴⁰

In response, the association has begun to establish GBVH prevention systems, including survivor referral pathways, partnerships with human rights organizations and the police, member awareness and rights education, and emerging internal reporting and leadership structures aimed at strengthening women's voice and protection. As one leader explained, "We link every lady to organizations where they can report if they are being abused." These efforts are reinforced by inclusive welfare structures and sustained awareness-building, which collectively strengthen voice, trust, and accountability within the association. While these measures are perceived to have contributed to a reduction in incidents, leadership was unable to provide quantitative evidence to substantiate this, reflecting limited measurement of GBVH outcomes.

Challenges

However, persistent barriers continue to deter reporting. Many victims fear retaliation and livelihood loss due to entrenched power asymmetries and the informal nature of the sector. Daily survival is often tied to access to specific sites, intermediaries, or local authorities, meaning that reporting abuse can lead to eviction, exclusion from waste streams, or blacklisting. In addition, the reporting process itself carries significant costs, time away from income-generating activities, transport expenses, and the burden of navigating complex bureaucratic systems. Low trust in law enforcement, shaped by past experiences of inaction or inadequate response, further discourages victims from coming forward.

Despite these achievements, the association continues to face persistent and structural challenges rooted in systemic exclusion and power imbalances. A fundamental constraint is the lack of formal legal recognition, which limits waste pickers' access to labor rights, social protections, and government contracts, leaving them highly vulnerable to policy shifts and exclusion from formal waste systems. Although Kenya's National Sustainable Waste Management Policy (2021) outlines efforts to formalize the sector, weak implementation has limited its impact on improving working conditions and securing livelihoods.

In parallel, emerging technology-driven waste management models are introducing new forms of exclusion. Private companies are increasingly digitizing waste collection, tracking, and recycling systems through platforms and data-driven logistics. While framed as efficiency-enhancing, these developments risk displacing informal workers who lack access to digital tools, capital, or formal registration systems. In practice, such platforms often prioritize formal actors and aggregated supply chains, bypassing waste pickers or relegating them to low-value roles. Without deliberate inclusion mechanisms, digitalization may reinforce existing inequalities by concentrating control over data, pricing, and market access in the hands of private actors.

These challenges are compounded by severe resource constraints, which limit the association's ability to scale organizing, invest in equipment, and provide basic welfare support. Waste pickers also remain marginalized within just transition processes, where participation is often tokenistic. At the same time, they face market exploitation by intermediaries who control prices and limit bargaining power, trapping workers in low-income cycles. The threat of displacement further intensifies insecurity, as landfill closures and relocation policies are implemented without viable alternatives.

Although the association is advancing community cooperatives to build economic power, enabling members to bid for contracts and engage government, their effectiveness remains limited. As noted, "we haven't yet [secured contracts]... working with the government is a little bit tricky," with processes often shaped by "dirty politics" and non-transparent tender allocation. Even where opportunities arise, projects have been awarded to external actors or individuals outside existing waste picker networks. This highlights how, despite efforts to formalize through cooperatives, waste pickers continue to face exclusion from meaningful participation in formal waste systems.

Beyond structural constraints, there are also challenges related to the just transition concept itself, particularly in terms of awareness and practical translation. Evidence suggests that understanding of the concept among waste pickers is still emerging, often introduced through external engagements rather than grassroots processes. This points to a broader translation gap, where just transition remains



largely rhetorical, and to an epistemic imbalance in which waste pickers are incorporated into externally defined frameworks rather than shaping them.

These constraints are further shaped by gendered vulnerabilities, with women facing heightened risks of harassment, particularly at household collection points, alongside limited access to capital, equipment, and economic opportunities. Together, these challenges reflect deeper structural inequalities across institutional, market, and social domains.

Replicable Lessons

- Worker organizations expand power when they strategically link their struggles to broader societal agendas. In this case, reframing waste picking as dignified, climate-relevant work not only challenges stigma but also positions waste pickers within climate justice and urban sustainability discourses. This alignment enhances legitimacy, facilitates coalition-building with environmental and development actors, and creates pathways for institutional recognition and policy influence.
- In contexts where formal labor protections are weak, combining informal support systems (peer networks, associations) with formal institutions creates more effective protection mechanisms. Partnerships with police, human rights organizations, and civil society actors increase credibility and provide additional layers of protection that informal worker groups cannot guarantee on their own.
- Establishing clear and trusted reporting and support pathways is critical for addressing abuse and vulnerability among members. However, their effectiveness depends on being embedded within inclusive welfare structures and sustained awareness-building efforts. Together, these elements foster trust, strengthen collective voice, and enhance accountability, creating an enabling environment in which members feel safe and supported to report abuse.
- Organizing workers into associations or groups transforms the reporting of GBVH from an individual burden into a collective responsibility. This collective approach reduces fear of retaliation, provides a layer of protection, and strengthens workers' bargaining power when engaging authorities, intermediaries, and other duty bearers.