



Assessment of Work Stress among Sanitary Workers

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Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration between both authors. Author MS designed the study, performed the statistical analysis, wrote the protocol, and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. Author VVL managed the analysis of the study and corrected the manuscript. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

Aims: Sanitary workers play a significant role in maintaining cleanliness and public health. However, they operate in hazardous conditions and face several work-related challenges that contribute to high levels of stress. The study was intended to assess occupational stress experienced by sanitation workers and to identify workplace factors contributing to stress levels to guide workplace improvements to enhance well-being of the workers.

Study Design: A descriptive research design with random purposive sampling technique was adopted for the study to examine sanitation workers' practices pertaining to occupational stress and challenges and the working conditions.

Place and Duration of Study: The study comprised sanitation workers from Guntur, Andhra Pradesh.

Methodology: Data was collected using the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) Work-Related Stress Indicator Tool, which evaluated different factors such as workload, clarity of roles,

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managerial and peer support and interpersonal relationships and were rated on a 5-point Likert scale. Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics, like frequencies, percentages, total scores and mean scores and respondents were categorized into low, moderate and high stress levels by comparing frequency and percentage distributions.

Results: The findings from the study revealed that, an overall mean stress score of 3.28, reflected a moderate level of occupational stress. About 63.30% of respondents experienced moderate stress, 26.70% reported high stress and 10% reported low stress. Among the major factors that contributed to stress were workplace bullying, which was more significant with a mean score of 4.00, followed by the strain of emotionally demanding tasks (mean = 3.37) and the pressure of heavy workloads (mean = 2.77). Workers also expressed that having clear job roles (mean = 3.73) and receiving support from colleagues (mean = 3.63), which lessened the pressures faced in day-to-day work demands.

Conclusion: Sanitation workers were found to experience a moderate level of occupational stress. The findings revealed the need to workplace better by avoiding bullying, proper distribution of tasks and support from the employers and impart awareness on such issues to improve the overall wellbeing and quality of life of the workers.

Keywords: Occupational stress; sanitary workers; managerial support; workplace satisfaction; well-being.

1. INTRODUCTION

Sanitation workers are crucial to manage and uphold sanitation across all phases of the cleanliness process, encompassing cleaning, operation and waste disposal. Significant risks of physical harm and psychological stress arise from the need to maintain cleanliness in numerous public places with the goal to safeguard public health and the workplace (World Bank Group & World Health Organization, 2019; WHO, 2020). According to Dalberg (2018), 2 million people worked in various high-risk occupations in India, while there were approximately 5 million sanitation workers participated in high-risk sanitation work.

Despite having a crucial role in preserving public health, many sanitation workers endure hazardous working circumstances, including long hours, low pay, unstable employment, social stigma and a lack of personal protection equipment. Numerous occupational health risks, such as illnesses and physical injuries, are present for sanitation workers. According to Tolera and Tsegaye (2024), around 72% of garbage collectors sustain industrial accidents and there was a significant occurrence of respiratory disorders among workers, particularly in sensitive areas, as a result of exposure to hazardous chemicals. Gada *et al.* (2023) found that 87% of sanitation workers experienced respiratory problems and more than 68% reported musculoskeletal pain caused by repetitive motions and poor working conditions. The risk of infectious diseases such as hepatitis

A is also significantly higher for the group (Behera *et al.*, 2022).

A significant number of workers reported anxiety and depression, often associated with demanding workloads and irregular, stressful working hours (Oza *et al.*, 2022). Additionally, insufficient recognition and lack of organizational support adversely affected mental and physical health, contributing to increased stress levels among the sanitation workers. Exhaustion from working in awkward postures significantly increased the risk of musculoskeletal disorders, alleviating stress and reducing overall well-being (Tolera *et al.*, 2023).

Due to societal stigma, job insecurity and adverse working conditions, sanitation workers experience high levels of psychological stress. According to Kabir *et al.* (2022), 81% of Bangladesh's informal garbage workers suffered from significant mental distress during the COVID-19 epidemic, due to social and economic difficulties. In India, 17.20% of female sanitary workers had low self-esteem, according to Senthil Kumar *et al.* (2025), emphasizing the need for mental health services among the workers. Husaini and Joshi (2023) stressed on improved workplace policies and support, highlighting the generality of professional stress that leads to anxiety and depression. The results revealed the need for sanitation workers mental health interventions. Lack of management support and workplace harassment heighten stress among sanitary workers, increasing work pressure. The study aimed to assess

occupational stress and identify stress factors. Understanding these stress factors is essential for enhancing the health, job satisfaction and productivity of sanitation workers.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study was conducted to assess work-related stress among 30 sanitary workers selected through random purposive sampling from Guntur, Andhra Pradesh. Data was collected using a scale adapted from Health and Safety Executive's Management Standards Indicator Tool (2021) and rated with 5-point Likert scale. The questionnaire comprised general demographic information such as age, gender, years of experience, education level, job role, work hours. Descriptive statistics, such as frequency, percentages and mean scores, were used to analyze the data. Optimistic statements were scored from 1 (Never) to 5 (Always), while undesirable items were reverse coded 1 (Always) to 5 (Never) (Ravalier, *et.al.*, 2013). The total scores and mean values were calculated for each item and responses were classified as Low (≤ 2.0), Medium (2.01–3.50) and High (> 3.50) levels of agreement to assess the intensity of stress.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study examined the levels of occupational stress among sanitation workers using the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) Work-Related Stress Indicator Tool. The findings were analyzed and interpreted to understand the important stressors for enhancing the workers' well-being.

3.1 General Information of the Respondents

About (67%) of sanitary workers were female, with a smaller portion (33%) were male. Which reflected a gender inequality that may influence experiences of stress, the type of tasks performed, males were involved in sewage cleaning, drainage cleaning, garbage collection and disposal. Most of the workers (60%) fall under 31-50 years age group, suggested an experienced worker. However, the presence of older workers (17% above 50). About 77% of the workers had over 5 years of experience. The results indicated that the majority are acquainted with work but also exposed to prolonged stress due to repetitive tasks over many years.

Only 17% of the workers have high school education, with most employees having secondary education or lower. The relatively low income compared to the work's physical demands contributed to dissatisfaction and financial stress, compounding work-related pressures. The workers were divided across different roles, with sweepers (33%) and cleaners (27%) forming the majority. The majority (67%) work between 6 to 10 hours per day. Extended working hours were an important contributor to work-related stress, especially for the workers working more than 10 hours a day (13%). A summary of general information of the respondents was presented in Table 1 (see Appendix A for the complete responses).

3.2 Occupational Stress Assessment Using HSE Tool

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) Work-Related Stress questionnaire was used to assess occupational stress among the respondents. A summary of stress levels was presented in Table 2 (see Appendix A for the complete responses).

The analysis of 39 workplace-related statements assessing clarity, control, demands, support, relationships and exposure to bullying revealed a mixed yet insightful picture of the respondents' working conditions.

Out of the 39 statements, 13 items (33%) scored in the high range, reflecting favourable perceptions across several significant characteristics. These included clarity in duties and responsibilities (Mean = 3.73), knowing how to get the job done (3.53), receiving help from colleagues during difficult times (3.53) and feeling supported in emotionally demanding work (3.63). These findings are in line with Bhavya Agarwal *et al.* (2020) confirmed that workplace peer support strengthens flexibility and well-being in stressful work environments. Furthermore, bullying-related aspects received high scores both in terms of the absence of personal harassment (4.13) and the confidence in challenging or reporting the behaviour (3.67 and 3.87, respectively) indicated a moderately respectful and safe workplace culture which associated with findings stated by Machul *et al.* (2024), who emphasized that workplaces with low harassment and clear reporting mechanisms enhance psychological safety and mutual respect among employees.

Table 1. Summary of factors indicators among sanitation workers

Statements	Mean Score	Stress Level
I am clear about my duties and responsibilities	3.73	High
I know how to go about getting my job done	3.53	High
I can decide when to take a break	3.47	Medium
I have to work very intensively	2.50	Medium
I am unable to take sufficient breaks	2.83	Medium
If work gets difficult, my colleagues will help me	3.53	High
I can rely on my line manager to help with work problems	3.50	Medium
I am subject to personal harassment	4.13	High (positive)
I am subject to bullying at work	4.00	High (positive)
Relationships at work are strained	3.63	High

A larger proportion, 26 items (67%), fell in the medium range, indicated moderate satisfaction. These items included aspects such as opportunities to question management about changes (3.13), ability to influence the speed and method of one's work (3.27–3.33) and perceptions of time pressure and workload (mean scores around 3.00–3.33). While the scores suggested that a manageable work environment existed and highlighted the areas where the workers felt that they were partially supported. Mohite *et al.* (2024) and Batarfi *et al.* (2023) findings also showed that moderate satisfaction and job autonomy were predominant about workload, pace and decision-making characteristics among workers. However, none of the items had a low mean score (≤ 2.0), which indicated that the weaker areas like managing conflicting demands, work intensification, with insufficient breaks were observed as moderately challenging rather than serious problems. In terms of workplace dynamics, responses indicated that relationships at work were generally positive (3.63), and line managers were seen as encouraging and approachable (3.60). However, some attention is necessary due to the moderate ratings around workload balance, intensive pace of work and limited autonomy over decisions, which contributed to long-term stress if left unnotified. IOSH & Management Today (2024) concluded that supportive managers and positive relations contribute to higher employee morale and wellbeing, though moderate gaps in support such as workload balance and autonomy require continued attention to prevent stress.

The findings suggested that the work environment is generally supportive and respectful, there are strong opportunities for improvement in the areas of job autonomy, workload distribution and participative decision-making. The findings helped to create better

support systems to improve workers' health and performance. Sanitation workers often face many health and safety risks, but supportive practices and respect from management play an important role in reducing stress and improving well-being. Botchwey *et al.* (2022), found that sanitary workers emphasized the value of safety measures, respect and encouraging work practices for protecting the health of the workers. Which showed that both physical safety and an encouraging work environment are important for worker well-being.

The findings can help improve the workplace and lower stress levels by rotating shifts to prevent workers from having too much workload, offer counseling to support mental health and grievance redressal systems about workplace mistreatment. Providing fair wages, insurance and secure contracts can reduce job insecurity, a common cause of stress. Training and awareness programs on safe work practices can help workers protect health while promoting self-esteem and appreciation for their role in keeping communities clean.

4. CONCLUSION

The study assessed the levels of occupational stress among sanitary workers, highlighted the significant challenges sanitary workers faced in their work environment. The findings revealed that most respondents were male, aged between 25 and 45 years. Most respondents reported that working hours ranged between 8 to 12 hours a day, contributed to the stress levels.

Many respondents reported a lack of clarity regarding the job expectations and duties, leading to confusion and heightened stress. Additionally, a significant number of respondents indicated that sanitary workers experienced high workloads and unattainable deadlines, which

negatively affected their ability to manage the tasks effectively. Similar observations were made by Tolera *et al.* (2024), who linked heavy workloads and weak supervision to occupational injuries and stress among sanitary workers.

Furthermore, the findings revealed that workers had support from colleagues, sanitary workers often lacked adequate managerial support. Issues of workplace bullying and harassment were also prevalent, with several respondents expressed feeling of being weakened and disrespected by others in the workplace. The occupational stress experienced by sanitary workers was influenced by multiple factors, including heavy workloads, limited control over the tasks and a lack of adequate support and interpersonal conflicts. The understanding gained from the study emphasized the need for interventions aimed at improving working conditions, providing managerial support and encouragement for a positive work culture. Ensuring fair compensation, secure employment and training in safety can protect health and improve the dignity of sanitation workers.

DISCLAIMER (ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE)

Author(s) hereby declare that NO generative AI technologies such as Large Language Models (ChatGPT, COPILOT, etc) and text-to-image generators have been used during writing or editing of this manuscript.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that they have no known competing financial interests or non-financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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APPENDIX

Table 1. General information of the respondents

Demographic Information	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	10	33.00
	Female	20	67.00
Age Group	20-30	5	17.00
	31-40	8	27.00
	41-50	10	33.00
	51-60	5	17.00
	60+	2	6.00
Years of Experience	0-5 years	7	23.00
	6-10 years	8	27.00
	11-15 years	9	30.00
	16+ years	6	20.00
Education Level	No Formal Education	5	17.00
	Primary Education	8	27.00
	Secondary Education	12	40.00
	Higher Education	5	17.00
Job Role	Sweeper	10	33.00
	Cleaner	8	27.00
	Waste Collector	7	23.00
	Supervisor	5	17.00
Number of Hours Worked	Less than 6 hours	6	20.00
	6-8 hours	12	40.00
	8-10 hours	8	27.00
	More than 10 hours	4	13.00

Table 2. Occupational stress assessment using HSE tool

Statements	Likert scale rating	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Total Score	Mean Score	Stress Level
1. I am clear what is expected of me at work	Never	3	10.00	96	3.20	Medium
	Rarely	5	17.00			
	Sometimes	10	33.00			
	Often	7	23.00			
	Always	5	17.00			
2. I can decide when to take a break	Never	2	7.00	104	3.47	Medium
	Rarely	4	13.00			
	Sometimes	8	27.00			
	Often	10	33.00			
	Always	6	20.00			
3. Different groups at work demand things from me that are hard to combine	Never	4	13.00	81	2.70	Medium
	Rarely	3	10.00			
	Sometimes	9	30.00			
	Often	8	27.00			
	Always	6	20.00			
4. I know how to go about getting my job done	Never	1	3.00	106	3.53	High
	Rarely	4	13.00			
	Sometimes	10	33.00			
	Often	8	27.00			
	Always	7	23.00			
5. I am subject to personal harassment in the form of unkind words or behaviour	Never	15	50.00	124	4.13	High
	Rarely	8	27.00			
	Sometimes	4	13.00			
	Often	2	7.00			

Statements	Likert scale rating	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Total Score	Mean Score	Stress Level
6. I have unachievable deadlines.	Always	1	3.00	100	3.33	Medium
	Never	5	17.00			
	Rarely	10	33.00			
	Sometimes	8	27.00			
	Often	4	13.00			
7. If work gets difficult, my colleagues will help me.	Always	3	10.00	106	3.53	High
	Never	2	7.00			
	Rarely	4	13.00			
	Sometimes	7	23.00			
	Often	10	33.00			
8. I am given supportive feedback on the work I do.	Always	7	23.00	99	3.30	Medium
	Never	2	7.00			
	Rarely	6	20.00			
	Sometimes	8	27.00			
	Often	9	30.00			
9. I have to work very intensively.	Always	5	17.00	75	2.50	Medium
	Never	1	3.00			
	Rarely	4	13.00			
	Sometimes	10	33.00			
	Often	9	30.00			
10. I have a say in my own work speed.	Always	6	20.00	98	3.27	Medium
	Never	3	10.00			
	Rarely	5	17.00			
	Sometimes	8	27.00			
	Often	9	30.00			
11. I am clear what my duties and responsibilities are.	Always	5	17.00	112	3.73	High
	Never	1	3.00			
	Rarely	3	10.00			
	Sometimes	7	23.00			
	Often	11	37.00			
12. I have to neglect some tasks because I have too much to do.	Always	8	27.00	89	2.97	Medium
	Never	4	13.00			
	Rarely	6	20.00			
	Sometimes	9	30.00			
	Often	7	23.00			
13. I am clear about the goals and objectives for my department.	Always	4	13.00	103	3.43	Medium
	Never	2	7.00			
	Rarely	4	13.00			
	Sometimes	9	30.00			
	Often	9	30.00			
14. There is friction or anger between colleagues.	Always	6	20.00	111	3.70	High
	Never	10	33.00			
	Rarely	8	27.00			
	Sometimes	7	23.00			
	Often	3	10.00			
15. I have a choice in deciding how I do my work.	Always	2	7.00	100	3.33	Medium
	Never	3	10.00			
	Rarely	4	13.00			
	Sometimes	8	27.00			
	Often	10	33.00			
16. I am unable to take sufficient breaks.	Always	5	17.00	85	2.83	Medium
	Never	4	13.00			
	Rarely	5	17.00			
	Sometimes	9	30.00			
	Often	6	20.00			

Statements	Likert scale rating	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Total Score	Mean Score	Stress Level
17. I understand how my work fits into the overall aim of the organisation.	Always	6	20.00	109	3.63	High
	Never	1	3.00			
	Rarely	4	13.00			
	Sometimes	8	27.00			
	Often	9	30.00			
18. I am pressured to work long hours.	Always	8	27.00	88	2.93	Medium
	Never	5	17.00			
	Rarely	6	20.00			
	Sometimes	7	23.00			
	Often	6	20.00			
19. I have a choice in deciding what I do at work.	Always	6	20.00	102	3.40	Medium
	Never	2	7.00			
	Rarely	4	13.00			
	Sometimes	9	30.00			
	Often	10	33.00			
20. I have to work very fast.	Always	5	17.00	83	2.77	Medium
	Never	3	10.00			
	Rarely	5	17.00			
	Sometimes	9	30.00			
	Often	8	27.00			
21. I am subject to bullying at work.	Always	5	17.00	120	4.00	High
	Never	14	47.00			
	Rarely	8	27.00			
	Sometimes	4	13.00			
	Often	2	7.00			
22. I am aware of others being subject to bullying at work.	Always	2	7.00	116	3.87	High
	Never	12	40.00			
	Rarely	8	27.00			
	Sometimes	6	20.00			
	Often	2	7.00			
23. If I were aware of bullying I would feel able to challenge it.	Always	2	7.00	110	3.67	High
	Never	2	7.00			
	Rarely	3	10.00			
	Sometimes	7	23.00			
	Often	9	30.00			
24. If I reported bullying, I would be confident that it would be stopped.	Always	9	30.00	95	3.17	Medium
	Never	4	13.00			
	Rarely	6	20.00			
	Sometimes	7	23.00			
	Often	7	23.00			
25. I have unrealistic time pressures.	Always	6	20.00	92	3.07	Medium
	Never	6	20.00			
	Rarely	5	17.00			
	Sometimes	8	27.00			
	Often	7	23.00			
26. I can rely on my line manager to help me out with a work problem.	Always	4	13.00	105	3.50	Medium
	Never	2	7.00			
	Rarely	4	13.00			
	Sometimes	8	27.00			
	Often	9	30.00			
27. I get help and support I need from colleagues.	Always	7	23.00	109	3.63	High
	Strongly disagree	2	7.00			
	Disagree	3	10.00			
	Neutral	7	23.00			

Statements	Likert scale rating	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Total Score	Mean Score	Stress Level
28. I have some say over the way I work.	Agree	10	33.00	100	3.33	Medium
	Strongly agree	8	27.00			
	Strongly disagree	3	10.00			
	Disagree	4	13.00			
	Neutral	8	27.00			
	Agree	10	33.00			
	Strongly agree	5	17.00			
29. I have sufficient opportunities to question managers about change at work.	Strongly disagree	4	13.00	94	3.13	Medium
	Disagree	6	20.00			
	Neutral	7	23.00			
	Agree	8	27.00			
	Strongly agree	5	17.00			
	Strongly disagree	3	10.00			
30. I receive the respect at work I deserve from my colleagues.	Disagree	4	13.00	101	3.37	Medium
	Neutral	8	27.00			
	Agree	9	30.00			
	Strongly agree	6	20.00			
	Strongly disagree	5	17.00			
31. Staff are always consulted about change at work.	Disagree	6	20.00	90	3.00	Medium
	Neutral	7	23.00			
	Agree	8	27.00			
	Strongly agree	4	13.00			
	Strongly disagree	3	10.00			
32. I can talk to my line manager about something that has upset or annoyed me about work.	Disagree	5	17.00	99	3.30	Medium
	Neutral	7	23.00			
	Agree	10	33.00			
	Strongly agree	5	17.00			
	Strongly disagree	4	13.00			
33. My working time can be flexible.	Disagree	6	20.00	94	3.13	Medium
	Neutral	7	23.00			
	Agree	8	27.00			
	Strongly agree	5	17.00			
	Strongly disagree	5	17.00			
34. My working location can be flexible (subject to business constraints).	Disagree	5	17.00	94	3.13	Medium
	Neutral	7	23.00			
	Agree	7	23.00			
	Strongly agree	6	20.00			
	Strongly disagree	2	7.00			
35. My colleagues are willing to listen to my work-related problems.	Disagree	4	13.00	104	3.47	Medium

Statements	Likert scale rating	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Total Score	Mean Score	Stress Level
36. When changes are made at work, I am clear how sanitary workers will work out in practice.	Neutral	8	27.00	100	3.33	Medium
	Agree	10	33.00			
	Strongly agree	6	20.00			
	Strongly disagree	3	10.00			
	Disagree	5	17.00			
	Neutral	7	23.00			
	Agree	9	30.00			
	Strongly agree	6	20.00			
37. I am supported through emotionally demanding work.	Strongly disagree	3	10.00	101	3.37	Medium
	Disagree	4	13.00			
	Neutral	8	27.00			
	Agree	9	30.00			
	Strongly agree	6	20.00			
	Strongly disagree	10	33.00			
38. Relationships at work are strained.	Disagree	8	27.00	109	3.63	High
	Neutral	6	20.00			
	Agree	3	10.00			
	Strongly agree	3	10.00			
	Strongly disagree	2	7.00			
	Disagree	3	10.00			
39. My line manager encourages me at work.	Neutral	7	23.00	108	3.60	High
	Agree	11	37.00			
	Strongly agree	7	23.00			
	Strongly disagree	2	7.00			
	Disagree	3	10.00			

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