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Living on the margins of the city: an ethnography of moving bodies and urban exclusion in waste picking

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Abstract

Urban waste picking is an important yet understudied phenomenon in contemporary cities, situated at the intersection of social inequality, waste management, and urban policy. It has largely been examined through economic, policy-oriented, or social-problem frameworks, with limited attention to its spatial and embodied dimensions, particularly in Iranian cities. This article offers an ethnographic analysis of waste picking as a mode of urban dwelling shaped by movement, embodiment, and everyday negotiations with urban order. The study is based on four months of qualitative fieldwork in Amol, Iran, using participant observation and in-depth engagement with purposively selected waste pickers across specific urban locations and temporal rhythms. Findings indicated that waste pickers actively participate in the social production of urban space through repetitive routes, strategic timing, and spatial tactics, transforming marginal sites into functional and meaningful nodes within the city's lived geography. Their bodies emerge as key sites where environmental inequality and urban exclusion are materialized; continuous exposure to contamination and risk demonstrates how structural vulnerability accumulates at the level of lived experience. At the same time, their adaptive mobility and strategic invisibility function as a form of everyday resistance. By integrating urban anthropology, embodiment theory, and environmental justice, this study argues that understanding the contemporary city necessitates attention to marginalized lives and bodies that are engaged with the environment.

Keywords

Ethnography
Embodiment
Environmental justice
Social production of space
Urban anthropology
Waste picking

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1. Introduction

In recent years, rapid urbanization, increasing consumption, and the expansion of waste generation patterns have confronted contemporary cities with complex challenges in urban environmental management. Municipal waste has evolved not merely into a technical and managerial issue, but into a social, political, and cultural subject where power relations, social inequality, and modes of everyday life function in an interconnected manner (Gidwani & Reddy, 2011). Within this context, urban waste picking, as a prominent manifestation of the informal urban economy, occupies a paradoxical position. On one hand, it plays a fundamental role in recycling, reducing landfilling, and the circulation of materials; on the other, it is perceived as a marginal, insecure, and often illegitimate activity (Samson, 2015). Global studies indicate that millions of people in cities worldwide, particularly in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, are directly or indirectly involved in informal waste collection and sorting activities (Dias, 2016). These groups contribute significantly to the global recycling chain, especially in the plastics sector; in some cities, the bulk of recycled materials is supplied by waste pickers (Lepawsky & Akese, 2015). Despite this key role, waste pickers are often overlooked in formal waste management policies, and their presence in urban spaces is represented as a nuisance, disorder, or a social problem (Millar, 2018).

From the perspective of social sciences, waste picking cannot be analyzed solely as an economic activity or a survival strategy. This phenomenon is closely intertwined with structural inequalities, urban poverty, migration, exclusion policies, and the embodied experiences of working in polluted environments (Bourgois & Schonberg, 2009). Recent research on health and environmental justice has shown that waste pickers are disproportionately exposed to physical hazards, pollution, disease, and institutional violence, a situation often resulting from structural mechanisms and urban policies, rather than individual choices (Quesada et al., 2011). However, the majority of existing literature, particularly in policy and waste management studies, focuses on the quantitative, economic, or technical aspects of waste picking, paying less attention to the lived experience, embodiment, and everyday life of waste pickers in the city (Gutberlet, 2016). Due to this analytical gap, waste pickers are viewed more as a problem or a target for intervention than as actors who actively participate in the production and reproduction of urban space.

In the social approach, urban anthropology, by offering a critical perspective, rests on the premise that the city is not merely a physical structure or a management system, but a lived phenomenon and experience shaped through everyday actions, the movement of bodies, and sensory experiences (Low, 2017). By introducing the concept of the social production of space, Henri Lefebvre demonstrates that space is a product of social relations, power dynamics, and everyday life, and cannot be reduced merely to design or formal planning (Lefebvre, 1991). Michel de Certeau also emphasizes the importance of micro-everyday actions, such as walking and wandering, as ways of redefining space from below (de Certeau, 1984). Applying this framework to the study of urban waste picking enables the phenomenon to be understood as a mode of living in the city, where moving bodies, informal pathways, specific temporal rhythms, and constant encounters with urban control shape a distinct experience of the city (Millar, 2018). Ethnographic studies in various cities around the world have demonstrated that waste pickers are not just consumers of marginal spaces, but producers of alternative meanings and orders within the city (Gidwani & Reddy, 2011).

1.1 Statement of the problem

In recent decades, urban management in Iran has increasingly confronted phenomena such as waste picking and various forms of informal employment. The predominant urban policy response to these phenomena has generally been organized management, control, and, in many cases, the physical removal of these individuals from public spaces. In this context, waste picking, as one of the most visible forms of urban poverty, has become a focus of disciplinary, regulatory, and contractual interventions often justified by the logic of cleansing, beautification, and "organization." However, what has received less attention is the understanding of the deeper mechanisms that organize these interventions within the framework of a coherent urban social policy regime. Previous research on urban poverty and social exclusion has examined the structural dimensions of inequality, ineffective welfare policies, and their social consequences. Studies have shown that urban social policy can, through institutional logic, lead to the reproduction of social exclusion. Yet, their focus has primarily been on the level of macro-policy-making and analyzing official documents and discourses. What still requires empirical investigation is how this policy

regime manifests at the everyday life level, in bodies, spatial actions, and objective encounters between waste pickers and urban structures. Thus, the core issue is “How does urban social policy, through institutional, regulatory, and discursive mechanisms, regulate, restrict, or render invisible the presence of poor bodies in public spaces?” This process is not merely an executive policy but part of a broader order that defines the legitimacy and possibility of the presence of marginalized groups in the city. Within such a framework, social exclusion is not merely a consequence of poverty but a product of a regime of spatial and moral regulation of the city.

In Iran, waste picking has attracted the attention of researchers over the past decade as an urban social and environmental issue. Studies indicate that waste picking in metropolises like Tehran is linked to urban poverty, migration, child labor, and contradictory urban management policies (Isari & Shojaeizand, 2020). However, the majority of domestic research also adopts a pathologic or policy-oriented approach, with less attention to the everyday experiences, body, and spatial perception of waste pickers (Ahmady, 2023). Consequently, a clear gap is observed in the research literature. On one hand, the environmental and economic roles of waste pickers are acknowledged, yet on the other, their lived experience in the city, particularly from the perspective of the body, movement, and encounters with urban policies, has been less subjected to ethnographic inquiry. This article seeks to address this issue by focusing on the everyday life of waste pickers, demonstrating how the city is constructed and given meaning “from below” through these marginalized bodies and their daily actions.

Accordingly, the central research question of this study is “How do waste pickers experience, make sense of, and reproduce the city through their daily movement, bodily experience, and encounters with urban policies and controls, and what is the relationship between these experiences and issues of social inequality and environmental justice?” Addressing this question not only contributes to a deeper understanding of waste picking as an urban phenomenon but can also enrich the theoretical discourse of urban anthropology and environmental anthropology within the context of contemporary Iranian cities. The point of departure for this article in urban studies literature is the shift in analysis from the level of official policy to the level of spatial and embodied actions, where social exclusion

is understood not merely as a statistical index, but as an everyday, emotional, and material experience.

1.2. The necessity of the problem in the context of Amol City

Although social exclusion and the management of urban poverty are observed in many cities across Iran, the city of Amol has its own distinct contextual characteristics in this regard. As one of the important cities in Mazandaran Province, Amol lies at the intersection of agricultural, tourism, and urban service economies. This dual position has exposed the city to seasonal population dynamics, increased waste generation, and additional pressure on urban management infrastructure. Cities in northern Iran, particularly in Mazandaran Province, have faced a structural waste and garbage crisis in recent years, resulting from a combination of factors including tourism growth, rising consumption, weak recycling infrastructure, and environmental constraints in municipal waste management. In a city such as Amol, which is both historically and culturally significant and located along major transportation routes in northern Iran, this situation has intensified discourses of cleanliness, beautification, and urban order. Within this framework, the presence of waste pickers in public urban spaces occupies a contradictory position. On the one hand, the municipal waste management structure is informally dependent on their labor; on the other hand, at the level of discourse and practice, there are efforts to control, organize, or remove them from the urban landscape. This duality – the structural dependence on recyclable labor and the tendency to render poor bodies invisible – has become more pronounced in Amol due to the severity of the waste crisis and the sensitivity for urban appearance. Additionally, the spatial organization of Amol, including the concentration of commercial activities in the central core, the high density of traffic along certain major corridors, and the expansion of peripheral settlements, has specifically shaped the spatial distribution of waste pickers and their encounters with formal institutions. Therefore, social exclusion in this city is not merely a consequence of poverty, but the result of the interplay between the waste crisis, beautification policies, the spatial structure of the city, and the logic of urban social policy. From this perspective, the case of Amol allows us to show how urban social policymaking, in a context simultaneously marked by environmental crisis and tourism pressure,

leads to the regulation of the visibility, mobility, and presence of waste picker bodies in urban spaces. Thus, in this study, Amol is not merely a site for data collection, but an analytical case through which the relationship between social policy, waste management, and place-based processes of social exclusion can be examined.

2. Theoretical foundations

The present research is situated at the intersection of three theoretical domains: the everyday life and the social production of space in the city; embodiment and sensory experience in urban anthropology; and urban politics, social exclusion, and informal lives. A review of the theoretical literature indicates that each of these domains has been considered separately, but their interconnectedness, particularly within the framework of ethnographic research on urban waste picking, remains limited. The three central theoretical domains of urban everyday life, the body and sensory experience, and urban politics and exclusion, play a fundamental role in understanding waste picking in contemporary cities; while connected, they provide a theoretical basis for ethnographic analysis.

2.1. Everyday life and the social production of space in the city

The theoretical starting point of this research is understanding the city as a lived and continuously produced phenomenon, rather than merely a collection of physical structures or management systems. Within this framework, Henri Lefebvre, by introducing the concept of everyday life, demonstrates that power relations, the logic of capital, and formal orders are reproduced or challenged at the level of daily experiences (Lefebvre, 1991). From his perspective, the city is shaped not only at the level of planning but also through the ordinary, repetitive, and often overlooked actions of its inhabitants. Michel de Certeau expands this approach by focusing on micro-actions. He distinguishes between the strategies of power institutions and the tactics of everyday actors, showing that practices such as walking, wandering, and the informal use of space represent a form of redefining the city from below (de Certeau, 1984). This perspective is particularly important for understanding informal lives in the city, as it reveals how marginalized groups actively participate in the production of space, even under conditions of control and exclusion. More recent studies in urban anthropology emphasize this approach, using ethnography to analyze the city as a

network of lived relationships, movements, and meanings (Hall, 2012; Low, 2017). In these studies, attention to groups on the margins of the city's formal order, including informal workers, is highlighted as a means to understand structural urban inequalities. In Iran, research related to urban everyday life has primarily focused on lifestyle, public spaces, and cultural consumption (Zokaei et al., 2020). While these studies have contributed to understanding lived experiences in the city, they have paid less attention to marginalized groups and forms of informal living.

2.2. Embodiment and sensory experience in urban anthropology

The second theoretical axis of the research concerns the concept of embodiment and the sensory experience of urban space and place. In contemporary anthropology, the body is not merely considered a biological entity but is understood as the nexus of experience, meaning, and power (Csordas, 1994). This approach emphasizes that spaces are experienced through bodies, and bodies themselves carry social histories and structural inequalities. Sensory anthropology, within this framework, highlights the importance of senses (smell, touch, sound, and sight) in understanding lived experience, demonstrating that urban experience is always multisensory and embodied (Pink, 2015). Consequently, pollution, waste, noise, and physical contact with the environment are not marginal elements but central to the experience of life in contemporary cities (Edensor, 2012). Waste picking, as part of this experience, emerges as a link between the body, pollution, and environmental inequality (Samson, 2015). Studies specifically addressing informal labor and the body have shown that the bodies of informal workers are disproportionately exposed to wear and tear, injury, and environmental hazards. These experiences are often overlooked in urban policymaking (Quesada et al., 2011). In Persian research literature, engagement with the body and sensory experience in urban studies is still limited. Although some recent studies on spatial justice and urban environmental quality have referred to lived experience (Ahmady, 2023), direct focus on bodies involved in pollution and informal labor has remained less explored.

2.3. Urban politics, social exclusion, and informal lives

The third theoretical axis of the research pertains to urban politics and the mechanisms of exclusion and

control. This approach, related to the concept of the right to the city, first introduced by Lefebvre and later expanded by Harvey, provides a critical framework for analyzing urban inequalities (Harvey, 2017). From this perspective, urban policies often favor dominant groups and exclude marginalized groups from public spaces. Anthropological studies have shown that urban control is exercised not only through formal laws but also through everyday routines, surveillance, and processes of making invisible (Wacquant, 2008). Informal urban workers are constantly subjected to this control, including eviction, forced displacement, and spatial insecurity (Roy, 2005). In Iran, research has also been conducted on urban management policies and informal activities, pointing to the tension between formal order and the everyday lives of marginalized groups (Isari & Shojaeizand, 2020). However, these studies have often been conducted from the perspective of policymaking or social pathology, with less attention paid to lived experiences and the narratives of the actors involved.

3. Research background

The issue of urban waste picking has been addressed from different perspectives at both global and local levels, and it can be classified into three main axes. At the global level, research on urban waste picking has demonstrated that this phenomenon has complex dimensions, not only involving the economic aspects of waste management but also deeply connected to social inequalities, spatial discrimination, and power structures in contemporary cities. A comprehensive report on urban waste pickers (Dias, 2016) emphasizes that waste pickers play a critical role in urban sustainability, recycling, and sustainable development; it should not be seen merely as informal and invisible labor, but rather as key actors in waste management and urban planning. Interdisciplinary research has also shown that the names and local terms used for waste pickers reflect social stigma and cultural norms, which in many societies reinforce discrimination and a subordinate position for these groups. For example, in Latin America and Africa, terms such as *Basuriego* carry negative social connotations, and this linguistic labeling can lead to the humiliation and marginalization of waste pickers in urban policymaking (Gutberlet, 2023). Ethnographic studies in various cities have also emphasized the active role of waste pickers in reproducing and redefining urban spaces. For example, ethnographic research in Istanbul has shown that waste pickers, through their continuous presence in

routes and seemingly marginal spaces, create a form of bottom-up spatial production that can challenge formal urban orders and make alternative spaces possible. This mechanism is consistent with Lefebvre's and de Certeau's theories of the social production of space and micro-practices (Geçkili Karaman & Şalgamcıoğlu, 2025). Some studies have addressed environmental justice in relation to waste picking within broader challenges such as climate change, pandemics, and unequal urban policies. According to these studies, waste pickers in urban environments, especially in developing countries, systematically face legal discrimination, unsafe working conditions, and unusual encounters with formal policies, which should be examined from the perspective of environmental justice (Shanmugasundaram, 2024). In anthropology and social geography, some studies have also focused on the marginalization and urban lives of waste pickers in specific cities. Sen's study in Kolkata, India, using interpretive ethnography, examines the waste picker community and shows that although these groups are located at the very heart of the city, they are pushed to the margins in terms of access to formal services, social justice, and urban resources, experiencing a different spatial reality of the city (Sen, 2018).

Thus, analyzing waste picking solely from an economic and managerial perspective is insufficient; it requires interdisciplinary approaches that examine it in relation to spatial justice, social production of space, and sensory-embodied experiences. Many of these studies, despite their different approaches, rarely focus on everyday lived experiences, embodiment, and direct encounters with urban policies, which can serve as the starting point of the present research.

In Iran, specialized studies on urban waste picking are relatively limited and scattered, often within the framework of urban poverty studies, social harms, or waste management. A significant portion of these studies adopts a descriptive-pathological approach, relying less on theoretical analyses or ethnographic approaches. One notable qualitative study in this area is Naderi et al. (2022), which explores the social and psychological conditions of waste pickers in Tehran using semi-structured interviews. The results of this study indicate that psychological stress, physical exhaustion, job insecurity, and legal ambiguity are among the most significant lived experiences of this group. However, the main focus of the research is on social consequences, with less attention paid to embodiment and everyday spatial experience (Naderi et al., 2022). A study in Ahvaz, focusing on the process

of waste picking formation and its social consequences, suggests that this phenomenon has emerged in connection with unemployment, migration, urban poverty, and the inefficiency of formal waste management systems. This research analyzes waste picking as a macro-level socio-structural issue, paying less attention to the daily and embodied experiences of the actors involved (Moghadam & Bagheri, 2024). Another study focusing on the informal life of waste picking among Afghan migrant workers in Tehran shows that the presence and emergence of this group result from the interaction of economic, political, and familial factors, as well as hybrid urban governance structures. This research significantly contributes to clarifying the institutional and policy dimensions of waste picking, approaching the subject from a structural and macro perspective. Similar to many domestic studies, the body, sensory experience, and daily spatial actions do not hold a central position in this research (Isari & Shojaeizand, 2019).

Some studies on urban poverty and marginalization have also indirectly referred to waste picking. These studies on the urban informal economy and the lives of marginalized groups have demonstrated that waste picking is a common survival strategy under conditions of structural inequality (Ounagh et al., 2023). A study titled "Urban social policy and exclusion social; narration of excluding the body and poverty from urban spaces" demonstrates that social policymaking in contemporary Iran follows a logic of exclusion and invisibility of poverty, with a primary focus on macro-policy levels and the analysis of official documents (Rashidi, 2023). These works have generally considered waste picking as an economic or social variable, rarely addressing it as a lived and embodied experience in urban space. At the level of official media, numerous reports and news articles have been published about waste picking, especially child waste pickers, in large cities like Tehran. These reports represent waste picking as a symbol of poverty and social inequality and often, with a criminalizing approach lacking an analytical and theoretical framework, have further reproduced pathological discourses (e.g., news agency reports on child waste pickers).

A review of both domestic and international literature indicates that while most studies on urban waste picking have focused on important economic, social, or institutional aspects, they have rarely delved into the lived experiences, embodiment, and sensory encounters of waste pickers with urban space.

Meanwhile, the literature in urban anthropology and critical urban studies emphasizes that space and body should be considered central arenas for analyzing urban inequalities, rather than merely neutral contexts for social actions (Lefebvre, 1991; de Certeau, 1984). Therefore, the present research, by focusing on daily life, spatial movements, and bodies engaged with pollution and insecurity, analyzes waste picking as a form of urban existence. It aims to demonstrate how urban policies and exclusionary mechanisms, which have often received attention at the level of laws and discourse, also have a significant impact at the level of the body and daily experience. Furthermore, it seeks to demonstrate how waste pickers, not merely as victims of urban structures, but through their movement, presence, and daily tactics, participate in the social production of urban space and act as agents. Thus, the main innovation of this research lies in establishing a connection between the three areas of urban daily life, embodiment, and urban politics, a connection that has rarely been pursued coherently in the domestic literature.

4. Methodology

This research has been conducted with a qualitative approach, using the ethnographic method. This approach aims to understand the lived experiences of social actors within the context of their daily lives and from their own perspectives. Ethnography, as a primary method in urban anthropology and sociology, allows for the analysis of social phenomena in connection with spatial, bodily, and power relations, enabling the researcher to reconstruct social meanings within daily actions and interactions (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). This approach was selected based on the premise that the phenomenon of urban waste picking cannot be understood solely through statistical data or institutional analyses. Instead, this phenomenon gains meaning through daily movements, bodily experiences, and continuous encounters with urban order and control. The research field was the city of Amol, and the fieldwork was conducted over four months. The field of study was considered not as a fixed space, but as a network of daily routes, stops, and movements – an approach consistent with the anthropological understanding of space as a lived entity (Ingold, 2011).

Field research was carried out in five central and semi-peripheral neighborhoods of the city that were daily sites of activity for waste pickers. These locations

specifically included busy streets, side alleys off main routes, and collection points for trash bins. The presence in the field was intermittent and frequent, occurring at different times of the day and night, especially in the early mornings and late evenings when waste pickers are most active. This prolonged presence facilitated the establishment of a relatively trusting relationship with participants and the generation of rich, context-specific data, which was formed gradually and interactively in accordance with ethnographic principles (Murchison, 2010). Participant selection was purposive. The study population included individuals who continuously participated in waste-picking activities at these locations in Amol. The criteria for sample selection included the type of activity, the extent of presence in the field, accessibility, and willingness to participate in the research. The sampling process was gradual and occurred concurrently as the research progressed; it continued until theoretical saturation was reached, when new data no longer added new concepts or themes to the analytical framework of the research (Murchison, 2010). Data were collected through a combination of ethnographic techniques, including participant observation, informal conversations, and semi-structured interviews. Given the pivotal role of “movement” in the daily lives of waste pickers, “mobile ethnography” was employed. In this framework, the researcher moved alongside participants on some of their daily routes, observing and recording their actions, interactions, and experiences within the urban spaces. The main themes for observation and interviews included movement patterns, bodily experiences, social interactions, sense of security/insecurity, and encounters with the control mechanisms of urban institutions. The flexibility of the interviews allowed participants to express their narratives in their preferred language and order. Data were documented in the form of field notes, recorded narratives, and descriptions of social situations. Data analysis was conducted based on Murchison’s proposed framework. The data were examined continuously and simultaneously with data collection, and initial coding was carried out. The codes were then organized into conceptual categories, and central themes were extracted through constant comparison of the data. The analysis was cyclical and interpretive, aiming to connect empirical data with theoretical concepts and represent the meaningful structures of the actors in the field of study (Murchison, 2010). To

enhance the validity and trustworthiness of the findings, several strategies were employed, including prolonged field engagement, diversity of data sources, comparison of participants’ narratives, and the researcher’s continuous reflexivity regarding their own position in the field. Additionally, a form of data and method triangulation was used within the qualitative framework by combining field observations, interviews, and document analysis to increase analytical coherence. These measures were taken to improve reliability and ensure the internal consistency of the data (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019; Murchison, 2010). Throughout all stages of the research, ethnographic ethical principles were observed. Participants participated voluntarily, and their identities were kept anonymous. Given the vulnerable position of waste pickers, the researcher endeavored to avoid any harmful intervention or potential risk, maintaining the research relationship based on respect and ethical sensitivity.

5. Findings

The findings of this research stem from fieldwork, participant observation, and accompanying urban waste pickers in their movements, focusing on their lived experiences within the context of daily life. They have been extracted as variables through the narratives, actions, movements, and bodies engaging with the city. The experience of waste picking reveals a close connection between movement in space, embodiment, and urban policy. These three aspects function not as separate categories, but as intertwined layers of waste pickers’ existence in the city. Movement represents the external, everyday form of waste pickers’ presence in the city. It demonstrates how, through movement, they redefine urban spaces from the ground up, highlighting their daily routines, lived paths, and temporal rhythms. The body is the primary site of encountering pollution, danger, and environmental inequality. It is analyzed as the embodiment of environmental and social inequalities. Urban policy determines the possibilities and limitations of this way of life. It addresses waste pickers’ encounters with urban policies, mechanisms of exclusion, control, and forms of everyday resistance. This analytical structure allows waste picking to be understood not merely as an informal economic activity, but as a form of urban existence and an experience of urban inequality shaped simultaneously by movement, the body, and policy.

5.1. Movement in the city: The daily life of waste picking as living in space

The findings indicated that “movement” is the central core of waste pickers’ lived experience in the city. This means that waste picking is not a sporadic activity, but a way of life in constant motion, a movement that connects the body, space, and urban time. For the participants, the city is not a collection of streets and land uses, but a lived network of routes, stops, dangers, and opportunities that have become ingrained in their bodies and spatial memory over time. Field observation showed that waste pickers know the city not through official maps, but through lived routes or a “mental map”. These routes are the result of accumulated experience, trial and error, and their continuous encounters with exclusion and control. Each waste picker or group has relatively fixed routes that include specific bins, less-policed streets, familiar neighborhoods, and points of sale for recyclables. One participant explained:

“I made this route myself. I know where it’s good, where it’s trouble”. Another participant, describing their daily route, said, “I’ve been taking this same path for a long time. If I change it one day, I lose out, both in terms of money and trouble”. Another individual added, “If you know these areas, your work gets done. If you don’t, you either get nothing or get caught by the municipality.”

These statements reveal that movement in the city is not merely a spatial choice but a socio-political decision. Routes are adjusted based on the experience of danger, competition, police encounters, and the citizens’ gaze. In this sense, waste pickers consume, redefine, and produce space from below through their movement. Furthermore, the movement of waste pickers does not align with the city’s dominant rhythm. Their activity primarily occurs during marginal hours, such as early mornings or late evenings, the times when surveillance is less and access to resources is greater. In field observations, early morning hours were recorded as the golden time for activity.

One participant stated, “Early in the morning, the city is ours; after that, it’s not.” Another participant emphasized, “By the time people start coming out, we should have finished our work. After that, it’s just conflict.” “Night is also good, but the risk is higher. Early morning is both emptier and safer.”

These sentences clearly illustrate the relationship between time and power. For waste pickers, the appropriation of the city is always temporary, conditional, and fragile, transforming with changes in

season, light, temperature, and the intensity of surveillance. Walking for waste pickers is not just a physical act but a social and meaning-making practice. During field accompaniments, we observed that bodies unconsciously adjust the speed, direction, and posture of movement based on the spatial context, moving faster in high-risk areas and slower in familiar neighborhoods.

A participant said while moving, “Don’t look here, and just keep moving.” Another participant, in a similar situation, stated, “If you stop, it means attracting attention. You have to keep moving.” Another added, “The body itself knows where to go fast and where to go slow!”

These bodily adjustments indicate that the unequal urban order has been internalized at the bodily level. Through movement, waste pickers are both present in the city and strive to remain invisible. The daily movement of waste pickers is the intersection of everyday life, space, and power. Through their lived routes and temporal rhythms, they experience and reproduce the city from below, an experience that is simultaneously imbued with limitations and creativity.

5.2. Bodies in Motion: Sensory Experience and Embodied Environmental Inequality

The findings showed that, in urban waste picking, the body is not merely a tool of labor, but the primary site where the city and environmental inequalities are encountered. If movement constitutes the outward form of everyday life, the body is where this life is borne, recorded, and made meaningful.

Continuous contact with waste, touch, smell, dampness, and pollution is an inseparable part of waste pickers’ bodily experience. The hands are the first point of contact, often with little or no effective protection. Many participants described how the body gradually becomes accustomed to these conditions.

One participant said, “At first you feel sick, then the body gets used to it; after a while you stop thinking of it as waste, it becomes money.” Another noted, “At the beginning, my hands shook, and I felt nauseous. Now I even wonder how I can reach into the bin so easily.” A third added, “The smell bothers you at first, but then it’s like your brain switches off, you don’t notice it anymore.”

This adaptation, not indifference, is a bodily strategy for survival. Wounds, cuts, chronic coughing, and muscular pain appear repeatedly in participants’ accounts and are observed as routine. These injuries are often accepted as a normal part of the job.

“ If you keep thinking about it, you can’t work. You have no choice but to do it, you can’t stop working, so you have to ignore a lot of things.” Another participant, showing his hand, said, “These wounds are always there. They heal and then come back again. At some point, you lose track of them.” One more explained, “My back always hurts, but if I stay home, what will we eat tomorrow?”

To sustain a livelihood, the body normalizes danger, an indication of the unequal distribution of risk in the city. Waste pickers’ bodies are also exposed to judgmental gazes. Many participants referred to shame and efforts to become invisible.

“ I lower my head so they won’t look at me. We know they’re looking, like a partridge hiding its head in the snow.” Another said, “Sometimes you feel like you’re not even a person. Their gaze is heavy.” “My clothes are dirty, and of course, there’s a smell, that’s when you understand.”

Here, the body simultaneously carries labor, pollution, and social stigma. For waste pickers, the body is the most important, and sometimes the only, asset. The absence of insurance and institutional support places additional pressure on it.

“ If the body can’t work, nothing remains. We know our bodies get polluted, but we have no choice. We go to places where city people don’t go.” Another participant said, “We don’t have insurance, we don’t go to the doctor. It’s the body and itself.” And another, “As long as the legs can walk, we work. When they can’t, then God is great.”

In this sense, waste pickers’ bodies are the embodiment of environmental inequality. Sensory experience, pain, and adaptation show that waste picking is a form of embodied living within unequal urban policies.

5.3. Urban politics, exclusion, and control: Living on the margins of formal order

The findings reveal that the daily lives of waste pickers are constantly shaped by urban policies and mechanisms of control. Here, “politics” refers not only to formal laws but to a collection of everyday interactions, gazes, and interventions. In the official urban discourse, waste pickers are either absent or considered a nuisance. This symbolic erasure leads to spatial exclusion.

“ If you are seen, it means trouble. We hide ourselves or work in the dark of night so as not to be seen.” Another participant explained, “When the agents pass by, that’s the end of it there. Even if they don’t approach you, you know you have to leave.” A third

person said, “Our presence is not pleasant for the city. That’s why they don’t want us here.”

Invisibility is a survival strategy. Even without direct confrontation, the mere possibility of encountering authorities regulates movement. Changing routes is an example of internalized control.

“ We don’t go to certain places at all. Not because we can’t, but because the trouble is too much.” Another participant added, “You change your route not because it’s bad, but because you know they might give you a hard time.”

Formal waste management policies often ignore the role of informal workers, creating insecurity.

“ Every plan they introduce causes us stress. We don’t know what to do; our lives become insecure.” Another participant, “They say ‘regulation,’ but we don’t understand if this regulation means our elimination.” Someone else stated, “One day they say they’ll gather us, the next day they leave us be. We are left in the midst of this uncertainty.”

Despite exclusion, waste pickers are active agents. Local relationships, marginal times, and changing routes are forms of quiet resistance.

“ We have arrangements with some shopkeepers; they know when we’ll come.” Another participant said, “We work at night, so no one bothers us. That’s a way in itself.”

Urban policy, in the experience of waste pickers, is a lived reality, embodied in their bodies, movements, and emotions. While the city is not a field for absolute erasure, it is an arena for daily negotiation.

“ It’s not that they don’t let us at all, but you always have to be vigilant.” Another participant mentioned, “You’re always one step behind.”

The findings suggest that urban waste picking should be understood as living in the city, a life shaped at the intersection of movement, the body, and politics. Through their daily routes, vulnerable bodies, and encounters with urban exclusion, waste pickers experience and reproduce the city from below. These findings indicate that urban and environmental inequality are not abstract concepts but embodied realities manifested in everyday bodies and movements. In the process of coding and structuring categories and subcategories derived from the analysis of field data, the data were categorized and analyzed through a back-and-forth process between initial concepts and the theoretical framework. The organizational logic of the categories and the relationships between different levels of analysis are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Analytical framework for extracted categories in findings

Main categories	Organizing categories	Conceptual codes	Ethnographic evidence	Linkage to the conceptual framework
Movement in the city, waste picking as a living in the space	Continuous movement	Movement as survival	I made this route myself; I know where it's good, where it's troublesome	Lefebvre; everyday life and the production of space
	New routes	Informal route, city map	Fixed routes including specific bins, low-surveillance streets, and points of sale	de Certeau; everyday practices and tactics
	Marginal timings	Alternative urban rhythm	Early in the morning, the city is ours; after that, no more	Urban rhythms (rhythm, time)
	Bodily regulation of movement	Speed, direction, bodily caution	Observation of speed changes in high-risk spaces	Embodiment of experience
Bodies in motion, embodied environmental inequality, and sensory experience	Sensory contact with waste	Smell, touch, pollution, humidity	At first, you feel bad; then, the body gets used to it	Sensory ethnography
	Bodily habituation	Normalization of risk	You have to ignore many things	Structural vulnerability
	Body as capital	Body - livelihood tool	If the body doesn't work, nothing remains	Body and survival
	Social stigma	Shame, invisibility	I lower my head so they don't look	Urban exclusion
Politics, urban exclusion and control, living on the margins	Symbolic omission	Absence in formal discourse	Seeing us is not pleasant for the city	City and citizenship
	Indirect control	Possibility of encounter, self-control	Changing routes without confrontation	Internalization of power
	Strategic invisibility	Secrecy, night work	We work in the dark, so we are not seen	de Certeau; silent resistances
	Policy insecurity	Uncertainty, institutional anxiety	Whatever plan they give, it's stressful for us	The informal citizen
	Everyday negotiation	Local relationships, adaptation	Coordination with shopkeepers, timing selection	Politics of everyday life

6. Discussion

Urban waste picking cannot be understood solely as an informal economic activity or a socio-administrative issue, but rather must be analyzed as a way of living in the city where movement, the body, and power operate in an intertwined manner. This conclusion aligns with critical approaches in urban studies that view the city not as a mere product of formal policymaking, but as a field of everyday actions and power relations. Within this framework, waste pickers are not on the margins of the city, but are present at the heart of urban space production processes, participating in the redefinition of the spatial order through their daily actions. Field data indicate that waste pickers, through repetitive movements, organization of routes, stopping points, and specific timings, produce a type of lived geography where seemingly marginal urban spaces become significant

activity hubs. This finding is consistent with Lefebvre's concept of the social production of space, which views space not as a predetermined entity, but as a product of social relations and everyday actions (Lefebvre, 1991). In this regard, ethnographic research on waste picking has also shown that waste pickers, through their continuous presence in urban spaces, form networks of routes and activity points that play an active role in organizing the city (Dias, 2016; Millar, 2018). Eithari and Shujaiezadeh (2019) have shown that waste picking in Tehran is not just an economic activity, but a form of informal living shaped by migration, marginalization, and unequal urban structures. Furthermore, Naderi et al. (2022) have emphasized the complexity of the social and economic relationships of waste pickers in Tehran, demonstrating that this phenomenon is organized within a network of formal and informal relationships. While confirming

these results, the findings of the present research indicate that waste picking can be analyzed not only at the level of social structures but also at the level of spatial and bodily experience.

From the perspective of embodiment, the research data show that urban policies and unequal social structures are directly imposed on the bodies of waste pickers. Continuous exposure to pollution, physical exhaustion, and environmental hazards suggests that the bodies of waste pickers have become the arena for the manifestation of social and environmental inequalities. This finding is consistent with approaches in the anthropology of the body, which view the body not as a neutral mediator, but as a site of experience and the exercise of power (Csordas, 1994). In this context, the concept of structural vulnerability shows that marginalized urban groups are disproportionately exposed to environmental hazards, and this situation is a product of power relations and unequal structures (Quesada et al, 2011). Some studies have also emphasized this dimension. For instance, Zarei et al. (2023), in a critical ethnography of waste picking in the city of Meybod, demonstrated that the experience of harm, insecurity, and physical exhaustion is an integral part of the lives of waste pickers. Similarly, Parvin et al. (2018) analyzed the link between migration and waste picking, revealing that the bodies of migrants in an urban context become a field for experiencing inequality and social exclusion. The findings of the present research align with these studies, indicating that the bodies of waste pickers can be analyzed as a “living archive” of urban inequalities.

In this research, the movement of waste pickers in the city reveals itself not merely as an economic act, but as a form of active adaptation and, simultaneously, silent resistance. Changing routes to avoid control, selecting marginal times for activity, and utilizing under-

monitored spaces indicate that waste pickers are constantly negotiating with the urban order. This finding aligns with de Certeau’s analysis of everyday life tactics, in which institutional power-lacking actors, through creative, personalized, and situated uses of space, simultaneously follow and subvert the dominant order (de Certeau, 1984). Samson (2020) demonstrates that the presence of waste pickers in urban public spaces can be considered a form of implicit claim to the right to the city, which is expressed through everyday spatial actions in the absence of official recognition. Similarly, Gidwani (2013) shows that waste pickers, through their movement and presence in the city, produce alternative spatial orders that are simultaneously subject to and protesting the official order. The findings of the present research indicate that similar forms of these spatial and bodily actions can be observed within the urban context of Iran, although these actions are shaped in specific regimes of control, exclusion, and urban management, and often are context-specific patterns.

Understanding urban waste picking requires simultaneous attention to three dimensions: movement, the body, and urban politics. Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual model emerging from the data analysis (Figure 1). Waste pickers are not merely victims of the urban order, but active agents in the social production of space who, through daily movements, bodily experiences, and life tactics, redefine the city from the bottom up. The research findings, while consistent with previous studies, suggest that analyzing waste picking within purely economic or institutional frameworks is insufficient to explain the complexities of the urban life of this group. An embodied ethnographic approach can provide new horizons for understanding urban inequalities and informal ways of living.

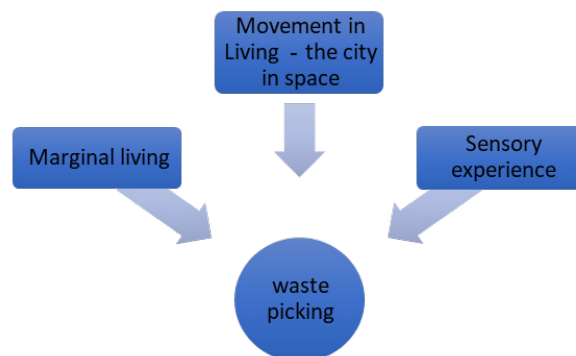


Figure 1. Dimensions of interpreting waste picking

7. Conclusion

This study, using an ethnographic approach and the theoretical framework of urban anthropology and environmental studies, showed that urban waste picking cannot be analyzed merely as an economic activity or a social issue; rather, it should be understood as a way of living in the city, in which movement, the body, and urban politics operate in an intertwined manner. Within the context of structural and environmental inequalities, waste picking has its own logic, rhythms, and meanings, which can only be understood through an embodied and ethnographic study. The findings showed that waste pickers, through repetitive everyday movements, route organization, and specific time schedules, actively participate in the social production of urban space. This finding challenges common understandings of space as merely the product of formal planning and aligns with Lefebvre's view of the social production of space (Lefebvre, 1991). In this framework, the city is reproduced not only from above, but also through micro-actions and marginalized bodies, and seemingly peripheral spaces become meaningful nodes in the city's lived geography. The analysis of bodies interacting with waste indicates that urban politics functions not only through laws and discourses but also has a direct impact on bodies and lived experiences. The bodies of waste pickers have become a site where social and environmental inequalities are embodied; this condition is consistent with the embodied approach in anthropology and the concept of structural vulnerability (Csordas, 1994; Quesada et al., 2011). In this sense, the body is not only a tool of labor but also a lived archive of policies of exclusion and institutional neglect.

The findings also showed that movement in the city for waste pickers is not merely a functional act, but a form of active adaptation and everyday resistance. Changing routes, choosing marginal times for activity, and using low-surveillance spaces reflect tactics used by actors lacking institutional power to sustain their lives. From a theoretical perspective, this study addressed three important components in the literature on urban studies and anthropology in relation to waste picking. First, by linking movement, embodiment, and urban politics, it provided an analytical framework that moves beyond economic and institutional explanations of waste picking. Second, by focusing on at-risk bodily experiences, it offered a tangible understanding of environmental

justice in everyday life. Third, by presenting ethnographic data from the Iranian urban context, it partially filled a gap in the global waste-picking literature, which had largely focused on Latin America and South Asia. From a policy perspective, the findings suggest that ignoring waste pickers in formal waste management systems not only reproduces social and environmental inequalities but also weakens the important ecological functions of this group. Recognizing the practical knowledge and lived experience of waste pickers can contribute to more inclusive and just urban management policies. Despite the limitations of focusing on a specific urban context, this research underscores that understanding the contemporary city without highlighting marginalized lives and bodies engaged with the environment will remain incomplete. Waste pickers, despite being institutionally overlooked, actively contribute to the social production of space, and an ethnographic study of them allows for a critical rethinking of the city, inequality, and environmental politics.

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The first author: 50%

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest in conducting this research.

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