

Cairo's Treasures of Trash

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A donkey cart carrying garbage is seen in the Zabaleen area in Cairo, Egypt.

By May El Habachi

Overlooking Cairo's Citadel, lies a small secluded community informally known as the *Zabaleen*, or garbage people.

As the name suggests, the *Zabaleen* live in the midst of garbage that overwhelms the district's narrow winding roads and small alley ways.

Children play carefree and are oblivious to the stench of garbage that looms over them. If anything, they have grown accustomed to it.

But this is not their garbage. This is the garbage of about two thirds of the country's capital, Cairo, one of the world's most populous cities.

"This is our life. We have been collecting other people's trash and selling it for more than 30 years. We have inherited this life from our parents and our children will inherit it from us," says Moussa, a man in his early 20's, who was born and raised in the Zabaleen community.

Moussa is among the 70,000 Coptic Christians whose livelihood is based on collecting and recycling trash.

"The work is usually divided between family members," Moussa tells Newsweek Middle East.

"Fathers and sons go to the city to collect trash door-to-door from residents. They then bring it home to their women who then sort the garbage manually, separating paper, plastic, glass and food in bags ready to be sold for recycling."

According to a study conducted by the American University of Cairo, the Zabaleen collect about 40 percent of Cairo's waste and recycle 85 percent of it, a rate that is much higher than many cities in Europe and North America.

Yet, they continue to remain part of the informal workforce that has existed in the capital for decades. To date, they have not received formal recognition from the government, but with international waste management contracts coming to an end in June 2017, times could be changing.

Wasted Opportunity

Ezzat Naem Guindy, Director of Spirit of Youth Foundation (SOY) –a non-governmental organization that provides literacy and entrepreneurship programs for school-aged boys living in Zabaleen—does not seem hopeful that they'll be awarded local contracts for managing the city's waste.

"We have met with the relevant government bodies and presented our proposal, but haven't received word from them yet," Guindy tells Newsweek Middle East.

"Even if we are not chosen, they should not continue to contract international waste management companies because they have proven to be ineffective," he adds.



Ezzat Naem Guindy in front of Spirit of Youth Foundation.

In 2003, the government sold annual contracts worth \$50 million to international waste management companies to collect Cairo's trash, replacing informal waste pickers.

According to Guindy, these companies were only required to recycle 20 percent of waste they collected, while the remaining 80 percent was dumped in landfills.

Laila Iskandar, Egypt's former Environment Minister and a waste management expert for over 35 years, is critical of contracting international waste management companies to clean up Cairo's streets.

“The formal multinational companies did not operate their composting plants efficiently and their landfills were poorly managed... they designed their system to landfill rather than recycle the waste they collected,” says Iskandar.

Moreover, the contracted international companies didn't collect garbage door-to-door from residents like the Zabaleen did and continue to do. Instead, they placed large metal bins in central collection points because their machines were too large for the narrow streets of Cairo.

As a result, the residents were unhappy. Not only did they have to dispose of their waste in containers outside their homes, but now they were being charged for garbage collection fees that were included in their electricity bills for what seemed to be an inconvenient and ineffective waste collection system.

“Now that garbage fees are included in electricity bills, we have no choice but to pay it,” says Mona, a resident in Cairo's downtown Bab Ellouk District.

“Some people even pay both fees—one for the formal waste collection and one for the Zabaleen, because it is inconvenient for them to throw garbage in the big containers on the streets.”

But even if people don't pay the Zabaleen, they will still collect garbage from residents' homes. “They need it to survive and support their families,” explains Guindy.

Recycling and Entrepreneurship

In lack of formal initiatives by the government, smaller recycling projects are taking place.

One such project is the '*Learning and Earning* program' offered by SOY foundation for boys. In addition to learning how to read and write, children learn to count and recycle empty shampoo bottles.

“The boys learn how to work in the local industry and make money for their families,” says Guindy.

“We encourage children to attend the program by giving them money to buy empty shampoo bottles. The foundation collects more than 1 million shampoo bottles a year for boys to learn about the business of collecting and selling plastic bottles to recyclers for profit,” he adds.

In a community where more than half the residents are illiterate and without education, this program comes in handy as it enables children to learn and continue working in the family business while also making money.

The program, which started in 2004, has so far seen more than 500 graduates to date.

This is not the only program in the Zabaleen area. Association for Protection of the Environment (APE) is another non-governmental organization that also provides literacy and recycling programs for girls such as rug weaving, patch work and paper crafting to teach them the means of making money from recycling.

Meanwhile, back on Zabaleen streets, there are more than 750 small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) related to waste management according to Guindy.

“We are the largest transfer station in the world. We recycle about 10 million Egyptian Pounds (\$570,250) worth of trade in the Zabaleen area daily,” says Guindy.

And in a city that disposes of 15,000 tons of trash every day, there seems to be no shortage of recycling workshops and business opportunities.

Integration of Zabaleen

In hopes of being part of the formal waste management sector, SOY organized 1,200 waste collectors across six areas in Greater Cairo and registered them in waste management companies, so when (if) they are contracted by the government, they will be ready to start operations.

Even if the Zabaleen are not awarded these contracts, it's important that they still play a role in the city's formal waste management. Iskandar recommends waste to be formally collected from homes to clean up the streets of Cairo, which have become very unsanitary with the presence of open containers.

This will not only restore the cleanliness of Cairo's streets, but will also provide employment opportunities for the wanting youth, who are struggling to find jobs in today's economy.



A garbage truck carrying trash is seen in the Zabaleen area of Cairo, Egypt.

According to Guindy, one ton of garbage creates 12 jobs daily, from collecting and sorting waste to selling it to recyclers.

“Waste collecting and recycling is good for employment, good for the environment and good for sustainable development,” he says.

Meanwhile, just outside of Cairo in Ismailiya and Port Said areas, the governors have signed contracts with the newly formalized informal sector waste pickers who collect trash door-to-door from residents’ homes.

Although these informal waste pickers are not the Zabaleen, this initiative might help the Zabaleen gain contracts with local authorities in the future, especially if proven successful.

Still, there are doubts about including the Zabaleen in formal waste management.

“Although this seems like a timely opportunity for the Zabaleen to get waste collection contracts with local authorities, I doubt that they will be offered those contracts as the government is less likely to contract numerous small collection companies,” says Iskandar.

“It would rather opt for two to three large contractors to avoid the problem of managing hundreds of contracts and because the tendering process will more likely be centrally driven rather than at the local municipal level, which means the preference will be for large operators.”

But waste will always end up in the Zabaleen community. “Where else will it go?” asks Guindy.

“We have been here for generations and will continue to be here. This is our livelihood.”

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