

# Keeping Thimphu Running: The Lives and Livelihoods of City Workers

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**Abstract:** This article examines the lives and livelihoods of Thimphu's municipal daily wage workers – primarily low-income migrants employed by the Thimphu Thromde – who carry out critical maintenance and cleaning tasks essential to the city's daily functioning. Despite their indispensable role, these workers face profound precarity marked by gaps between formal labour protections and everyday realities. Based on mixed-methods fieldwork, this article explores their migration pathways, living conditions, work challenges, and adaptive strategies.

**Keywords:** Migration, City-Workers, Thimphu, Precarity, Adaptation.

## Introduction

Their bright purple work suits should render their presence conspicuous but

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the daily wage earners have been so deeply entrenched in the everyday visuals of Thimphu for so long that their presence hardly warrants a second glance from people passing by. For the daily wage earners who are engaged in various manual maintenance and cleaning tasks, the humdrum of the city fades into the background.

Part of the working class are the workers employed by the Thimphu Thromde Administration, the majority of whom are migrants. The daily wage workers who will hitherto be referred to as city workers are engaged in the daily maintenance of the city, the upkeep of its roads, gardens, drains and other infrastructure. Thimphu Thromde employs 349 workers on its roster or what the city workers refer to as the muster roll. The muster roll allows Thimphu thromde to carry out its motto, as displayed in large font on its website, “Keep Thimphu City Clean and Green.” Out of its 500 staff members, more than 300 are city workers. Thus, the thromde machinery is operated largely by the city workers. This article argues that despite being indispensable to the city’s daily functioning, the lived experiences of the workers reveal a critical disjuncture between formal protections and everyday realities. Based on over eighteen months of fieldwork employing a mixed-methods approach—including life history interviews, focus group discussions, photovoice, and a quantitative survey—this article examines the layered experiences of precarity, resilience, and adaptive strategies that shape the everyday lives of Thimphu’s city workers.

## **Migration Journeys and Occupational Pathways**

Two primary drivers of migration to Thimphu from rural areas consistently emerged. First, many individuals moved in search of employment opportunities. Second, a significant number - particularly women - migrated to accompany spouses who had already secured work in the city.

While men often migrate in pursuit of job opportunities, women’s migration tends to be more embedded in relational roles. One female worker explained

“I came here after marriage. My husband had already been

working in Thimphu as a city worker, so I followed him. Later, I joined as a cleaner because we needed the income.”.

Social networks play a crucial role in shaping entry into the Thromde workforce. In many cases, employment is facilitated not through formal recruitment channels, but through informal ties - family members or friends embedded within the system. Several city workers recounted that roles had been passed down generationally, or that spouses had played a key role in integrating their partners into the municipal labour force. For instance, one worker shared:

“Back in our hometown, both my husband and I were city workers. When he migrated to Thimphu, I moved with him and later joined Thromde here as well.”

Another young city worker who works as an electrical lineman recounted how his father’s decades of service in the municipal workforce - and the connections he cultivated - directly contributed to him securing a job:

“My father in his decades of service has fostered good relations within the workforce; that helped me get in.”

In the context of Thimphu’s city workers, these networks function as critical assets that enable households to secure employment and enhance their adaptive capacity. The lineman added:

“now that I too have started earning an income which supplements that of my father’s, the economic condition of our family has significantly improved”

These connections are not merely social conveniences - they represent a form of adaptive capacity, wherein families collectively draw on existing relationships and institutional familiarity to build livelihoods in Thimphu. As Adger (2000) argues, adaptive capacity is underpinned not only by material resources but by social resilience - the capacity of

individuals and communities to respond to stress through institutions, networks, and collective identity.

## Living Spaces of the City's Labour Force

The city worker settlements are located in various parts of Thimphu, some of them stand in stark contrast to the more formal and affluent structures that surround them. In areas that have undergone rapid development and infrastructural expansion, dense clusters of worker housing remain tucked away - sometimes just below major expressways or adjacent to sewage treatment facilities. These spaces, though central to the city's functioning, are marked by spatial compression and material scarcity. It is often difficult to distinguish where one dwelling ends and another begins. In some colonies, lavatories are situated outside, and the overall layout feels improvised rather than planned.



*Figure 1: A city worker's house below a busy highway with small vegetable gardens.  
Photo by author, 2024*



*Figure 2: Settlement for city workers with houses framed by seasonal blooms. Photo  
by author, 2024*

Despite these conditions, signs of domestic care and permanence are evident. Small gardens are carved out of limited space, and hen coops or flowering plants suggest efforts to make these homes livable and dignified. Some

structures appear to be shared or partitioned to accommodate multiple households under one roof - an adaptation to space constraints and housing shortages.

Scattered within some of these older and often fragile structures are newer, concrete buildings built by the Thromde Administration, a more recent addition to the settlement landscape. In some cases, they have been built following damage caused by fires or the demolition of earlier makeshift homes. While they represent a modest upgrade, their presence also highlights the uneven distribution of infrastructural investment across settlements. Notably, those living in the newer concrete homes are required to pay rent to the Thromde, whereas residents in makeshift houses continue to live rent-free.



*Figure 3: City workers colony with both makeshift and concrete houses. Photo by*

*author, 2024.*

Within these settlements, many households have occupied the same spaces for decades, contributing to a strong sense of community and mutual support among residents. Despite the material precariousness of the built environment, long-term cohabitation has fostered enduring social ties, informal governance practices, and collective routines. “During times of death and illnesses, we rely on each other, collecting funds to reduce the burden,” shared one resident, reflecting the embedded systems of mutual aid and emotional support within these urban communities. Beyond such solidarity in times of crisis, collective action is also visible in everyday practices. For example, residents of a city worker settlement regularly organize neighbourhood cleaning campaigns along footpaths and the small stream that runs through their area - an effort that reinforces both environmental upkeep and community cohesion.

As Moser (1998) observes, “reciprocity and solidarity provide the informal safety nets that help urban poor households manage risk” (p. 4). These everyday reciprocal arrangements - from pooled financial contributions to collective neighbourhood care - are forms of social capital, which Adger (2003) defines as “the networks of relationships, reciprocity, trust, and social norms that facilitate cooperation within or among groups” (p. 389).

This was further evident during a focus group discussion with an all-women group in one settlement, where participants casually recounted each other’s life histories and described how they exchange vegetables from their home gardens. From working together to living together in the colonies, the physical and emotional proximity shared by city workers forms a critical dimension of social capital - a resource they draw on to navigate the uncertainties of urban life and promote their wellbeing.

## **Making Ends Meet: Protection and Precarity**

City workers are organized into functional groups and allocated to geographic zones, where they undertake tasks vital to the city’s everyday operation. This

includes gardening, cleaning, drain and sewage maintenance. Their labour is repetitive, physically demanding, and often invisible to those who benefit from it. Yet, it is this very work - conducted across seasons and terrain - that sustains the rhythms and hygiene of urban life .

In recognition of their role, the Thimphu Thromde introduced the Workforce Services Rules and Regulations (TTWSR) in 2020, stating: ‘All efforts have been made to ensure that the workforce of Thimphu Thromde are placed in a favourable position as those in any comparable agency... and while they are with us, be able to provide a safe working environment that is conducive for a bright and successful career and a fulfilling experience.’”

The Thimphu Thromde Workforce Services Rules and Regulations (TTWSR), introduced in 2020, formally articulates the entitlements, responsibilities, and protections owed to the city workers. The document represents a key institutional effort to regularize informal labour practices within public service delivery. However, field evidence suggests significant gaps between policy and practice.

There is widespread unawareness of the TTWSR itself. *Lajabs* (supervisors) interviewed admitted they were not aware of the document. Given that *lajabs* serve as intermediaries between the administration and city workers, their unfamiliarity with these regulations likely compounds the information gap among the broader workforce. This lack of awareness constitutes a structural barrier to accessing labour entitlements—such as overtime pay, provident fund contributions, or group insurance scheme - enshrined in the TTWSR. A city worker shared:

“Sometimes during the summer, especially when drains overflow or get blocked, we’re called in after work hours, late at night to help fix things. But we’ve been told that we’re not eligible for overtime pay...”

However, the TTWSR 2020 clearly stipulates that employees are entitled to overtime compensation. This disconnect between policy and practice echoes patterns observed across South Asia, where formal regulations often exist on

paper but remain unenforced in practice. As Agarwala (2013, p. 6) observes, “Most informal workers are legally excluded from protective labour legislation, and even when laws exist, they are often poorly enforced.”

In the case of Thimphu’s municipal workforce - who fall under the formal sector - this phenomenon of “paper protection” with the categorisation as formal workers results in an illusion of security, while failing to shield workers from the material realities of precarious employment.

## Wage Rate Revision

In 2023 a national workforce wage rate revision was announced by the Government. City workers are classified into five categories with category five consisting of unskilled workers such as sweepers and gardeners. Prior to the wage revision, those belonging to category five were paid Nu 215 per day. Following the revision, the rate was increased to Nu 400 per day.

For many city workers, the period before the most recent wage revision is remembered as one marked by acute hardship. A municipal cleaner, reflected on those times:

“It used to be so difficult. Sometimes when we fell ill, we couldn’t even afford to take a taxi to the hospital, so we had no choice but to stay at home in pain.”

Describing the present, she added, “Life as a city worker is better now...” Similarly, another lineman whose parents also worked as city workers, recounted:

“Times were tough. Even to attend school, I would ask seniors for their old *ghos* and shoes.”

His mother retired before the wage rate was revised, but his father, still employed, now earns a significantly higher wage. The combined income, he explained, has brought “better times” for the family.

The most recent wage revision - implemented less than two years ago - effectively doubled the daily earnings of city workers. Prior to this, most earned nearly half their current wages, an amount that constrained their ability to access even publicly subsidized services. Although Bhutan's universal healthcare and free public education are crucial safety nets for low-income families, low daily wages limited workers' capacity to make full use of these services - especially in situations where indirect costs (e.g., transportation, school supplies, or time off work) posed substantial barriers. In the cases mentioned above, the inadequacy of wages intersected with other factors - such as illness, family responsibilities, and the urban cost of living - to deepen the experience of precarity.

Income security - defined as access to adequate and stable earnings - is a critical dimension of reducing precarity among low-wage urban workers (Tebboth, Rao, Subramanian, & Singh, forthcoming). The recent wage increase has brought about measurable improvements in quality of life for many and reduced their precarity. Workers report greater ability to afford basic needs and access services. Yet, the gains remain fragile. Thimphu's cost of living - particularly in relation to food, rent, and transportation - continues to rise, outpacing the increase in wages. In such a context, complementary entitlements such as access to affordable secure housing, consistent overtime payments, and reliable access to provident fund schemes become not just supplemental, but essential to sustaining the livelihoods of city workers.

## **Occupational Health and Safety Measures**

On a daily basis, the city workers are exposed to dust, grime, waste and sewage which the city seems to churn out in increasing amounts. Their protection against the potentially hazardous aspects of their work are the uniforms and gears provided by Thromde administration. A supervisor whose division is responsible for the core town area, which by the self-admission of supervisors is one of the most challenging sites to clean and maintain. He shared:

“the gloves, helmet, and uniform are provided by Thromde. Previously, we used to receive two sets of shirts and trousers every year, but for the past three years or so, we have only been given one set. Additionally, while we have been informed that wearing a uniform on-site is mandatory, we do not receive adequate support. During summer, there are drain overflows. While there are designated teams for road and drainage maintenance, if they are unable to handle the situation, we are called to step in. However, to do so, we are required to wear our uniforms, which, in many cases, are still wet from the previous day. This makes it difficult to comply with the uniform policy”.

Such discrepancies are not unique to Bhutan. According to Choudhary and Ghosh (2020) who worked on sanitation work in India, “Sanitation workers remain outside the purview of labour protections, despite performing hazardous tasks under municipal contracts.”.The experience of a city worker in charge of sewage and drain maintenance reflects similar challenges. He shared, “We have to wear wet clothes for long hours, which is very uncomfortable. Sometimes we clean drains and rewear the same uniform the next day.” For workers on the ground, this translates into occupational precarity characterised by daily routines marked by physical discomfort and heightened exposure to illnesses.

### **The Women of the Workforce**

In Thimphu’s city workforce, gendered occupational stratification is both evident and entrenched. While *lajabs* - supervisors in Category (i) - are predominantly male, Category (v) comprises the unskilled labour force engaged in sweeping, gardening, and waste collection. The majority of these unskilled workers are women, whose roles are often physically demanding and repetitive. Despite spending decades in these positions, many women experience virtually no occupational mobility, remaining in the same role throughout their tenure, with minimal change in responsibility or compensation.

It was mid-morning when we arrived at the municipal worksite, the sun already harsh against the hillside. A group of women were busy hauling freshly cut logs - long, uneven, and visibly heavy - towards a truck parked on the roadside. Their bright purple uniforms stood in stark contrast to the browns and greens of the surrounding trees. The air was thick with the smell of pine and diesel.

As we spoke with the supervisor nearby, he paused to glance toward the workers. "The women in my section have it tough," he said, his tone a mix of pride and resignation. "They have to load heavy wood and rocks into the trucks. It's not easy." The moment captured more than just a routine task; it is an illustration of the everyday burdens that are normalized within these roles.

Despite the physical intensity of their work, opportunities for training or skill-building have been scarce and sporadic. Although the Thromde administration has, on occasion, offered training - such as in urban agriculture (e.g., oyster mushroom cultivation and composting) - these initiatives have often failed to translate into tangible gains. As one worker explained, "The training is of little use to us since we do not have the time to practice it." Such responses highlight a disconnect between institutional offerings and the everyday constraints city workers face, particularly women, whose time is shaped by both wage labour and domestic responsibilities. Rather than empowering workers, training in its current form appears to be tokenistic - detached from real opportunities for upward mobility or income diversification.

Jackson (1996) emphasises on the importance of taking into account women's specific contexts while fulfilling transformative gender agendas. This reflects the importance of interventions needing to be carefully tailored to the specific contexts of female city workers incorporating their aspirations and challenges.

By contrast, male workers are typically concentrated in Categories (iv) and above, where pay is higher and some degree of occupational progression is possible. When asked why men avoid Category (v) work, respondents indicated that men in these roles are expected to perform disproportionately

heavier tasks—such as lifting large logs or heavy waste - without differentiated compensation. As one respondent explained,

“They feel they shouldn’t have to do that when they are paid equally [to women], so they opt out of this category.” This reinforces not only gendered perceptions of labour value but also illustrates how equality in pay, when not accompanied by equity in workload and opportunity, can inadvertently reinforce male avoidance of lower-tier jobs while leaving women stuck in them. The gendered division of labour not only reinforces structural inequalities but also exposes women to heightened physical strain. Moreover, the lack of occupational mobility means that women continue in these roles for decades, with little opportunity for reassignment to less strenuous tasks.

### **Waste Picking and Caregiving**

“As the afternoon drew to an end, we came across three city workers returning home with sacks filled with trash slung over their backs. Their uniforms were dust-stained, their hands gloved, and their pace slow. We paused to talk, and they introduced themselves as part of the team responsible for waste collection. One of the women, shared:

“Our group is in charge of a large area and there aren’t many of us. The physical demands are exhausting, and sometimes it feels like there’s no relief because we have to keep going day after day.”

The others nodded quietly. Another woman added, “Two of us are single mothers and I have a brother who is a disabled person so that makes it even more challenging. The wage increase has helped but it’s still difficult to make ends meet. It’s frustrating because we’ve sought help - but nothing comes.”

This testimony highlights the compounded challenges these women face as they balance economic survival with caregiving responsibilities. It exemplifies what Kabeer (2015) calls the “double burden” of productive and reproductive labour. The intersecting demands of their physically taxing work and domestic duties place a significant and often overwhelming burden on them,

exacerbating both physical and emotional strain.

## **Breaking the Cycle: Educational Aspirations Among City Workers**

For many families, aspirations are centered around education - not as an abstract ideal, but as a hard-earned opportunity to disrupt cycles of precarity. As one city worker explained:

“My only wish has been for my children to study and do better in life. That is one of the reasons we came to Thimphu—since the educational facilities are better here.”

Yet improved access does not always translate into better outcomes. Even among families of city workers, it has been observed that although children attain higher levels of education than their parents, it is not to the extent of meaningful upward mobility, as overall educational attainment rates remain low.

In this context, Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) centres established by the Thromde have emerged as a vital intervention. Tshomo, a city worker and ECCD helper, reflected on their significance:

“It’s unfortunate that our sons did not have the opportunity to attend an ECCD when they were toddlers. I have witnessed firsthand the benefits these centers provide - from teaching children how to correctly hold a pencil to fostering independence and preparing them for formal schooling.”

ECCD centres are not only foundational for early learning, but also serve as essential care infrastructure - particularly for families engaged in daily wage labour. Another worker noted:

“It is helpful for those who do not have anyone at home to care for children while they’re at work.”

By supporting both children's development and parental employment, ECCDs occupy a unique space in advancing social equity. As UNICEF (2020) underscores, ECCDs function as a powerful equaliser and a mechanism through which disadvantaged children are not left behind at the starting gate of school. For the families of the city workers, access to such care infrastructures significantly enhances their wellbeing and adaptive capacity, enabling parents - especially mothers - to maintain consistent employment while fostering healthy growth of their children. While initiatives like ECCDs offer a meaningful starting point, they must be understood as part of a broader continuum of support needed to translate aspirations into outcomes. Without sustained investment in early learning, quality schooling, and post-secondary opportunities, the intergenerational promise of education risks remaining out of reach for those who keep the city running, yet remain on its margins.

## Conclusion

City workers in Thimphu are on the frontlines of addressing the complex and evolving challenges of urban life, including those exacerbated by climate change - such as increased waste, flooding, and infrastructure strain. Their labour is vital to maintaining the city's cleanliness and resilience, yet their own living and working conditions often remain precarious and under-recognized. Securing their wellbeing will require sustained and integrated interventions - not only better enforcement of labour rights but also expanded social support, secure housing, and inclusive education policies that recognize the full spectrum of barriers city workers and their families face. Ultimately, acknowledging the central role of city workers means going beyond symbolic recognition. It calls for structural reforms that ensure these essential workers can thrive with dignity, security, and genuine prospects for socio-economic mobility. As Thimphu continues to grow, the city's future will be shaped as much by the resilience of its daily wage earners as by the policies that empower them.

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