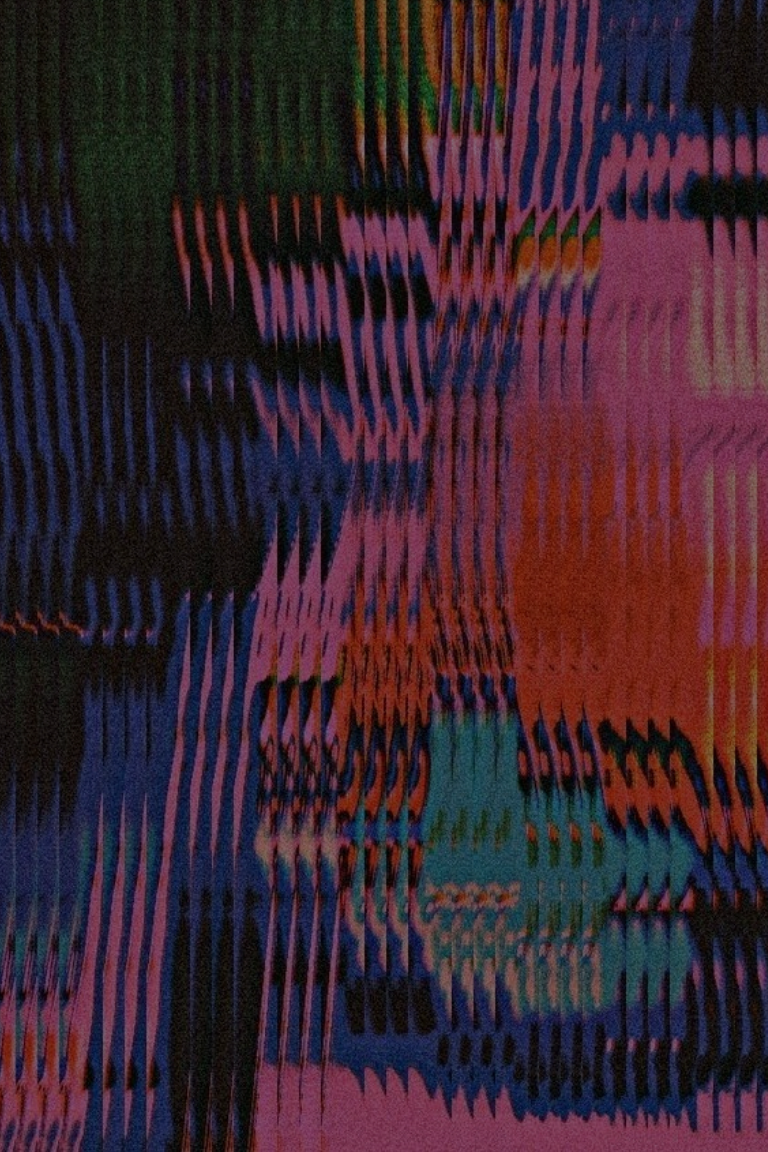
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THE INVISIBLE EWASTE ECONOMY OF SEELAMPUR



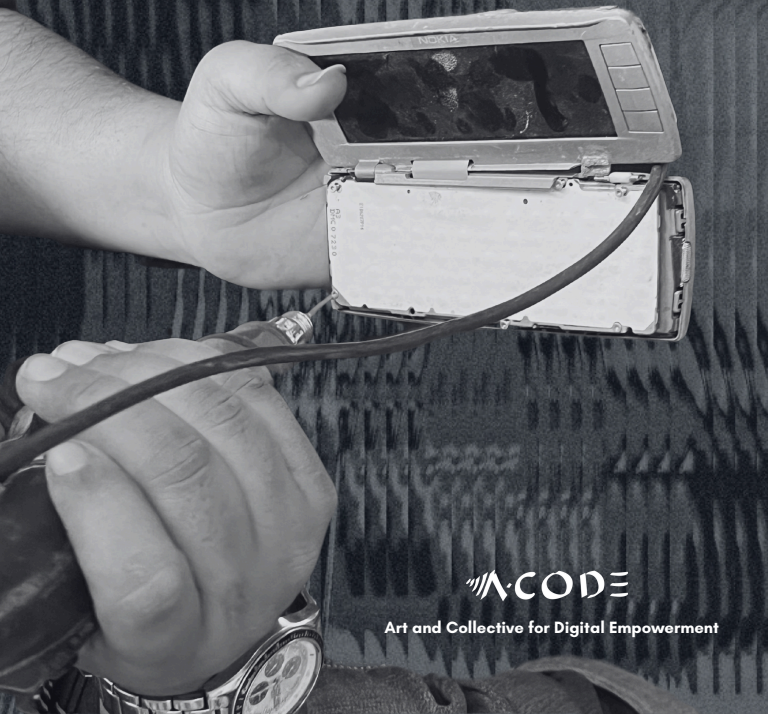
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THE INVISILBE EWASTE ECONOMY OF SEELAMPUR



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The Invisible e-Waste Economy of Seelampur
Year of Publication: 2025
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INTRODUCTION

This book highlights the empirical fieldwork conducted in Seelampur as part of a larger research project by the Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF, India) on the theme of the Circular Economy. The project aims to explore gendered labour experiences in the Internet of Things (IoT) domain, specifically within the context of the informal e-waste economy in India. The fieldwork offers an assessment of policy enforcement levels in Seelampur's e-waste market, emphasising the need for a nuanced, gender-sensitive policy approach that acknowledges the invisible and undervalued labour disproportionately carried out by marginalised gendered bodies.

On a sunny afternoon in Old Seelampur, in the Shahdara district of Delhi, the air smells of burning plastic and soldered metal. It is like an empire of broken things, set against a constant, harsh soundtrack where one can hear the clangs of hammers on metal parts, tools scraping on discarded laptops, printers, and televisions, and human voices shouting orders filling the cramped lanes. This is the everyday rhythm of Gali Number Chaar — Lane Number 4 — the oldest and most commercially vital artery of India's largest informal e-waste market.


"God gave me these hands to work. I don't need protection. I trust God to take care of me."
one worker said, her voice calm but resigned.



> e-waste workers face systemic exclusion from social security frameworks in India.

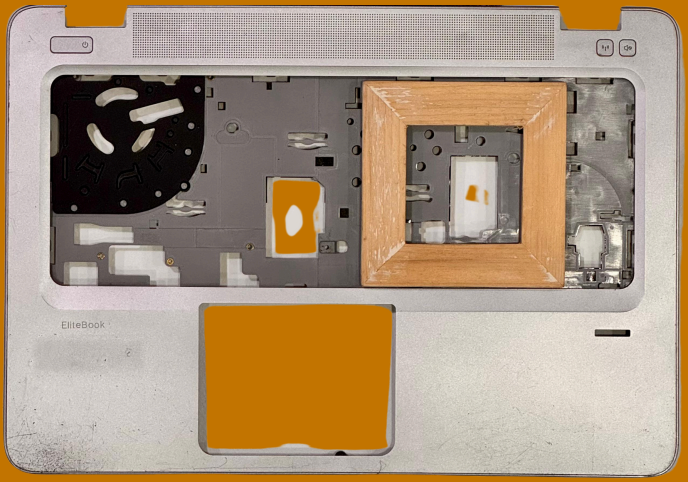


Our visit here was part of a larger circular economy project under the Digital Empowerment Foundation, aimed at mapping informal e-waste clusters and understanding how marginalised urban communities sustain themselves through precarious, undocumented livelihoods in Seelampur's volatile, informal economy. In essence, places like Seelampur mask the real cost of digital progress, exploiting the informal sector in the shadows of unregulated practices.

Around the workers, fine metallic dust floated in the air, nearly invisible but no less lethal.

These workers are often unaware of the slow, devastating damage caused by long-term exposure to toxic chemicals—lung diseases, skin disorders, chronic pain, and more.





Often stereotyped as the "toxic sink" of East Delhi's Jamna-Paar, the district is portrayed as a slum-ridden ghetto marked by poverty, hazardous livelihoods, and communal tensions—absorbing the digital detritus of global capitalism. However, the area is actually a mosaic of distinct Muslim-majority neighbourhoods—such as Shahdara, Old and New Seelampur, Jafrabad, and Maujpur—each with its own settlement history and labour structures. Along the polluted banks of the Shahdara Drain (formerly the Yamuna Canal), this hidden e-waste economy thrives. Studies estimate around 5,000 unregistered e-waste units operate here without official sanction, yet they remain integral to India's waste management system.


The machinery of our digital lives runs through places like Seelampur, where discarded gadgets and forgotten workers power an invisible economy.



> Unorganised workers' Social Security Act (2008) was introduced to extend welfare benefits like health, disability, maternity, and old-age protection to informal sector workers.



While Gali Number Chaar serves as the commercial hub —home to established traders dealing in bulk scrap procured through government auctions— the rest of the market sprawls across a labyrinth of interconnected lanes, each specializing in specific components like plastics, circuit boards, and copper wire. The e-waste market has flourished here precisely because such informal, marginalized spaces enable hazardous, illicit economies to thrive beyond regulatory oversight.


This is Gali No. Chaar (4) - India's oldest and busiest informal e-waste lane -
where the sound of hammers, scraping tools and shouting voices forms a relentless soundtrack.
दिल्ली नगर निगम
हाजी समीर अहमद मन्सूरी
(निगम पार्षद)
शास्त्री पार्क, वार्ड नं. 213
गली नं. 4

Despite the presence of 178 registered recyclers nationwide, the informal sector still processes 95% of the country's e-waste. Even formal recyclers have found discreet ways to circumvent regulations. Scrap dealers funnel 38% of the e-waste into informal yards, while producers, manufacturers, and showrooms contribute another 28%, often by illegally diverting waste to unauthorised processors.



As a young worker puts it while stripping a circuit board Clean,

"your phones, your laptops, your air conditioners – they don't disappear into thin air. It's places like this that swallow them. And no one outside Seelampur can do it like we do."





> “Women working in e-waste economies are constantly exposed to burning PVC, metallic dust, and chemical residues, making healthcare a rare and unaffordable luxury

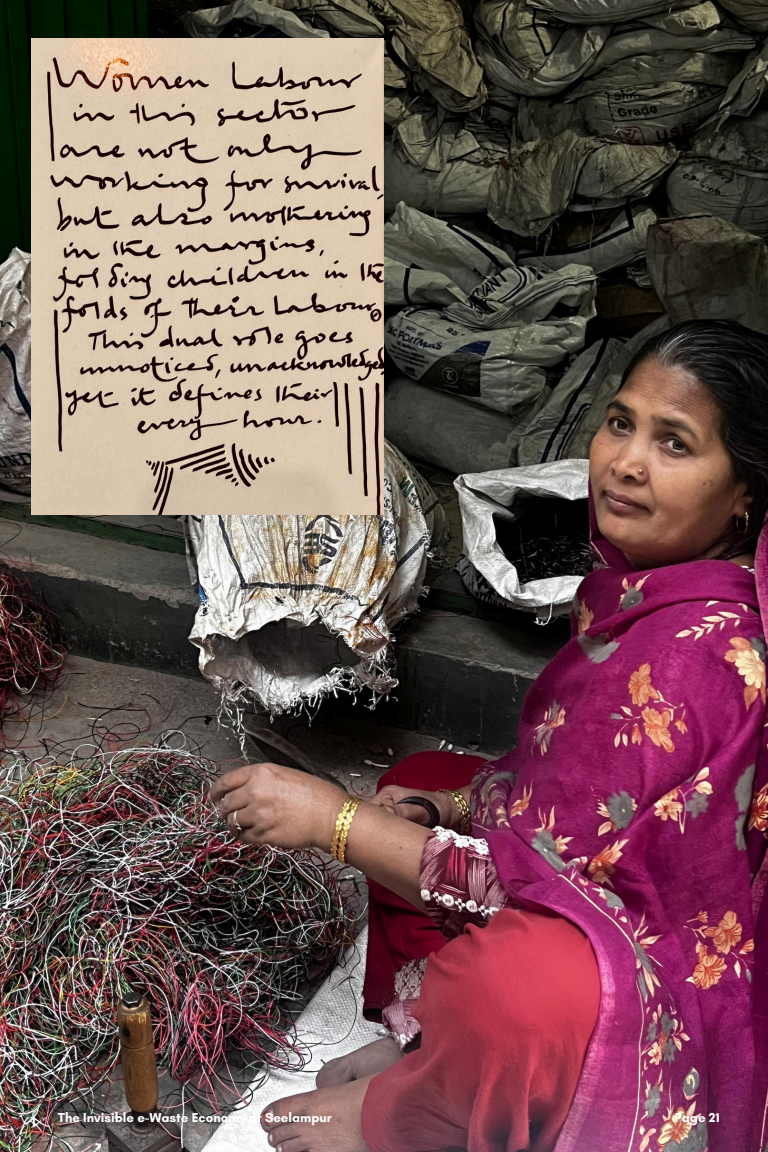
Shops are therefore, mostly makeshift, dimly lit, packed wall-to-wall with discarded electronics. The methods—open burning, acid leaching, and manual separation—are outdated and perilous, with no provisions for occupational safety, no protections against toxic exposure, and no mechanisms for social security. There are no gloves, no masks, no ventilation.





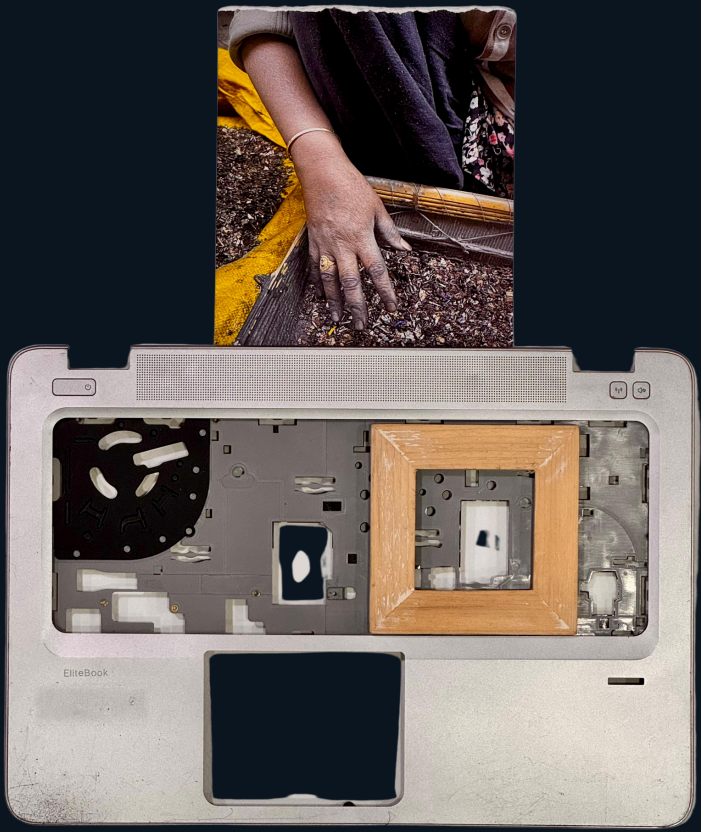
The workshops blur the boundaries between work, domesticity, compelling women to juggle different worlds of care, sociality, reproduction, household chores, and child-rearing while stripping wires in between in rooms thick with metallic dust. One woman, her face and hands smudged with soot, a toddler perched on her lap, sat near a furnace sorting wires. “When they were infants, we brought them here. Now they stay home, looking after each other,” said Yasmeen weaily. The absence of any creche facility leaves these women with no choice but to either leave their children at home unsupervised or bring them along into unsafe work environments.

Women Labour in this sector are not only working for survival, but also mothering in the margins, holding children in the folds of their labour. This dual role goes unnoticed, unacknowledged, yet it defines their every hour.

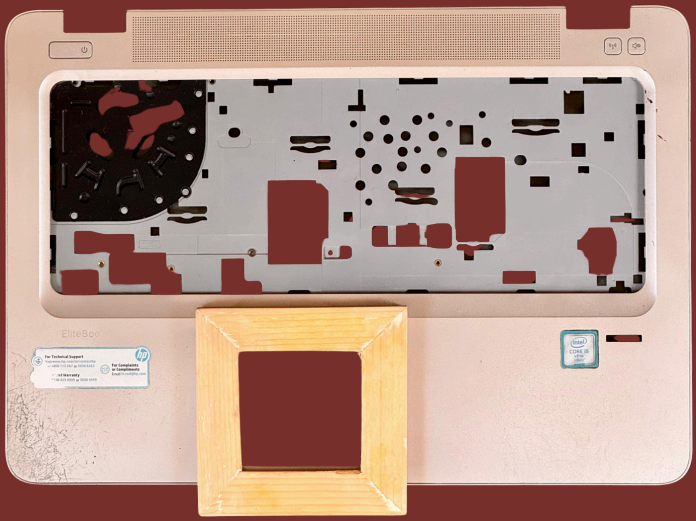




> The Rashtriya Swasthya Bima yojana (RSBy) offers ₹30,000 annual health insurance for Below Poverty Line (BPL) families.


EliteBook

Despite the relentless cycle of risk, labor, and survival that defines daily life in Seelampur, this reality is largely absent from government reports and corporate social responsibility recycling initiatives. Yet, the machinery of our digital world depends on places like Seelampur, where discarded electronics and overlooked workers sustain an invisible economy. Until we address the systems that shift the burden of waste onto marginalized communities, no policy will truly erase the toxic legacy we leave behind.



Until we confront the system that makes waste someone else's burden, no policy will clean up the toxic trails we leave behind.



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This book is a testament under the Art and Collective for Digital Empowerment program, and an amalgamation of real-life upcycled installations made out of e-waste, photographic documentation of labour on e-waste and a documentation of Seelampur's e-waste. To match the lifecycle of technology, the calligraphic style was adopted to highlight the empirical fieldwork conducted in Seelampur as part of a larger research project by the Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF, India) on the theme of the Circular Economy. Read more publications by scanning the QR Code.

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