

# Recommendations to improve women's participation and experience in plastic and e-waste management

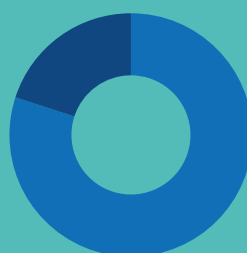
Women form the backbone of many waste management systems globally as they play key roles in waste collection, sorting and processing. Despite their substantial involvement in these sectors, they are often marginalized into high-labour, low-paying jobs with little opportunity for growth and progress. This is especially true for informal systems (which exist outside of regulatory frameworks) where women form the bottom of the job-profile hierarchy.



Increasing interest in formalizing waste systems has highlighted the need to safeguard the workforce, yet there has been little effort undertaken to understand these gendered experiences of waste workers. To effectively improve the conditions surrounding vulnerable waste workers, it is necessary to look closer at the gender dimension, and action multi-level interventions that can lead to holistic and long-term empowerment of women. It is important to remember that there is no one actor or one level that can single-handedly bring a transformative change in a sector that has been set in its ways for decades (if not longer). In this context it is important to start with what is needed and map the same to who can provide it.

## Why should waste management systems focus on empowering women who work in the sector?

- Women occupy the lowest tier of the job hierarchy in the informal sector.
- Due to the purely market-driven nature of the informal waste management system, they are not compensated for their time or efforts.
- They face discrimination, harassment, exposure to toxic materials while working long hours for little pay.
- Evidence indicates that women who work in waste management might be doing so as a 'last resort' due to lack of skills and work opportunities – this might include single mothers, widows etc.
- Research shows that women are more likely to be adversely exposed to certain plastic and e-waste components.



■ Formal  
■ Informal

**Globally, around 24 million people worked in waste management and recycling related activities.**

**Nearly 80% of which were in the informal sector.**

\*WIEGO, 2013

# Empowering women through multi-level interventions

## A. Policy level interventions

Globally, waste management policies are often gender-blind<sup>1</sup> and unaware of the ground-level experiences related to the sector. Such policies need to intentionally preserve the interests of vulnerable and marginalized informal workers in the sector. In this context, such policies should:

- Enshrine non-discrimination, social inclusion and gender equality in its vision and mission statement.
- Wherever possible, prioritize formalization of the informal sector rather than creating a separate waste processing system. This would include registration of workers with the municipality, creating formal contracts and payment channels, securing minimum wage for all registered workers, employee benefits such as paid leave, health insurance etc.
- Create provisions for investment into protection of informal sector jobs following the implementation of waste management policies. This includes funding transition of informal workers into the 'formal' sector and providing a 'displacement' fund to compensate the workers that will be displaced by the formal sector.
- Encourage skilling and capacity building of informal workers on technical and non-technical topics to ensure that they have adequate opportunity to explore entrepreneurship.

- Encourage formation of worker groups and unions to ensure opportunity for collective negotiations.

To effectively address the gender-specific discrimination and marginalization faced by women in informal sector, the following provisions should be considered:

- Bringing women to the forefront of waste management should be encouraged through participatory program design, strategizing and implementation. This should not only include academic and sectoral leaders, but also worker unions and individual waste collectors.
- Gender-based budgeting should be introduced at all levels of governance to track effective disbursement for funding earmarked for women's development.
- Targeted awareness raising should be pursued which promotes the participation of women in waste management workforce and particularly shows stories of leadership and success.
- Policies should also recommend supportive fiscal incentives for women-led businesses, such as low-interest loans.
- Gender-disaggregated data collection should be encouraged, and the sectoral key performance indicators<sup>2</sup> outlined in policy (or any support document) should be adequately gender-disaggregated, wherever relevant.

<sup>1</sup> [UNEP-IETC and GRID-Arendal \(2019\)](#)

<sup>2</sup> KPIs or Key Performance Indicators are calculated monitoring criteria that can help measure the impact of projects or programs. In this context, a relevant KPI for the plastic or e-waste management sector could be, for example, number of businesses or enterprises that were provided some form of financial support (subsidy, low-interest loan, longer pay-back terms, etc.). An important gender-disaggregated sub-criteria would be the number of women-led businesses or enterprises that were provided the financial support.

## Interventions at different levels

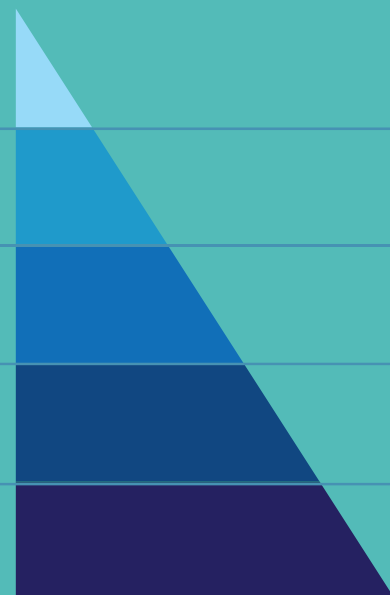
Policy level interventions: setting the ambitions and the gender-integrated agenda

Sector/program level interventions: actioning change through intentional efforts

Collective/position/organizational level interventions - SHG/CSO/ESO/NGO support, networking, mentorship, collective bargaining

Company/enterprise level - supportive corporate policies, adequate on-site infrastructure, gender-conscious HR policies, non-discriminatory workplace, equal opportunity to excel

Individual level interventions - capacity building & skilling, financing, access to infrastructure, social security (health insurance, paid leave, etc)



## B. Sectoral or programmatic level interventions

- Much like the policy recommendations outlined above, program design needs to be intentional, non-tokenistic and action oriented. This can be achieved by looking at gender as an integral aspect of end-to-end program execution, starting with design all the way to delivery. Key aspects such as gender-based budgeting, diverse and empathetic leadership, funding gender-oriented actions, gender-disaggregated data collection and monitoring should also be considered at the program level.
- In particular, the definition of the problem at the sectoral or programmatic level should be informed by voices from the ground, especially from the most vulnerable communities that participate in waste management and/or are directly impacted (for example communities situated near dumpsites).
- Program design should include coordination and collaboration with worker unions/collectives, Non-Government Organizations (NGOs), Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and Self Help Groups (SHGs) and other socially relevant groups/individuals to ensure that the program is informed by (and supportive of) real experiences and perspectives.
- Supporting women's empowerment means providing the right tools that meet the key requirements of individual workers. Programs should thus mobilize funds specifically to support skilling and capacity building, provide mentorship and guidance, and help women access critical resources such as financial support (such as loans, schemes etc.), real estate, networks and connections etc.

## C. Collective level interventions

- At the workforce level, waste workers in general (and women in particular) should be provided the tools necessary to mobilize as a collective and demand action and intervention in their interests. This is especially critical in contexts wherein the transition from informal to formal waste management systems is in progress.
- Networking with key stakeholders such as downstream buyers, municipality, government agencies, development organizations, local leaders etc. is crucial for ensuring visibility and protection of worker rights. Ensuring such connections and inroads are made would be an important contribution towards worker empowerment.

- Existing support systems should be leveraged and strengthened wherever possible. This includes NGOs, CSOs, SHGs, sectoral associations, labour unions etc. These support systems can provide guidance and mentorship through their experience and entrenchment in the local system. It would benefit informal workers to be aligned to groups that share similar aims and vision, through cross-pollination of ideas and greater collective bargaining power.

## D. Company/enterprise level interventions

**Individual companies and enterprises – whether formal or informal – are direct points of employment for women in the e-waste or plastic waste sectors. It is thus crucial that a 'bare minimum' access to infrastructure and resources is maintained at these places. Some key recommendations for interventions include:**

- Supportive policies or systems which can provide a competitive living wage to employees and/or waste pickers selling material.
- Non-discriminatory practices that allow for equal opportunity participation not only across genders, but also across religion, socio-cultural background, education, family status etc. Employees irrespective of their background or identity should have the opportunity to excel and advance in the company.
- Access to basic on-site facilities necessary to successfully educate a full-time job – this includes gender-disaggregated toilets, space to eat meals, access to transportation etc. If possible, childcare facilities should also be provided.
- Adequate occupational health and safety practices should be implemented, including periodic trainings and drills, proper signage especially regarding handling and storing of hazardous items (particularly important when melting, grinding, burning, and other pollutant-releasing practices are undertaken), appropriate safety gear etc.

## E. Individual level interventions

**Every individual worker in the waste management space should be able to access the following:**

- A minimum living wage that goes beyond material value or individual efficiency, to consider the time and efforts applied by individuals.
- Access to employee welfare policies such as health insurance, paid leaves, accident compensation etc.

These should be provided by the employer (in case the worker is aligned to, say, a recycling company) or the municipality.

- Access to schemes such as low-interest loans, investment/savings opportunities etc. that can be leveraged by the worker to secure their (and their family's) future.
- Access to unions, cooperatives, associations to empower collective bargaining.
- Job security in the form of redundancy compensation or vertical/horizontal skilling etc.
- Awareness raising programs which challenge gendered notions of workforce participation

in the sector and encourage equal pay as well as entrepreneurship (particularly in the case of women).

- Technical and non-technical skilling and capacity building opportunities that cover key aspects of the sector (such as dismantling in case of e-waste or sorting/recycling in case of plastics), as well as other important skills such as financial literacy, digital literacy etc.
- Access to adequate personal protective equipment while working.

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