

## Waste disposal & equality between women and men

### How is equality between women and men relevant to waste disposal systems?

The management and recycling of solid waste and sewage is a growing problem in most urban areas because of concerns related to both public health and environmental damage.

The effectiveness of waste disposal initiatives can be improved through the incorporation of an understanding of gender differences and inequalities. Waste disposal projects can also provide support to women (especially if they are responsible for waste disposal) and ease their overall work burden through improved family health. Waste disposal initiatives can also contribute to gender equality through offering opportunities for women's increased employment.

Gender differences and inequalities can affect various aspects of waste disposal:

- **Household responsibilities relating to waste and waste disposal.** Given women's primary responsibility for cleaning, food preparation, family health, laundry, and domestic maintenance, women and men may view domestic waste and its disposal differently. They may have different definitions of what is waste or garbage. They may also manage waste differently and put different priorities on its disposal.
- **Household resources and waste disposal.** Women do not always have equal input into the allocation of family finances. For example, although a woman might be willing to spend scarce household resources on waste disposal, her spouse may not agree. As well, women's heavier workloads mean that they often have less available time. Thus men and women can assign different values to time spent on waste disposal. For example, men may think that one central disposal point is sufficient, while women may prefer a greater number of smaller, yet more accessible disposal sites.
- **Views and priorities related to waste disposal.** Given different responsibilities and resources, women and men may set different public health priorities and have different environmental standards. For example, in one community where undrained storm water caused problems, the neighbourhood committee was given a choice between two

types of drainage systems: a sophisticated one that would take three years to become operational or a simple one that could be operational before the next rainy season. The committee chose the sophisticated one while the women, consulted separately, would have preferred the simple system which would have solved their problems immediately\*.

- **Participation in community decision-making about waste disposal.** Despite women's relatively high involvement at the local level, men are more likely to have access to institutions that set priorities and make decisions regarding municipal infrastructure. Community consultations processes often fail to take gender inequalities into consideration and thus neglect women's preferences. Unless explicit measures are taken to ensure women's participation, their priorities, responsibilities and needs will not be heard.
- **Employment opportunities in waste disposal or sewage treatment.** In some urban centres, solid waste management has evolved into an organized system of collection, trade and recycling. There is often a marked division of labour in these various tasks between women and men (see the example on the overleaf). With a consideration of the specific barriers faced by women, waste disposal initiatives could offer improved employment possibilities for women.

These broad issues need to be explored in each situation. In addition to gender differences, other factors such as age, class, race, or religion will influence people's responses to waste and their ability to participate in initiatives. For example, daughters may view waste recycling differently than sons (given their responsibilities for different household tasks). A woman from a wealthy household may be able to pay for a private sewage treatment system that is not an option for a poorer woman. Participatory approaches can assist in both the understanding of gender equality dynamics and the design of gender-sensitive interventions.

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\* Muller & Schienberg (1997). *Gender and Urban Waste Management*. Paper presented at the Gender, Technology and Development Conference, organized by TOOL/ TOOLCONSULT, Amsterdam.

EXAMPLES OF GENDER EQUALITY ISSUES IN WASTE DISPOSAL	
Waste collection and recycling	<p>How (and even if) households participate in recycling and collection programmes is influenced by the gender division of labour, responsibilities and resources. Therefore an understanding of these gender equality issues can contribute to programme effectiveness.</p> <p>Women and men have different opportunities to work in small and medium recycling enterprises -- given differential access to such factors as credit, training, and time. Initiatives should address the specific barriers faced by women.</p>
Environmental communication and education programmes	<p>Environmental messages are more effective if they are tailored to relevant target audiences (male/female). For example, if women are responsible for the disposal of organic waste, they should be the explicit target of these messages and special communications plans may be needed to reach them.</p>
Capacity of local authorities involved in sewage and waste disposal	<p>Improved capacity of local authorities to apply a gender analysis in waste disposal will improve programme compliance and participation and help to ensure that women's needs are met.</p> <p>Consultative processes and participatory planning mechanisms require an explicit consideration of both women's and men's ability to participate. Women face obstacles relating to the time and place of a meeting or the process of the consultation itself.</p>
Employment in sewage systems	<p>Specific measure may be required to ensure that women can secure employment or benefit from training.</p>

GENDER DIFFERENCES AND INEQUALITIES IN WASTE DISPOSAL	
<p><b>Gender Division of Labour in Waste Collection and Recycling</b></p> <p>One study found a well-organized system of collection, trade and recycling waste in Hochiminh City marked by a definite gender division of labour. This system included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Door-to-door itinerant buyers (entirely women) who buy solid waste products from households;</li> <li>▪ a range of small, medium and big shopkeepers (men) who purchase waste from the buyers;</li> <li>▪ middlemen who link the shopkeepers with the recyclers; and</li> <li>▪ the recycling or production units run by men that transform products for sale to consumers.</li> </ul> <p>This division of labour has implications for both women's opportunities to participate in the sector and for officials seeking ways to improve the system.</p> <p><b>Source:</b> R. Mehra (et al.) (1996). "Women in Waste Collection and Recycling in Hochiminh City"  <b>Population and Environment: A Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies.</b> 18(2) November.</p>	<p><b>Gender Differences: Attitudes, Knowledge and Practices</b></p> <p>In Machala, Ecuador a study examined attitudes, knowledge and practices of urban households relating to solid waste disposal. Issues explored included the relative importance of solid waste (in relation to community problems), cost recovery issues, and potential ways to reach target audiences. Examples of gender-related findings included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Most respondents reported that the male in the couple contributed the most to household bills in general, and the last electric bill specifically. Consequently, men pay more for the waste collection service, when it is funded through a surcharge on the electric bill. However, the proportion of women who paid the electric bill was higher in middle class neighbourhoods (13%) than in lower-class ones(6%)</li> <li>▪ In the most households (88%), women were responsible for separating waste.</li> <li>▪ Men and women generally had different perceptions about how frequently waste is disposed of, about the distance that must be travelled to dispose of waste, and about the time spent disposing of waste. Waste disposal is considered to be more time consuming by men than by women.</li> <li>▪ Men, more often than women, cited the regularity and low cost of the pilot system as reasons for their satisfaction with the service.</li> <li>▪ More women than men believed that a municipal waste collection system was more effective, trustworthy, but at the same time, more expensive, than a private system. More men than women preferred a private garbage collection system.</li> </ul> <p>All of these differences have implications for the design and implementation of waste disposal programmes: who to target, who to involve and who to listen to regarding preferences.</p> <p><b>Source:</b> M. Grieser &amp; B. Rawlins (1996). <i>Issues in Urban and Rural Environments: GreenCOM Gender Reports.</i> Washington</p>