

Recognising gender issues in the management of urban waste

Gender division of labour

The gender division of labour includes:

- Reproduction, including procreation, social reproduction and consumption in the household or family.
- Production being paid work and income-generating activities inside or outside the household or family.
- Social organisation and collective action outside the household or family.

It is important to recognise that gender relations are context-specific, that is, they have varied across different historical periods and differ from one cultural context to another. Gender relations can and do change over time, although they are resistant to change.

What do we mean by gender issues?

Men and women have different physical characteristics and attributes on the basis of their *biological sex*. *Gender* refers not to their physical biology, but rather to the different socially ascribed responsibilities of women and men, and the social relations between them. Significantly, the *gender division of labour (GDL)* refers to the different tasks conventionally performed by women and by men, and the value accorded these tasks. For example, in many societies, unpaid housework is not valued as highly as paid work outside the home.



How do gender issues relate to solid waste management?

Although there are variations from one context to another, the following generalisations can be made about gender responsibilities in relation to solid waste management.

Reproduction

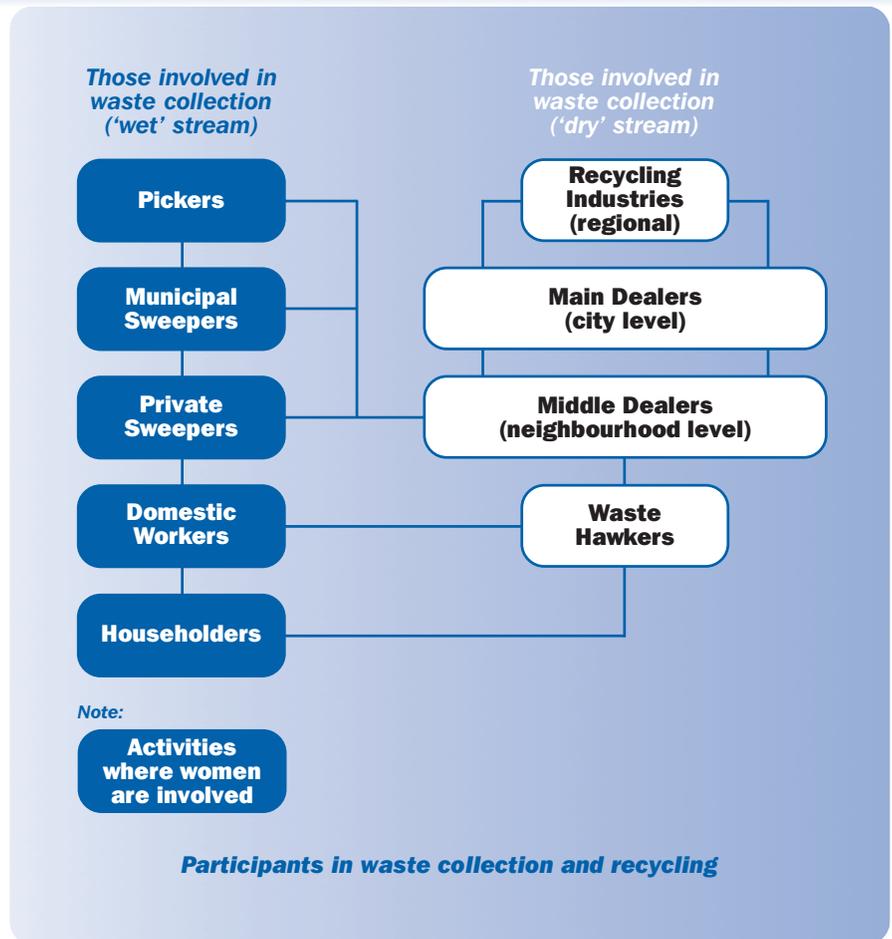
Women generally play a much more important part than do men in the area of *reproduction* in the following ways:

- As those performing and managing *housework*, including the disposal of waste.
- As the household members who order or buy many items for the family and home, they are important as *consumers* and, as such, contribute to the type of waste generated.
- As *educators*, women are key in the socialisation of children and in inculcating habits and values.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that despite the importance of women in the area of reproduction in the gender division of labour, they are often not the final decision-makers.

Production

In terms of productive activities or *paid work*, both men and women derive livelihoods from waste. In many countries, both women and men are sweepers, domestic workers and waste pickers. As with other areas of the informal economy, it is less common to find women in the recycling trade or industry, except as workers. Women are also less likely to be found in supervisory or managerial posts within municipalities and private waste collection firms. Moreover, the evidence suggests that in the context of competition for declining secure or permanent jobs in waste collection, women lose out to men.



Gender and work with child waste pickers in Bangalore, India

Many NGOs in Bangalore work with street children, the vast majority of whom are waste pickers or have relied on waste picking at some stage in their short lives. A number of these NGOs have tried assistance strategies such as providing night shelters for such children, as well as alternative vocational training schemes. In both cases, it has proved difficult to accommodate girl children. In the case of night shelters, these become seen as dens of prostitution if girls are admitted and residents in areas proximate to the shelters lodge objections with the authorities. In the case of vocational training schemes, it is difficult to find employment for girls who have been involved in waste picking, again because they are seen as 'loose women'.

Strategies employed by female waste pickers themselves involve working in a family or kinship group, often including an older woman or women. This provides all the members of the group with some measure of protection. One NGO has recognised this and, in order to reach girls as well as boys, has closed its night shelter in favour of working with family networks.

Another NGO trains waste picking girls as domestic workers and finds them placements in service as an alternative to working on the streets. The problems encountered are considerable. They include exploitation of the girls by their employers and problems of finding safe accommodation for young single girls outside of a conventional family context. This is perhaps why the NGO in question is one of the few targeting girl children of the streets.

Social organisation and collective action

Depending on the context, women are often more likely than men to become involved in social organisation and collective action at the neighbourhood level because the smooth operation of local level services is important to them and the ease with which they can carry out their household tasks. Thus, women are likely to be interested in community-based initiatives around SWM. However, context-specific gender relations play a role here. For example, in some urban centres in Asia, it is difficult for women to become involved in social organisation outside the home because of the practice of seclusion of women, and it is men who take the lead on the struggle for urban services. Moreover, gender relations intersect with other social relations, such as class and caste. For example, there is evidence that there is a general reluctance on the part of many South Asian women to engage with waste workers who are believed to be ritually impure in the context of the caste system.



Two reasons why an understanding of gender relations is important for SWM

Effectiveness and efficiency

Recognising the gender division of labour can make the management of solid waste more effective and efficient because interventions and innovations are correctly targeted if the gender division of labour in a particular context is taken into account. However, it should be noted that when women are involved for efficiency reasons, this has the potential for increasing their responsibilities and workload, and this needs to be guarded against.

Example One: Where women are primarily responsible for doing or managing household work and for the socialisation of children in a family, it is most effective to target environmental education associated with waste management at women rather than men.

Example Two: Where women are involved in community management, it is efficient to involve them in innovations to community-based waste collection. Where women are socially secluded or are only marginally involved in community-level activities or social organisation, it is more effective to involve men in the management of self-help initiatives around community waste management.

Empowerment and equity

Recognising gender and other social relations can make possible the addressing of social goals alongside improved service delivery.

Example One: If women are not conventionally involved in social organisation or collective action outside the home, encouraging their participation in the activities and decision-making associated with the struggle for improved waste collection services can serve *empowerment* objectives, as well as the goal of effective service delivery.



Example Two: Changes to waste collection through mechanisation, privatisation or downsizing of the labour force impact on women sweepers differently from men. Recognising this allows us to promote gender *equity* by addressing the interests of both women and men workers, thus discounting against women being marginalised in the process of competition over declining jobs.

Lessons learned

There are three key lessons to be learned from the experiences gained from recognising gender issues in solid waste management:

- Gender analysis needs to be undertaken to ensure that the context-specific gender relations and related social relations are understood and taken into account.
- Targeting of strategies for improved SWM needs to recognise the gender division of labour and either respect it or recognise that challenging it requires special expertise and effort.
- Gender-sensitive impact assessment needs to accompany changes to solid waste management in terms of household members, community-based organisations and waste workers themselves.

This note presents the synthesis of a knowledge review on 'Gender Issues in the Management of Urban Waste'. The research project aims to build capacities of government and non-government organisations in primary collection of solid waste. This note is written for organisations and individuals who in one way or another support the development of primary collection systems in low-income countries.

References / Further reading

Beall J. (1997a), 'Households, Livelihoods and the Urban Environment: Social Development Perspectives on Solid Waste Management in Faisalabad, Pakistan', PhD thesis, London School of Economics and Political Science.

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Sponsored by the Department for International Development (DFID), UK

This document is an output from a project funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID). The views expressed are not necessarily those of DFID.

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- The role of micro-enterprise in solid waste management
- Vehicles for primary collection of solid waste
- The role of community-based organisations (CBOs) in solid waste management
- Recognising livelihoods from urban waste

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