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WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT AND EQUALITY IN SOLID WASTE MANAGEMENT AND RECYCLING

Global Landscape

BACKGROUND

The economic and environmental dangers of ocean plastic pollution (see box 1) require immediate global interventions that address mismanaged plastic waste at its source: on land.[6] Most ocean plastic pollution comes from developing countries—notably coastal countries with rapidly urbanizing populations—which tend to have weak solid waste management systems and lack formal recycling. While growing awareness of waste's economic value and the benefits of resource efficiency[7] has led to increased municipal and private investment in solid waste management (SWM) and recycling, **the informal sector, where women are present in the greatest numbers, continues to fill critical gaps in urban service delivery.**

Box 1: Snapshot of Ocean Plastics

- Eight million tons of plastic enter the ocean every year,[1] 80 percent of which comes from land-based sources,[2] in part because only 10 percent of the world's plastic is recycled.[3]
- Global plastic production is expected to increase from approximately 250 million metric tons in 2015 to 380 million metric tons by 2025.[4]
- If production rates and waste management systems remain unchanged, the world's oceans will contain nearly 250 million metric tons of plastic by 2025 and more plastic than fish (by weight) by the year 2050.[5]

[1] Jambeck, J. *et al*., (2015).
[2] McKinsey & Company and Ocean Conservancy, (2015).
[3] Baker, J., (2018).
[4] McKinsey & Company and Ocean Conservancy, (2015).
[5] *Ibid.*
[6] *Ibid.*
[7] Refers to sustainable and efficient use of resources, including through waste minimization.

Women and the challenges they face in SWM and recycling lack visibility, largely due to the chronic **absence of both sector-wide and sex-disaggregated data**. The lack of a uniform occupational coding that distinguishes individuals working in various positions in waste and recycling as a distinct labor category exacerbates this problem.[8] This absence of data undermines the ability of governments, donors, and other stakeholders to measure women's contributions to waste management and recycling, track development outcomes, and benchmark change. Though the visibility of women's involvement is limited, and data is lacking, women work formally and informally in the sector as recyclers, waste pickers, sorters, intermediaries, business owners, and employees of municipal waste service providers.

Through its efforts to reduce marine plastics pollution and support women's economic empowerment and equality (WE3) (see box 2), the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) is committed to enhancing women's roles in SWM and recycling. To better understand the context, opportunities, challenges, and innovative ways to integrate, address, and strengthen WE3 in SWM and recycling, Banyan Global[9] conducted a WE3 gender analysis of the sector based on stakeholder interviews across 15 countries and a literature review of more than 200 sources. The geographic scope of the analysis was global, with an additional focus on the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Peru. The findings and recommendations presented herein are based on this analysis.

Box 2: Recent developments in ocean plastic pollution and WE3

The passing of the Save Our Seas Act and the Women's Entrepreneurship and Economic Empowerment Act in 2018, along with the recent launch of the Women's Global Development and Prosperity initiative by the White House, places USAID in a position to drive the global donor agenda around the importance of WE3 in SWM and recycling.

FINDINGS

Despite women's significant and active roles in informal SWM and recycling sector, there are indications that **meaningful gender integration in the sector has been negligible**. A global desk review[10] revealed that only 17 percent of SWM and recycling documents included gender in a substantive way. Too often, experts, governments, donors, and other stakeholders (see figure 1) lack an understanding of the gender dimensions of the sector and, therefore, do not have specialized expertise and appropriate approaches to address this issue.

Women worldwide face common structural barriers that impede their full economic participation in the traditionally male-dominated SWM and recycling sector. These barriers are pervasive in the formal sector, where women work as recyclers, intermediaries, business owners, and employees

[8] For example, at the International Labour Organization, the mining industry occupation coding covers a full range of positions including supervisors, managers, professionals, technicians, plant operators, and laborers. Yet solid waste management and recycling sector workers are only referred to as refuse workers, garbage and recycling collectors, refuse sorters, sweepers, and related laborers. For further information, see https://www.ilo.org/public/english/bureau/stat/isco/docs/resol08.pdf.

[9] Aidis, R. and D. Khaled. Banyan Global (2019), Women's economic empowerment and equality (WE3) gender analysis of the waste management and recycling sector (forthcoming), USAID. Women's Economic Empowerment and Equality Technical Assistance Task Order under the Advancing the Agenda of Gender Equality (ADVANTAGE) indefinite delivery, indefinite quantity (IDIQ) contract.

[10] Seventeen percent of mainstream SWM and recycling sector related documents did not mention gender in their title or subtitle. Source: Aidis, R. and Khaled, D. (2019).

of municipal waste service providers. Yet they are even more pronounced in the informal sector, where women work primarily as recyclers, waste pickers, and sorters. In both sectors, prevailing social norms and expectations limit women's ability to move into decision-making and leadership positions. Moreover, they inhibit access to finance, with which women could purchase equipment and start and grow recycling businesses.[11]

Harassment and violence threaten not only women's safety but also their ability to advance into decision-making and leadership positions. Waste management companies in the formal sector, for example, typically lack sexual harassment policies, and national legislation often does not address sexual harassment in public spaces or businesses.[12] Though sexual harassment exists in every occupation and industry, it is more prevalent in male-dominated sectors.[13] Over time, sexual harassment can negatively impact women's workplace opportunities and career decisions, resulting in significant and often overlooked financial consequences.[14] Many women take pay cuts and make sacrifices that harm their careers to escape sexual harassment in the workplace.[15] In the informal sector, women are especially vulnerable to abuse, including sexual exploitation, which goes unchecked without legal enforcement mechanisms.

Figure 1. SWM and Recycling Stakeholders

PROGRAM LEVEL RECOMMENDATIONS

The challenges facing the SWM and recycling sector globally require gender-diverse teams to develop new approaches that advance WE3 and increase commitment to sustainable, environmentally friendly solutions. A study analyzing the gender diversity of research and development teams found that companies with more women were more likely to introduce radical new innovations into the market.[16] Another study of more than 1,500 global corporations revealed that the more gender-balanced an executive team, the more likely the company is to invest in renewable power, low-carbon products, and energy efficiency.[17] The following recommendations are based on the findings of the WE3 gender analysis.

- **Change perceptions of SWM and recycling as masculine work**. Programs should engender the SWM and recycling sector by supporting awareness-raising and capacity-building interventions for recycling value-chain stakeholders as well as academic and technical

[11] Conveyed during a key informant interview.
[12] Women Business and the Law Database (2018).
[13] Mclaughlin, H. et al. (2017).
[14] National Partnership for Women & Families (2019).
[15] Mclaughlin, H. et al. (2017).
[16] Based on a study of 4,277 companies in Spain over a two-year period (Rock and Grant, 2016).
[17] McElhaney, K. and S. Mobasseri (2012)

institutions. Interventions may include improving human-resource practices to attract, promote, and retain women in SWM and recycling employment as well as incorporating social- and behavior-change communications.

- **Include women in planning at all levels.** Improvement of the sector requires women's active participation at all levels within organizations, as well as their engagement in project planning and evaluation activities.

- **Strengthen women's leadership and organizations** within the sector. Interventions should identify and work with existing women's organizations and enterprises to build their organizational, leadership, and business-management skills.

- **Strengthen awareness of gender-based violence, prevention, and reporting** throughout the value chain, drawing on best practices and gendered approaches USAID has developed for other sectors.

- **Increase access to credit, professional training, and market information** for female waste pickers, recyclers, and women entrepreneurs in the formal and informal sectors.

- **Improve gender equity in access to recyclables** for informal male and female waste pickers and collectors. Interventions should ensure fair access to waste for all groups based on locations and collection patterns.

AGENCY LEVEL RECOMMENDATIONS

The success of women's economic empowerment in the male-dominated SWM and recycling sector will require USAID and other stakeholders to take a long-term view. Sustainable change necessitates building partnerships with the public and private sectors to create the conditions that support equal treatment. Just as important is building internal and stakeholder capacity to support new ways of increasing women's access to leadership roles, assets, income, finance, and markets in the sector. The following recommendations are based on the WE3 gender analysis findings.

- **Strengthen expertise and understanding of the gender dimensions of SWM and recycling** within USAID. Provide specialized training in engendering male-dominated sectors as they relate to solid waste management and recycling to relevant USAID Washington and mission staff, implementing partners, and other stakeholders.

- **Address the need for sex-disaggregated and gendered data** by building capacity and support for missions to initiate gendered data collection for USAID-funded projects in the sector.

- **Build awareness of the gender dimensions of waste at the global level.** The recent passing of the Save Our Seas and the Women's Entrepreneurship and Economic Empowerment Acts of 2018, along with White House's launch of the Women's Global Development and Prosperity initiative, places USAID in a position to convene and drive an agenda in the international donor community around the importance of WE3 in SWM and recycling.

- **Strengthen partnerships with nongovernmental organizations, donors, government, and the private sector** (such as the food industry, recycling companies, retailers, hospitality companies, and impact investors) to leverage knowledge and resources and to scale effective solutions.

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