



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

Latin America and the Caribbean Landscape

BACKGROUND

Countries in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) have some of the fastest-growing cities in the world – with accompanying rapidly increasing rates of waste generation. Poor waste management systems coupled with expansive coastlines and extensive internal waterways that carry unmanaged waste to the ocean pose a grave threat to surrounding marine environments and related tourism (see box 1). In Peru, for example, the per capita generation of waste at the local level has increased by 40 percent over the last 10 year.¹ This increase in production is problematic given the region’s incipient solid waste management (SWM) and recycling systems and limited public awareness of the importance of recycling and proper waste disposal.

Box 1: Snapshot Dominican Republic

Though plastics are estimated to comprise less than 10 percent of the total waste stream, an equivalent of 10,000 tons of plastic still is used in the Dominican Republic each year, of which only 24 percent is recycled. The remaining roughly 7,600 tons of plastics are sent to dumps or end up in the ocean. The government is paying more attention to the importance of recycling and the reduction of plastic pollution in the oceans, incentivized by the threat to its tourist economy. The intractable fact remains, however, that the business ecosystem for recycling is nascent, and there is not enough trade to make it profitable.

Source: Diario Libre. (2014).

At the national level within LAC, a growing awareness exists about the benefits of resource efficiency² and the importance of solid waste management and recycling, especially in relation to ocean plastics

¹ United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) (2016).

² Refers to minimizing waste and maximizing resources.

pollution and the threat to LAC's blue economy.³ All 33 LAC ministries of environment committed to combatting ocean plastic pollution and improving recycling efforts.⁴ A 2018 report developed to guide the design of possible policies and programs for SWM and recycling, however, only mentioned women and gender in just one textbox that focused on the informal sector,⁵ exacerbating gaps in knowledge and recognition of women in the sector.

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. To combat ocean plastic pollution and improve recycling efforts in the region, gender-diverse teams are needed to develop new approaches to advance women's economic empowerment and equality (WE3), in both the formal and informal sectors, and increase commitment to sustainable and environmentally friendly solutions.

Through its efforts to reduce ocean plastic pollution and support WE3 (see box 2), the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) is committed to enhancing women's roles in waste management and recycling. To better understand the context, opportunities, challenges, and innovative ways to integrate, address, and strengthen WE3 in SWM and recycling, Banyan Global⁶ 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 solid waste management and recycling.

FINDINGS

An estimated 4 million individuals rely on informal waste picking and collecting as their main source of livelihood in LAC.⁷ Many of these recyclers and waste pickers are women, who often choose informal waste picking as it is the only option available for combining their childcare and household responsibilities with earning an income. In many cases, a lack of legal status also can drive that decision. Though official data is lacking, anecdotal **evidence indicates that women are paid less as waste pickers and have less access to more valuable recyclables, equipment, and vehicles.** Female

³ The blue economy refers to the sustainable use of ocean resources for economic growth and improved livelihoods and jobs, while preserving the health of marine ecosystems. Source: <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/infographic/2017/06/06/blue-economy>

⁴ United Nations Environmental Program. (2018).

⁵ Ibid: Box 4.10 Waste Management and Gender, p. 184

⁶ 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.

⁷ Based on experts from Latin America convened for the 2013 Be Waste Wise Panel: Integrating the Informal Waste Recycling Sector in Latin America, The 2013 Global Dialogue on Waste.

waste pickers also experience greater health risks collecting at dumpsites⁸ and are exposed to greater risk of sexual harassment, violence, and abuse, particularly when gangs are present at urban dumpsites. Gender discrimination, sexual harassment, and exploitation can be exacerbated by intersecting discriminations based on identities such as indigenous status, race, class, disabilities, and marital status. Though women are sometimes members of waste picker associations, it is rare for them to be in leadership roles.

Waste pickers frequently sell their recyclables to intermediaries and in some cases to recycling companies. Men visibly engage at these two levels in the recycling process, but little is known about women's involvement. Inadequate access to vehicles, credit, and networks as well as the threat of gang activity form additional barriers to women's engagement as intermediaries or business owners in recycling.⁹ Similarly, little is known regarding women's involvement at the municipal level in SWM and recycling. **Adherence to traditional gender roles** that impede attracting, hiring, promoting, and retaining women; a male-dominated culture; overt or covert discrimination; and lack of exposure to the benefits of working in the waste management and recycling sector restrict women's ability to contribute fully and equally at all activity and decision-making levels.¹⁰

In some LAC countries, the absence of legislation can increase **women's vulnerability to sexual harassment and exploitation** at work (in the formal and informal sectors). Even when laws exist, weak enforcement combined with prevailing cultural norms and attitudes impede both women's reporting of sexual harassment, abuse, or violence and overall legal effectiveness.

PROGRAM LEVEL RECOMMENDATIONS

The LAC region presents opportunities for new and strengthened engagement for donors, such as USAID, to increase WE3 in the waste management and recycling sector at the formal and informal levels. Fully engaging women in nontraditional SWM and recycling jobs and increasing their participation in decision-making and leadership positions expands the talent pool to tackle current and future issues facing the sector. The following recommendations are based on the findings of the WE3 gender analysis.

- Tailor WE3-related SWM and recycling interventions **to specific country conditions** and the location-specific context of value-chain stakeholders. This approach should include capacity building for women as well as gender sensitization and transformation training for men on “egalitarian and positive expressions of masculinities” that include awareness raising and prevention of sexual harassment and violence against women in the workplace.¹¹
- Build the **leadership skills of and networks among women** within the sector at all levels within the local, national, and regional; identify and work with existing female recyclers, recycler

⁸ Because they are sorting through waste and collecting smaller objects, women tend to spend a longer time at dumpsites, which increases their exposure to toxic waste. Conveyed during a key informant interview.

⁹ Conveyed during a key informant interview.

¹⁰ Conveyed during a key informant interview.

¹¹ For further information, see Engaging Men and Boys in Food and Nutrition Security: The Hidden Half of Gender Equality Programming (2014) <https://www.spring-nutrition.org/events/engaging-men-and-boys-food-and-nutrition-security-hidden-half-gender-equality-programming>.

organizations, labor organizations, and female entrepreneurs, leaders, and organizers in the waste management and recycling sector to build their organizational, leadership, and business management skills.

- Leverage national gender laws to **incorporate gender in evolving SWM and recycling legislation and municipal SWM plans**. Legislative groundwork and precedence for gender equality in the SWM sector is present in several LAC countries, even if budgetary allocations are low and implementation and enforcement lacking.
- **Increase women’s access to capital, equipment, and business support** services to start and grow small- and medium-sized recycling enterprises.
- Encourage the **adoption of non-discriminatory human resource practices** in the formal sector that help organizations attract, promote, and retain female talent and **leverage existing voluntary social responsibility certification programs** (see box 3).
- **Improve the livelihoods and conditions of female waste pickers** in the informal sector. In doing so, incorporate a multifaceted approach; a one-size-fits-all model for informal female waste pickers does not consider their specific conditions and needs.

Box 3: Gender Equality in the Workplace Promoted by Voluntary Certification in LAC

The *Empresa Socialmente Responsable* certificate is a voluntary certification program the *Fundación Hondureña de Responsabilidad Social Empresarial* implemented in Honduras for businesses that promote socially responsible practices and gender equality. To receive the certification, companies must develop a code of ethics that include a sexual harassment policy. Similar programs are offered by *Fundemos* in El Salvador, the *Centro para la Acción de la Responsabilidad Social Empresarial* in Guatemala, and *EcoRed* in the Dominican Republic, all of which are members of the Integrate network.

In 2009, the United Nations Development Programme launched the certification program of gender equality seals. National governments in 10 LAC countries, including Honduras and the Dominican Republic, have implemented the program, and it is currently being developed in El Salvador. Peru developed its own system of certification of equality: *El Sello Empresa Segura, libre de violencia y discriminación hacia la mujer* (The Secure Company Seal, free of violence and discrimination against women) for private sector companies.

Sources: <https://integrarse.org/> and <https://www.mimp.gob.pe/selloempresa/descripcion-sello.html>

MISSION LEVEL RECOMMENDATIONS

Successfully advancing WE3 in the male dominated SWM and recycling sector will require USAID to take a long-term view. Sustainable change necessitates building new partnerships across agencies and with the public and private sectors to create conditions that support equal treatment and new ways of increasing women’s access to leadership roles, assets, income, finance, and markets. The following recommendations are based on the WE3 gender analysis findings.

- **Strengthen expertise and understanding of the gender dimensions** of waste management and recycling within USAID. Provide specialized training in engendering male-

dominated sectors as they relate to SWM and recycling to relevant USAID mission staff, implementing partners, and other stakeholders.

- **Address the need for sex-disaggregated and gendered data** by building capacity and support for implementers to initiate gendered data collection for USAID-funded projects in the sector.
- **Build awareness of the gender dimensions of waste at the national level.** LAC governments are adopting new national plans that focus on developing the SWM and recycling sector and, in some cases, these plans include gender as an important component. It is still unclear, however, to what extent these strategies will be implemented.
- **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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