

Gender equality and preventing plastic pollution

The social and economic prosperity of all people relies on a healthy and functioning biosphere. Plastic pollution and the resulting degradation of marine and coastal ecosystems – and the services they provide – threaten human well-being and human rights.

These impacts are felt disproportionately by socially disadvantaged groups such as women in rural communities and amongst the urban poor, who may be uniquely exposed to environmental threats whilst facing limited access to social protection and the resources to build resilience.

At the same time, women are important agents of change, whose potential to participate in environmental protection may remain untapped.

This SEA circular Issue Brief gives an overview of the links between gender, the environment and marine pollution and discusses measures to empower women and strengthen equality for more inclusive and effective marine litter interventions.

Key gender concepts

- **Equality** is the concept that all human beings are free to develop their personal abilities and make choices without the limitations set by stereotypes, gender roles, or prejudices.
- **Gender equality** means that the rights, responsibilities and opportunities of all individuals irrespective of their sex or gender identity are considered, valued and favoured equally in economic, social and political spheres of society. Dismantling inequality may require targeted support of socially disadvantaged groups to create a level playing field
- **Women empowerment** is often a prerequisite for gender equality.
- **Gender mainstreaming** is the systematic integration of the respective situations, priorities and needs of people of all genders in projects and policies with a view to promoting equality.



How is gender equality affected by marine pollution?

Despite advances in some areas, progress to achieve gender equality in Asia is insufficient to achieve the targets set out by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.¹ Significant differences remain between the rights realised and opportunities available for women and men in terms of employment and income, access to land and resource rights, to higher education, social protection and health services.

Differences in vulnerability to environmental risks are not inherently linked to physiological characteristics such as sex but are a product of inequalities in socio-economic status and income as well as exposure, including discrimination based on gender, social class, ethnicity, age, and (dis)ability.²

Evidence shows that gender equality is critical to achieving human rights and sustainable development from promoting economic growth, reducing poverty and environmental degradation, to improving health and food security.³

Understanding and addressing these inequalities in policies and programmes is not only an essential element of a human-rights based approach (HRBA), it also leads to more targeted, equitable and effective long-term results.

Gender roles and responsibilities, varied economic conditions and access to resources, cultural expectations and differences in knowledge and awareness levels all influence how women and men

use, dispose, and recycle different plastic products and to what extent they are exposed to health hazards and environmental threats.

Firstly, women and men are consumers of plastic products by virtue of gendered consumption patterns. Any analysis of plastic value chains and plastic leakage into the ocean will need to consider these patterns, as institutional policies may seek to reform them.

For example, social gender roles in societies across South-East Asia may assign household management duties largely to women, making them a key target group for market-driven solutions to reduce food packaging waste and a potential champion for awareness raising within families and their social networks.

Similarly, studies suggest that women are the biggest consumers of cosmetics and personal care products⁴ that often include microplastics and microbeads. Gender-specific roles and attitudes may also shape waste management practices of women and men in households and public spaces. Recognizing and addressing gender patterns along the plastic value chain can lead to more targeted effective and appropriate interventions.

Secondly, these patterns influence the exposure of women and men to marine litter and pollution and their ability to respond to environmental risks. In coastal communities, for instance, the gendered division of on or offshore fishing activities means that women and men face different types of marine pollution and habitat destruction with negative impacts on income opportunities and health.

¹ United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), 2019. SDG Progress Assessment Gateway, Version 1.0. Available from: <http://data.unescap.org/#progress>

² Adapted from Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2014. *Climate change 2014: Impacts, adaptation and vulnerability. Summary for policymakers*. Geneva: IPCC; Aguilar, L., Granat, M., & Owren, C. (2015). *Roots for the future: The landscape and way forward on gender and climate change*. Washington, DC: International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) & Global Gender and Climate Alliance (GGCA).

³ United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) & UN Women, 2018. *Gender Equality as an Accelerator for Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals*, Discussion Paper. New York: UNDP.

⁴ Women Engage for a Common Future (WEFCF), 2017. *Plastics, Gender and the Environment. Findings of a literature study on the lifecycle of plastics and its impacts on women and men, from production to litter*. Netherlands/France/Germany: WEFCF.



Women are among the most vulnerable groups of the urban poor and make up the majority of informal waste pickers, exposing them to health hazards and social stigma while consistently earning less than male waste pickers that more often are included formal employment.⁵ Systemic inequalities limit disadvantaged women's adaptive capacity to overcome these challenges and environmental risks.

Gender inclusive action to combat marine pollution

Women *and* men are distinct target groups for initiatives that aim to change behavioural patterns of consumption and waste management and need to be actively engaged and empowered to contribute to solutions for plastic management.

Gender mainstreaming from planning, implementation, to monitoring and evaluation are key to ensure women and men benefit equally from action on marine pollution, including provisions for targeted empowerment. Elements of gender mainstreaming include:⁶

Situation and gender analysis:

Collect gender-disaggregated data to identify women's and men's roles, needs and challenges faced along the plastic value chain, including the policy environment and assess their implications for

the protection of their rights not to be discriminated; assess culturally appropriate modalities to engage women and women.

Use of targeted approaches

Integrate gender indicators and targets into projects and monitoring and evaluation plans; design and promote policies, action plans and interventions that invest in solutions for women and girls to create a level playing field, e.g. access to finance and technology

Engage and empower women:

Build women's capacity to participate equitably and meaningfully in decision-making, interventions, consultations and awareness raising campaigns as agents of change; institutionalize multi-stakeholder cross-ministerial dialogues involving women's organizations.

Raise awareness and promote accountability:

Create visibility for women's needs, interests and contributions, raise awareness of gender discrimination; build the capacity of governments and other duty bearers to identify and address (unconscious) biases and strengthen accountability mechanisms.

More information:

- International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Global Gender Office: <http://genderandenvironment.org>
- Women's Environment and Development Organization: www.wedo.org
- United Nations Environment Programme resources on Gender and the Environment and the Global Gender and Environment Outlook: <http://web.unep.org/ggeo>
- UN Women: www.unwomen.org

⁵ Ibid. Based on findings of a 10-city Informal Economy Monitoring Study (IEMS) conducted by WIEGO to evaluate the realities informal workers across different sectors face. All IEMS publications are available from www.inclusivcities.org/iems/

⁶ For more detailed manuals on gender mainstreaming in environment projects and policies, see: Harms et al, 2015. *Training Manual to Support Country-Driven Gender and Climate Change. Policies, Strategies, and Program Development*. Mandaluyong City: Asian Development Bank; Aguilar et al, 2009. *Training Manual on Gender and Climate Change. Global Gender and Climate Alliance*.



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The project aims to reduce land-based sources of marine plastic pollution and its impacts, by ensuring that less plastic is wasted at source and management of the plastic value chain is improved in South-East Asia.

The focus lies on lifecycle stages of:

1. Production
2. Plastic use, and
3. Collection / sorting / recycling.

Project partners include national and local government agencies; businesses, producers, retailers, and associations in the packaging, consumer and institutional products industry. Civil society, consumers, informal waste workers, and communities most vulnerable to the impacts of marine litter are actively engaged and considered across all project activities to promote people-centred pathways to preventing plastic pollution.

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