POLICY BRIEF

Gender and waste nexus

Experiences from Bhutan, Mongolia and Nepal

UN environment

Technology for Environment

GRID ARENDAL

Assessment process and scope

The *Gender and waste nexus: experiences from Bhutan, Mongolia and Nepal* report provides a detailed analysis of the gendered nature of the waste sector in these countries. The report feeds into the Waste and Climate Change project, led by the United Nations Environment Programme, International Environmental Technology Centre (UNEP-IETC) together with partner organizations from Bhutan (WWF Bhutan), Mongolia (The Asia Foundation) and Nepal (LEAD Nepal), funded by the German Government's International Climate Initiative (IKI).

The report is based on fieldwork carried out in each country, guidance from local partners and a synthesis of the literature available on gender and waste. The report details the gendered patterns in each labour segment of the waste sector and at every level of the waste hierarchy. It draws a gendered map of waste management that is anchored by the specifics of each country, but that also reveals sector-wide and globalized patterns and processes.

Its primary purpose is to provide policymakers in these three countries with specific necessary information and a broad conceptual framework to guide policies aimed at bringing gender equality into the sector. The report also offers a broader reach through its analysis of the gendered nature of the waste sector, which could be widely applicable across other countries and contexts. Waste sector reforms, often driven by efforts to mitigate climate change emissions, are under way in many developing countries, which may find the guidance provided in the report useful.

Young woman picking up recyclables at a transfer station. An interview with her co-worker revealed that a picker manages to collect about 50–60 kg plastic and 20–30 kg of textile a day. Photo by Ieva Rucevska.

Policy brief within the Waste and Climate Change project led by the United Nations Environment Programme, International Environmental Technology Centre (UNEP-IETC)

Layout: GRID-Arendal
Cartography: Hisham Ashkar

Published: August 2019

Suggested citation:
UNEP-IETC and GRID-Arendal (2019). *Policy Brief. Gender and waste nexus: experiences from Bhutan, Mongolia and Nepal*

Supported by:
Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation, Building and Nuclear Safety
based on a decision of the German Bundestag

INTERNATIONAL CLIMATE INITIATIVE (IKI)

WWF
The Asia Foundation
LEAD
LEADERSHIP FOR ENVIRONMENT & DEVELOPMENT NEPAL

Why gender and waste?

The current gendered profile of the waste sector in Bhutan, Mongolia and Nepal is first and foremost the product of attitudes about and stereotypes of men and women directly linked to everyday life. Gender inequalities and norms are embedded in almost all aspects of waste management in these three countries and play out in distinctive ways throughout the entire value chain, mirroring existing socioeconomic structures.

This overall finding is not particular to these three countries. Over the past few years, increasing practitioner and academic attention has revealed that waste production and management are not gender-neutral. Existing inequalities, responsibilities and roles shape the position of waste in social and economic systems. Waste management practices often harden gender inequalities, though if developed appropriately, they have the potential to enhance equality and women's empowerment.

Tserenjav Sodnompil, a former school accountant, opened her own recycling facility in 2009. It is now one of the largest collection sites for recyclables in Ulaanbaatar. She views recycling as an important pillar of sustainability. Photo by Joni Seager.

A waste picker from Greener Way at the Memelakha landfill (Thimphu´s landfill) earning around 100 US $ per month and working about three days per week at the transfer station and three days per week at the landfill (Greener Way organises transport). Photo by Tina Schoolmeester.

Gender mainstreaming

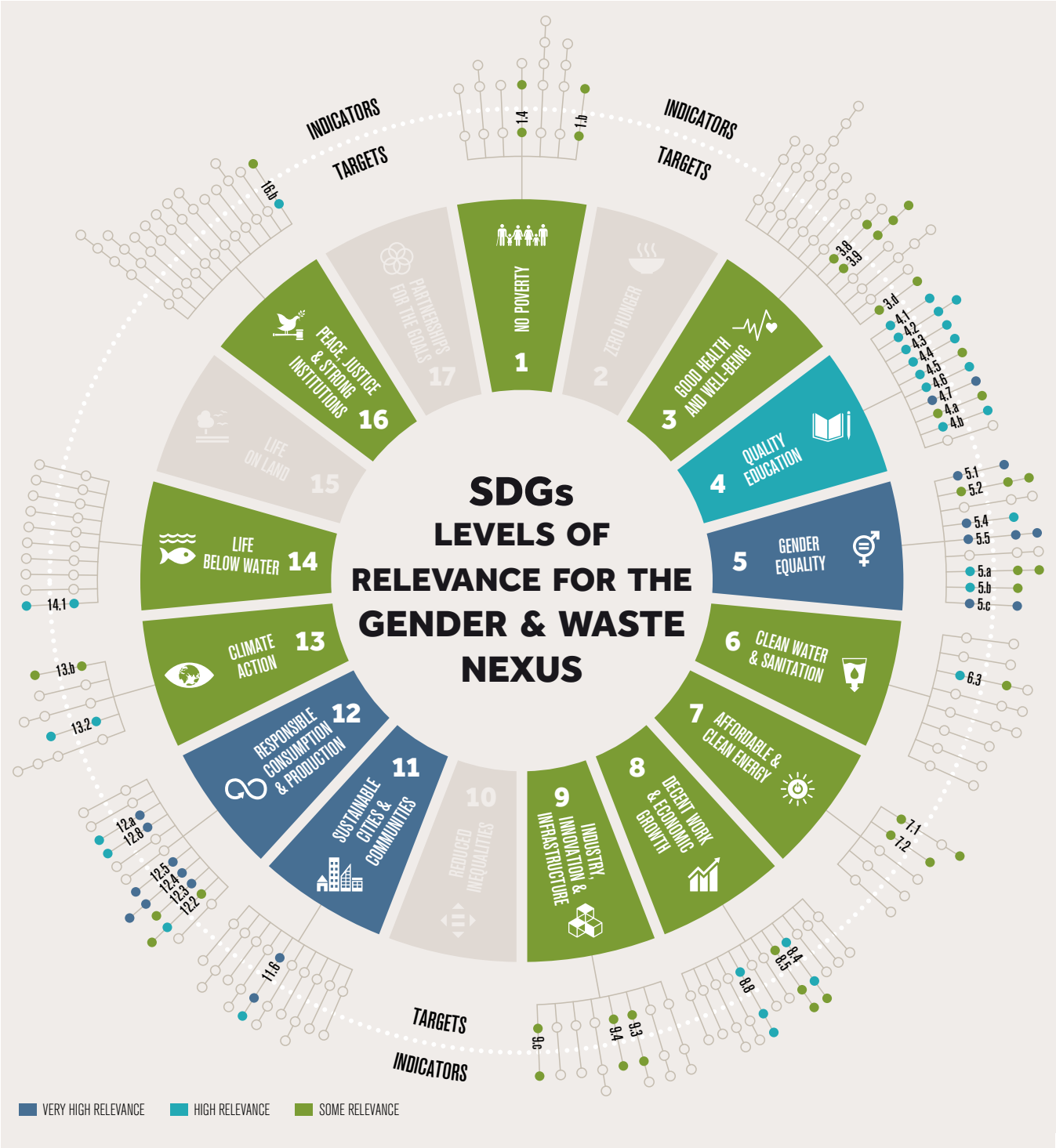
In order to create a more gender-responsive waste management sector and challenge current norms and practices, interventions should be implemented through practical gender mainstreaming, which is defined as the process of making both women's and men's concerns and experiences integral to the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the waste management hierarchy. Gender mainstreaming is therefore relevant for all stakeholders and structures that connect with and influence the sector.

Women weighting bag of recyclable materials while men record the weight. At transfer station, Kathmandu, Nepal. Photo by Tina Schoolmeester.

An artist-entrepreneur making materials from recycled paper, Ulaanbaatar, 2018. Photo by Joni Seager.

A group of men at Greener Way are compressing PET-bottles at the transfer station. Photo by Ieva Rucevska.

Relevance of the Sustainable Development Goals



The new evidence and analysis provided in this report adds to the emerging understanding in environmental fields that gender equality can act as a sustainability multiplier (UNEP 2016). Several of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) include waste reforms and target gender equality. Bringing gender equality into the waste sector will catalyse gender equality in other economic and social sectors. Moreover, implementing policies to bring gender equality into the waste sector will accelerate the three governments' ability to meet their broader global and national equality commitments, particularly for SDG 4 (Quality education) SDG 5 (Gender equality), SDG 11 (Sustainable cities and communities) and SDG 12 (Responsible consumption and production).

Findings and policy considerations

1. The waste sector is widely and mistakenly assumed to be gender neutral. As a consequence, gender inequalities are embedded in almost all aspects of waste management. Overcoming the presumption of gender neutrality is the first step to mainstreaming gender in the waste sector.

2. Attitudes, stereotypes and perceptions about appropriate gender roles permeate the gender and waste nexus. Changing attitudes about gender and norms of appropriate femininity and masculinity are as important as technological or structural changes to reform the waste sector in a gender-sensitive way. The waste sector cannot remain isolated from larger societal efforts to achieve gender equality and can make active contributions to larger equality goals.

3. Bringing a gender focus into waste sector decision-making and policy-setting is urgently needed. As modernization in the sector moves forward, policies should be gender-responsive and implementation should include monitoring for compliance. Policy goals should consider increasing the opportunities for women at all levels, from giving them contracts to promoting them as leaders and entrepreneurs.

4. The development of evidence-based, gender-sensitive policies requires information and data. Gender-disaggregated statistics and information related to the waste sector are currently not collected in any systematic way. Measuring impacts and results by developing and extending gender-disaggregated data collection across all indicators relevant to the waste sector will provide important benchmarks against which changes in the sector can be assessed.

5. Training on gender mainstreaming for all staff in district and local offices related to waste management will provide resources that will bring the concepts and benefits of gender mainstreaming into the sector at all levels. Currently, gender mainstreaming is available only at upper administrative levels, if at all.

6. Educational policies designed to achieve gender equality in STEM education may improve the representation of women in one of the most unequal educational domains in terms of gender.

7. Equal recognition and opportunities for both women and men need to be developed. Gender-based quotas or affirmative action incentives may

Workers at a scrap yard remove copper wires from electric wires. The young woman pictured is paid about US$ 43 per month because she lived at the scrap yard owner's house and did not have to pay for food or rent. The man pictured is older and receives US$ 115 per month – he lives independently. The owner travels to India once every month or two months to sell goods. Photo by Ieva Rucevska.

result in better representation of women in specific jobs, such as truck drivers, urban planners, waste management engineers and administrative staff. Training opportunities for women in jobs with the biggest inequalities – entrepreneurship, finance, trade, engineering, truck driving – may alleviate the imbalance. Similarly, awareness-raising campaigns, training and incentives could encourage men to redistribute their time towards housework and to participate in informal and community-based waste management and mitigation practices.

8. Labour equality standards and safety protection – waste collection trucks outfitted with lifts, for example – would benefit all waste labourers, both men and women, while eliminating one rationale for excluding women from waste collection jobs. Policies on childcare and maternity/paternity leave for both parents may improve the working environment for women and men.

9. Many countries around the world have successfully transitioned waste pickers into formal recycling jobs, providing models on how to ensure occupational protection for waste pickers and informal scrap and small-scale recycling dealers as landfills modernize. As recycling expands and becomes and more professional, women – who are currently prominent in small-enterprise recycling businesses – may need protection and capacity-building for their locally owned enterprises.

10. Households, which currently have the least formal engagement with the waste sector's power and policy structures, may be the pivotal site for reform. Households have tremendous collective capacity to reduce the flow of waste into the system, both through consumption practices and waste management and recycling strategies. Household needs and structures must be included in all waste management plans. Methodologies should be developed to assess the value of sustainable ecoservices that are currently provided on an unpaid basis by women managing waste in households and communities. This will enable policies to be based on a more accurate view of the waste value chain.

Group of women from the Taba & Dechencholing communities in North Thimphu who work together with the elected community leader to keep their neighbourhood clean. Photo by Tina Schoolmeester.

A waste picker in the streets of Thimphu, Bhutan. Photo by Tina Schoolmeester.

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