

Gender and Waste

Electronic discussion group, 9-31 May 1998 A summary

UWEP Occasional Paper

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

This document presents a summary of the email discussion on Gender and Waste, sponsored by WASTE, Advisers on Urban Environment and Development, Gouda, the Netherlands. This discussion was conducted between May 9 and 31, 1998 (originally May 9 and 22, then extended by one week). The technical coordination was performed by Dr. Mansoor Ali through the Global Applied Research Network (Garnet) at Loughborough University in the UK. The project was directed by Dr. Maria Muller, of WASTE. Anne Scheinberg chaired the discussion.

This document summarises the contributions of the participants and discusses in brief their implications for future research. The paper outlining the concepts, discussion themes, and protocols for the email discussion is included as Annex 1. Annex 2 is a short report of who participated and how the participants were recruited.

CHAPTER 2 FIRST THEME, GENDERED DEFINITIONS OF WASTE

The first theme, centred on the gendered definition of waste, aroused a great deal of interest, and there was most activity in this discussion theme. There were lively discussions on the definition of waste and the ways that gender relations within the household may influence waste handling practices. It is my interpretation that this interest reflects the fact that although we have, as practitioners, been noticing (or not) the activities of women in our waste and recycling projects, we have only just begun to think about gender as a factor in waste-related behaviour and to consider how attention to gender might cause better project outcomes.

Some specific themes about the gendered definition of waste included:

- "Waste" itself is not a neutral concept: there are other ways of characterising used or nonusable objects, and the very idea that something is waste may be alien to some cultures and ways of thinking.
- The nature and character of the waste producer/generator (insider/outsider; social class; age; sex; occupation; etc) may attach itself to the waste and result in the waste being defined differently depending upon who has produced it.
- Changes in products and packages are very dynamic right now in developing countries, so that the problems associated with and the potential uses of new materials (such as plastic bottles) are not well understood, nor is there a consistent approach to handling them.
- Within the household, it is women who know and decide what is useful and what is waste.
- Women and men (and also children) are almost certain to have different (and not always overlapping) knowledge of waste disposal places in their neighbourhoods.
- Women are far more likely than men to be involved in handling, cleaning up, or being associated with faecal waste, especially from children.
- Women "have to" handle waste in their homes: it is part of the definition of who they are and what they do, and no-one considers it strange or unfair that they do not get paid, even when these activities extend beyond the home to community cleaning. Women who are able to afford it may pass this responsibility to servants. Men, on the other hand, tend only to handle waste when they are paid for it, or when it is specific to their activities.
- The boundary between household and community is an important one, as it is at this point that discarded objects pass from the individual property of the household to becoming the community's waste stream; This boundary, also a gender boundary in relation to waste, often defines the limits of women's autonomy and control of waste materials.
- A key milestone in the process of urbanisation or "development" is creating systems to manage waste outside of the household, rather than within it (where it traditionally is handled by composting, burning, burying, feeding to animals, reusing, or the like). It then becomes the responsibility of women to take the waste to that point at the boundary of the household.
- This point, which can be referred to as the "point of set-out" is the point at which whatever has been defined as waste is placed outside of the household for handling by whomever or whatever institution is understood to be responsible for waste. It is at this

- point that ownership of the waste actually passes from the household to the community or city.
- If this reasoning is correct, any process of urbanisation or development will tend to reduce women's relationship to controlling the handling of waste materials by creating the expectation that those materials will be handled outside of the household, that is, outside of women's area of control. When this happens, women's access to and control of the resource components of waste is likely to decrease, and their experiences of recovery become less relevant.

CHAPTER 3 SECOND THEME: GENDER ASPECTS OF RESPONSIBILITY FOR WASTE

In terms of the second theme, responsibility, the participants offered a number of experiences and observations on the difference between men's and women's responsibilities for waste. There seemed to be a very general feeling that women are responsible within the home, and that this responsibility extends to the area around the home, compound, neighbourhood, etc. This is the case in spite of the fact that social norms or permission of husband (or partner, father, son, etc) may not normally allow women outside their homes, making it difficult for them to carry out this responsibility adequately.

Furthermore, participants observed that the point of set-out and collection is important, as it is the point at which women generally interact with formal or informal waste and recycling systems. This is true regardless of whether the waste collectors are from the formal or informal sector. Some of the participants pointed out that asymmetrical gender and power relations may make this a difficult transition point, since the city or community (paid) waste collectors, as well as the City leadership, who are generally male, tend not to understand the interests and needs of women in relation to the collection of household waste. For example, they may complain because the waste is not set out properly, not taking into account that the women cannot really leave their homes to put it in its proper place (and not having consulted the women in the first place, when deciding where the point of set-out should be). Or the times for waste collection may not have been set with any attention to the schedules and responsibilities of the women who will bring the waste to be collected. Or the containers which are appropriate for storage in the home may not be acceptable to the collectors, etc.

In the words of one participant: "It is extremely interesting to see the gender division in terms of when waste is considered a social responsibility and when it becomes a technical one. The 'switch over' ¼ reflects some interesting underlining issues in terms of gender and waste management."

CHAPTER 4 THIRD THEME: COMMUNITY

In summarising the (relatively few) writings on community, the participants experience with community based enterprises tends to reinforce the insight in the "responsibility" section that women may often be involved at a civic activity level, but when there is an opportunity to institutionalise "volunteer" or civic-minded activities, it is overwhelmingly men who are selected for paid labour. Even when women participate, it is unusual for them to work outside of stereotypically acceptable women's roles in administration, communication, or "making the coffee".

Some participants did offer examples of enterprises where women were paid, and told how the gender tensions between men and women workers in micro-enterprises and cooperatives had been resolved by taking advantage of the respective strengths of women and men.

At the same time, it was pointed out that when women are involved in waste activities as paid workers (as opposed to volunteering their time) they are among the lowest-paid; they work in the dirtiest and most dangerous conditions; they have no social or health insurance; and they may have to have their children work with them in these conditions. Their work is also likely to have lower social value and therefore be lower-paid (or vice versa: they may only have access to lower-paid work since they are seen as less capable or valuable than men; the causality is not clear).

When women seek to move from waste picking or scavenging to the status of micro-entrepreneurs, their access to credit and family support tends to be less than that of the men, so they are more likely to be handicapped from the start. Also, in recycling or recovery micro-enterprises, women's activity is more likely to be associated with certain materials, like textiles and plastics, and less likely in relation to metals, building materials, and things requiring strength, technical knowledge, or capital investment. In the cases where women are successful entrepreneurs or enterprise leaders, their position has often been deliberately strengthened by the participation of NGOs or CBOs in project initiation or expansion.

It also appears that in the experience of the participants, social class is an important determinant of women's activity in community enterprises: it is mostly middle- and upper-class women who are active in the NGO sector and in terms of community projects relating to waste and recycling.

At least one participant pointed out that the choice to be active on a community level in waste- and recycling-related activities may be motivated by second-level effects of waste accumulation and inadequate management. The community conflicts that arise when waste is poorly managed can have serious consequences, resulting in intra-community hostility and even violence, so community attention to waste may actually be focused on restoring social harmony, as much as on improving health.

CHAPTER 5 FOURTH THEME: POLICY AND PLANNING

The comments on the fourth theme divide naturally into two sub-areas for policy and planning. The first relates to gender analysis in the formal planning process for waste management, recycling, and other public services. The second concerns the practical gender concerns of women already working in the waste and recycling sector. These concerns include (among others):

- a need to improve conditions of work
- a general need for access to credit
- a weak negotiating position in regards to intermediaries and municipal authorities
- the lack of status or legitimacy for women workers or entrepreneurs
- the potential for women working outside the home to be harassed

The participants also alluded to the strategic gender interests of women working in waste and recovery activities, in terms of the potential to counteract or ultimately alter the asymmetrical power relationships between women collectors and sorters of waste and recyclable materials and men municipal authorities, competitors, purchasers of recycled materials (from women), or even men employees (of women entrepreneurs).

One aspect of this that received some mention, and that is worth emphasising, is the fact that since women's activities, especially their ability to do business outside the home, are limited or prohibited by social or cultural rules or the preferences of their husbands or other male relatives, their options in terms of technology, equipment, credit, and credibility as waste handlers are severely constrained.

A third area touched upon by a few of the participants is the need for project funders and planners to understand why gender analysis is important in waste projects, when it may appear that the connection is weak or irrelevant.

In terms of the formal planning process, participants' contributions pointed to the fact that gender analytic tools are important (and generally neglected) in any waste management or recycling diagnostic, assessment, or planning process. Specific tools mentioned in practice include community mapping and transects, separate-sex planning meetings, and stakeholder analysis. Here, the feeling was clear that there is a continuing need for analysis, for new theory, and the elaboration of insights into intra-household economic relationships, service and logistics preferences, willingness to pay, location for primary and secondary collection points, final disposal, separation protocols, and related factors. In this area, the main need for additional work would appear to be focused on using gender tools to improve the environmental, social, and economic performance of waste handling systems, rather than specifically for the purpose of benefiting individuals or groups of women. This suggests that a follow-up activity might include a gender component in waste planning processes, and/or the addition of gender information to manuals, technical documents, and the like.

In terms of the practical gender concerns and strategic gender needs for women waste workers, participants seemed to feel that the problems are well-understood and the difficulties for women are fairly obvious (in contrast to gender in the formal planning process, where they are only beginning to be understood). Participants agreed that there is a lack of interest, political will or sense of importance in the community of decisionmakers to address these issues in any cogent manner. Future work in this area, therefore, is more likely to involve creating a body of "evidence": case studies, perhaps, of the need for action, practical support, and social, physical, and financial protection, for women working with waste, so that this information can be used in a dialogue with project managers and development support organisations.

CHAPTER 6 EVALUATION AND CONCLUSION

Only one participant made a formal evaluation, although there were many positive comments in the contributions of the participants towards the end of the discussion. From the point of view of the chair, the following conclusions can be drawn:

- There is a need for contact and communication between people working in these two fields together, and separately.
- The body of work in gender and waste is not large. While certain individual projects have integrated gender and waste, there is not a ready source of information nor well-known resource documents. In the case of policy and planning, even the questions have not been well-articulated.
- There is a better understanding of the gender issues affecting women waste workers, and much of the existing work has been in this area, with a focus on the **welfare** of the workers. There is not much work in the other gender focus areas of **efficiency** or **equity**.
- The channels of communication between scholars and practitioners are limited, but generally open. The group that appears to be largely absent from the discourse are the activists
- The form of an email discussion is both effective and limited. It was effective in engaging a number of scholars and practitioners and sharing experiences and information. It was especially effective in terms of establishing the kind of communication that might occur during a "real time" conference or symposium, at a far lower cost and with far less disruption in the lives of the participants.
- It was limited in terms of the ability of people to participate in a timely manner, and in terms of treating the themes adequately. It was especially limited in terms of the ability to track and respond to specific questions raised. And of course it excluded those without an email connection.
- The use of a structured question format (see Appendix 1) proved absolutely essential in guiding the discussion.
- The care taken in identifying and recruiting participants (see Appendix 2), although extremely time-consuming, was well worth the effort. Not only did the participants essentially qualify themselves, but also, by the time the discussion started, they had made a commitment to participate which resulted in a consistently high level of discourse. The contributions, moreover, were in general focused and relevant.
- It also appeared that the idea of restricting the group to 30 (24 active) was successful. The group was large and diverse enough to represent a variety of viewpoints, but small enough that the participants began to "know" each other and to respond to each other's contributions, rather than simply focusing on the communications of the leadership.
- The email discussion succeeded in identifying, to the organisers and to the participants themselves, a group of colleagues working in the same area, which will hopefully serve as a platform for future work in this area.

ANNEX 1 CONCEPT PAPER AND PROTOCOLS

CONCEPT PAPER AND PROPOSED THEMES FOR THE E-MAIL DISCUSSION GROUP ON GENDER AND WASTE

Anne Scheinberg and Maria Muller April 1998

1 Introduction

This document is designed to introduce the planned on-line discussion group on gender in community-based waste management with a focus on developing countries. The discussion group is currently planned for May 9-31, 1998.

Community-based waste management is seen as one of the components of urban waste management, in which neighbourhood communities, households, community based organisations, and small, informal enterprises are engaged in collection and disposal, re-use and recycling of waste materials. The private formal sector has it own roles to play in waste management, just as the public sector has. In particular, the public authorities are in a position to design strategies to encourage and provide back-up to the waste activities carried out by communities and small enterprises.

Women and men, girls and boys are engaged in different waste-related activities, partly because of cultural traditions and conventions, partly because of practical interests, such as earning income, and maintaining a healthy living environment, and partly because of the wish to gain recognition as a worthy community member. Such waste activities range from the practice of collection, disposal, re-use and recycling, to decision making and management, and to representing and negotiating for their interests with the public and private sectors.

Some of the general questions underlying this e-mail discussion are for example, do women and men really have different perceptions of waste management in their communities? How are their roles and tasks in household and community related to waste activities? What opportunities do women and men have to be engaged in small waste enterprises? How have gender differences affected the sustainability and effectiveness of waste management? And what strategies and methods can be applied to enhance the contribution of both women and men?

The organisers of this e-mail discussion hope that the participants will contribute from their own practice, experiences, and research.

2 Objective and Goals of the Discussion Group

The general objective of the discussion is to encourage the participants to share their experiences and practices, and thus motivate others to introduce a gender perspective in community-based waste management, both those engaged in the implementation of waste projects, and those in policy-making positions.

The goals of the on-line discussion are:

- To initiate a many-to-many discourse ("multilogue") on the topics of gender analysis and community-based waste management, that will inform and enrich the practice and scholarship at the intersection of these two topics.
- To contribute to the sustainable, effective and environmentally sound management of waste as a resource, with a focus on less industrialised nations and countries in transition.
- To contribute to development that empowers women as well as men, and improves their lives and livelihoods in a sustainable and environmentally appropriate manner.
- To explore the relationships between gender and community- based waste management on a number of themes, as follows:

3 Themes for Discussion

3.1 The gendered nature of waste in specific cultures familiar to the participants.

Who defines if an object is "waste"; who makes it; who owns it: who is responsible for it; who gets blamed for it; who is allowed to scavenge, reuse, or repair particular types of waste? Are different kinds of waste differently gendered? For example, has human bodily waste a different meaning for women and men; are both women and men socially permitted to touch it? And is human waste different in this respect than, for example, household garbage?

In the specific cases where women are economically, socially, educationally, and/or culturally disadvantaged, does this create a perceived affinity between women and waste, because of the low or marginal status of both? If women's access to all resources is limited or denied, does waste become the resource of last resort? Is waste work seen as the only area which is open to women, because of their low status and limited education?

3.2 Gender and responsibility for household and community cleanliness

What are the gender characteristics of the task or project of community waste management, including human and animal waste management, street sweeping and the maintenance of public spaces; separation of waste at source; re-use of waste materials; collection, transport and disposal of solid waste from households and businesses?

Women are usually associated with responsibility for cleanliness of the home and for the health of the family. Does this translate to responsibility for or special interest in cleanliness of the community? Are there special aspects of women's role in community maintenance that relate to responsibility for waste management? At which point in the waste management trajectory (if any) does this special interest "switch over" to men and what are the aspects of that shift? What measures can project staff take to respond to these gender characteristics?

How does the gender balance of power and access and control of financial resources within the household and the community affect the demand for waste removal services? And how does this affect willingness to pay? How does it affect willingness to invest in, manage, and maintain household infrastructure such as compost bins, soak pits, or "modern" toilets? How does this affect willingness to do volunteer work for the community? And, knowing that gender affects for example willingness to pay, how has this been translated into the practice of waste projects?

3.3 Gender and Community-Based Waste Enterprises

What are the gender characteristics of small waste enterprises, for example in terms of size and potential for development, waste materials managed or recycled, division of responsibilities and tasks, working conditions, access to technological innovations, and income level?

How can project implementation focused on focused on micro- and small enterprises and cooperatives, ensure that women's existing enterprises are not disproportionately ignored or disrupted, and that women share appropriately and equitably in the benefits of new projects including being hired as workers, managers and the like? Are there examples of how this has happened?

3.4 Gender and Waste Management: Policy and Practice

What strategies can strengthen recognition for women's productive use of waste-derived resources? How can planners and development support organisations ensure that women's access to resources in the waste stream are not disturbed by modernisation or privatisation of waste systems?

What can gender analysis tell us about improving sustainable and environmentally sound waste management projects and practice? How can an understanding of the gender characteristics of households, communities and small enterprises improve the environmental and economic performance of micro- and small enterprises and cooperatives? How should gender be factored into cost recovery and fee administration schemes? Can the discussion group participants give examples of gender-sensitive methods in waste management?

Do women and men differ in their preferred policy and management approaches to waste, or in their selection of technology? How (if at all) does this play out at the community level, in local government, in NGOs and CBOs, and in international agencies and development

organisations? What does this suggest for the choice of waste, recycling and composting personnel and staff for government organisations, micro- and small enterprises, cooperatives, NGOs, and the like?

4 Discussion Group Protocols

The following are suggested protocols for the group.

4.1 Selection of Participants

Participants will be invited to participate by WEDC in consultation with WASTE. Participants in general will be selected on the basis of their practical working experience with gender and community-based waste management in developing and transitional countries. Persons hearing about the discussion group and wishing to participate are invited to send an e-mail to WEDC with a short description of their interest and experience and a request to participate. A curriculum vita is helpful but not necessary. Those with ideas for potential participants should send an email to WEDC.

4.2 Language of Discussion

The discussion will be held in English. Perfect English is not required, and participants are encouraged to say what they need to without fear for language criticism. If someone wants to participate but cannot participate in English, they should send an e-mail to the moderator in English, asking about possibilities for other languages. There is limited ability to assist French- and Spanish-speaking participants.

4.3 Contribution Protocols

The organisers are planning to experiment with direct contributions, that is, that the participants send their e- mail contributions directly to the discussion group, without screening by the moderator. The participants are requested to be disciplined and to focus their remarks on their direct practical or research experience or on responding to the experiences of others. If the first few days work out, direct contributions will continue, and if not, the moderator will screen the contributions.

Participants are asked to limit their contributions to three (3) per day, each being not more than half a page (A4 or 8.5x11), or about 250 words each.

It is not permitted to upload entire documents to the discussion. People having papers or documents they believe to be relevant are asked to post an abstract of no more than 250 words, giving their own e-mail address and inviting those who would like the full documents to contact them directly, not via the list.

The discussion will be organised around the four themes. To facilitate making a digest, participants will be asked to write the themes, the date, and the number (1, 2, 3, or 4) of their contribution in the subject line of the e-mail message.

ANNEX 2 REPORT OF PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT

REPORT OF GENDER AND WASTE PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT Anne Scheinberg June 1998

1 Method of Recruitment

The initial contact with potential participants was via either an announcement on a list-serve or a direct email. The listserves included: Garnet, Infoterra, GP-Net, and several others.

The direct contact was with people who had previously expressed an interest in gender and waste, or were known to the steering group (Maria Muller, Anne Scheinberg, and Mansoor Ali) to be working in this area.

The initial contact was an invitation to **apply** to participate, rather than a direct invitation to participate.

Approximately 25 people responded to the initial contact, either requesting more information or requesting to participate. As the discussion progressed, an additional 10 or so contacted one of the steering committee or one of the other participants.

Everyone who responded was personally invited to apply, and requested to send a short description of their practical experience and work in gender, waste, or both areas. They were further requested to confirm their availability during the discussion period, their willingness to devote time to the discussion, and their access to a computer for the period of the discussion. They were also invited to contact others who might be interested.

Of those who received an invitation to apply, four declined based on their perception that they did not have the experience or were unavailable during the discussion period due to travel, or due to technical limitations of their email system.

All of the rest who applied were accepted. In practice, therefore, it is fair to say that this was a guided process of self-selection. Participants, in practice, either qualified or disqualified themselves, based on the information they received and the requests for their experience or commitment.

Several requests to participate were received from people who did not make any subsequent effort to provide the requested information. These were provisionally allowed to participate, but requested to supply the relevant information and participate according to the protocols. Two of these people, when their contributions continued not to be relevant, were dropped from the core group.

In addition, several of the contributions from a small number of the official core discussants were held, rather than posted, as they were not appropriate to the theme or topic under discussion

Towards the end of the period, several contributions from non-core discussants which were received by Garnet were posted to the list anyway, either because they represented interesting geographical perspective or their comments were particularly appropriate.

2 Core Discussants

Following is a list of the 30 officially recognised core discussants:

Name Work Area (geographic)

Maria Muller Director, many countries in Africa

Mansoor Ali System Operator, Pakistan Anne Scheinberg Chair, Honduras, Hungary

Christian Zurbruegg limited, mixed

Bushra Gohar Pakistan
Dr. Chris Furedy many in Asia
Ines Restrepo Columbia
Jacqueline Garavito Columbia
Samson J. Nibi Ghana

Marielle Snel Hyderabad, India

Shawn Hayes Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia

Margot Aguilar Rivero Mexico

Luis F. Diaz many in L. America /Asia

Lynn Zender native American communities in North America

Andres Recalde El Salvador and Brazil
Zsuzanna Gille Post-communist Hungary

Usha Raghupathi India

Jeroen IJgosse Central America Zelma Gomez Honduras

Julie Burland Cote d'Ivoire, Mauritania, Chad

Anita Vlasveld Kenya, E. Africa

Jane Olley Peru
CEK - Kala Saba Mali

Saskia Everts Many countries

Victoria Rudin and Susie Lobo Ugalde Costa Rica, Central America Zoltan Kapros Post-Communist Hungary

Isa Baud Peru, India

Jo Beall Pakistan, India, Bangladesh

Shafiuk Azam Ahmed Bangladesh Maria-Lucia Borba Brazil

3 Activity Level

Of these core discussants, 24 made one or more contributions, and only the six listed below made no active contribution during the discussion:

Saskia Everts Zoltan Kapros Jeroen IJgosse Andres Recalde Margot Aguilar Rivero Dr. Chris Furedy

4 Occasional Contributors

The following, even though they were not core discussants, made occasional contributions which were posted when appropriate:

"Fran" Thailand Shuchi Gupta India

5 Interested Observers

The following persons, when they were invited to apply, opted to listen in, but not participate, based on their own perception that they did not have enough practical experience to contribute

Jac Smit Ray Lombard Samantha Wade Terrie Kolodziej

In addition, all of the 200-plus subscribers to Garnet's Solid-Waste-Management-Recycle ListServe received all of the discussion communications, although they did not post communications to the discussion directly.

6 Declined

Of those invited either to apply or participate, four declined due to travel or other commitments, or, in the case of the Malians, because their internet access was unreliable due to power outages in their country, although all indicated that they planned to look at the archive on the internet:

Manvita Baradi India
Catalina Trujillo UNCHS

Beth Miller Heifer International

Bany Sacko / Dionkounda Traore Mali

7 Contact not Established

No current email address was available for the following, whom the steering committee wanted to invite to participate:

Beatrice Njenga Almaz Terefe

The following people were contacted, based either on their previous expression of interest or on the knowledge of the steering group of their work in gender and waste, but did not reply to invitation to apply:

Miriam Elderhorst
Maria Naus
Marie D. de Surmain
Camille Stoop
Ian Reeve
Anouk Guine
Patricia Kambarani
Betty Kwagala
Diana Lee Smith
Anjana Iyer
Wendy Wakeman
Dan Lapid