

From Theory to Action: Gender and Waste Recycling

A Toolkit for Teachers, Researchers and Practitioners

Book 1: Theoretical Considerations on Gender, Empowerment and Waste



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Gender and Waste Recycling:**
A Research-Action Project in
Minas Gerais

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From Theory to Action Toolkit

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

INSEA – Nenuca Institute for Sustainable Development (*Instituto Nenuca de Desenvolvimento Sustentável*)

MNCR – The National Movement of Waste Pickers (*Movimento Nacional de Catadores de Materiais Recicláveis*)

NEPEM-UFMG – The Women’s Studies Research Center (*Núcleo de Estudos e Pesquisa sobre a Mulher*) at the Federal University of Minas Gerais

WIEGO – Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing

Note On Word Choice

The millions of people worldwide who make a living collecting, sorting, recycling, and selling materials that someone else has thrown away are referred to by many different terms in different regions. These include scavengers, recyclers, reclaimers, ragpickers, bidders, and waste pickers. In some places they collect only recyclables and in cities with no formal collection of household waste they provide the only system of waste collection that there is.

At the First World Conference of Waste Pickers, held in Colombia in 2008, a provisional consensus was reached to use the generic term “waste picker” in English (but, in specific contexts, to use the term preferred by the local waste picking community) and avoid the term “scavenger” due to its derogatory meaning. While an international consensus is still to be reached amongst activists, waste specialists, membership-based organizations (MBOs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the term waste pickers has been adopted and put into use by WIEGO as a useful generic term that suits the purposes of current global networking.

In this toolkit we use the term “waste picker” for the purpose of clarity and uniformity, regardless of context specificities.

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Above all, a very special thank you is due to the women waste pickers from Minas Gerais who participated in the workshops and opened their lives and experiences to the team. We are deeply grateful for and inspired by their participation, interest and most importantly, their knowledge from the onset of the project.

Sonia Dias
WIEGO, Waste Specialist

Foreword

In February 2012, the Gender & Waste Project – a partnership between WIEGO, NEPEM-UFMG, MNCR, INSEA — was born. It started as a pilot project in the state of Minas Gerais, Brazil, with the objective of raising awareness of the need for increasing the economic and political empowerment of women waste pickers throughout Latin America. The main focus of the project was to address gender inequality in waste picking activities, which could then be extended to the inequality faced in three areas of day-to-day life: at home, at work, and as leaders within their representative organizations. The project served not only to critically address these issues, but also to format workshops that specifically dealt with the initial stages of gender training. In other words, the project was designed to raise the women waste pickers' awareness of the complexities of gender relations and inequalities and the various spheres in which such dynamics play out. The project was broken down into a three-phase system with the following objectives in mind:

1. To provide women with the tools to work towards equality in the workplace and in their personal lives in order to strengthen their capacities and voices;
2. To increase women's leadership roles in waste picker representative organizations; and
3. To contribute to the economic empowerment of women waste pickers.

The idea for the Gender & Waste Project came from the Brazilian and Latin American women waste picker leaders' discussions with WIEGO. The project began taking shape after a participatory phase in 2011, involving women in small meetings and public debates (such as the Rio + 20's People's Summit, the Waste and Citizenship Festival), which were essential for the design of the pilot project. During these preparatory discussions, women raised the following issues:

- Marginalization during national waste picker movements' meetings;
- Current practice of more men participating in negotiations with federal government;
- Difficulties women face given the lesser recognition they receive for the way they express themselves compared to their male counterparts;
- Challenges caused by a combination of strenuous work and domestic responsibilities;
- Desire of women to have greater knowledge and education; and
- Struggles in tackling and discussing issues such as domestic violence, among others.

This participatory phase, guided by the principles of popular education, was meant to influence the design of the entire project based on the needs expressed by women waste pickers. These needs served to inform the second phase of the project, which resulted in several regional workshops with women waste pickers. Relying upon participatory methodology tools and a gender and feminist perspective, the participants reflected on women's autonomy, stereotypical gender roles and the main constraints for attaining greater equality and recognition in the diverse areas of social interaction during the workshops. They also identified their practical and strategic needs for overcoming such obstacles.

Understanding the gender inequalities associated with waste picking will ultimately increase the efficiency of waste management, while encouraging mutual respect between men and women.

Based on the results of the workshops, phase three of the project included the development of a "popular toolkit" for waste pickers on gender issues, as well as this practitioners' toolkit. For a look at the "popular Toolkit in English, see here: <http://wiego.org/sites/wiego.org/files/resources/files/Gender-Toolkit-EN-LR.pdf>. For the version in Spanish, see here: <http://wiego.org/sites/wiego.org/files/resources/files/mujeres-recicladores-baja.pdf>. For the version in Portuguese, see here: http://wiego.org/sites/wiego.org/files/resources/files/Waste_Gender_Toolkit_portuguese.pdf.

It is hoped that both toolkits will provide guidance for the fourth phase of the project, which is aimed at mainstreaming gender in the Latin American Network of Waste Pickers (RedLacre) and waste pickers networks and organizations elsewhere.



For WIEGO, empowerment refers to the process of change that gives working poor women – as individual workers and as members of worker organizations – the ability to access the resources they need while also gaining the ability to influence the wider policy, regulatory, and institutional environment.

Striving for women's empowerment on all levels – economic, symbolic, and political – is crucial for ensuring mutual respect and for improving the lives of female and male waste pickers.

Sonia Dias
WIEGO, Waste Specialist

Preface

“Autonomy is knowing what you want. It’s about making decisions at home, of not being indecisive, deciding on what you really want”.
(Woman waste picker)

“Autonomy is a right we are fighting for every day”.
(Woman waste picker)

“It’s fighting for your objectives to be heard”.
(Woman waste picker)

It is with great pleasure that I present the results of the careful work carried out in the project “Rethinking Gender and Waste Recycling: A Research-Action Project in Minas Gerais” (WIEGO/NEPEM-UFGM/INSEA/MNCR).

This Gender and Waste Recycling Academic Toolkit can be seen as a valuable instrument for disseminating useful practices in the process of mainstreaming gender in social projects and, especially, in projects with workers from the waste recycling sector.

This Project was designed with the purpose of intervening in workers’ lives in a creative and original manner. Based on complex democratic and sociopolitical processes, it seeks to collectively work on public issues and agendas of intervention that impact the world of labour. In other words: the central axis of this pilot project of intervention, carried out in partnership with WIEGO, NEPEM-UFGM, INSEA, and MNCR, along with the other projects carried out by NEPEM, is based on the main objective of *mainstreaming¹ gender*. In yet another project, NEPEM/UFGM, known as a reference centre and institution for its contributions on gender and feminist perspective in Brazil, was interested in creating new frameworks for interpreting reality through a critical and feminist analysis that rethinks both the power relations among individuals and the possibilities for establishing alliances and shared strategies of action, though this time in the field of waste picking.

It is well known that gender relations are deeply unequal and vary in degree throughout the world, whether it is in day-to-day life or at work. The differentiated value placed on the work done by men in detriment of that carried out by women, for example, is still a harsh reality in many countries. We also know that these asymmetrical relations are based on traditional and stereotypical dimensions of the sexual division of labour and continue to organize

¹ The idea of mainstreaming gender has gained ground not only as a theoretical concept, but also as a policy strategy (Daly, 2005). Nonetheless, it is a contested concept in feminist theory and in development studies. For useful discussions and critiques of the concept see the special issues of Social Politics (2005) and The International Feminist Journal of Politics (2005). More specifically, see: Moser (2005); Daly (2005); Walby (2005).

our relationships. Even though it may be true that men and women have been participating in productive activities (sometimes even identical) in the labour market, it is important to recognize the segregations in determined occupations and the unacceptable inequalities in terms of salaries, for example. Despite women's massive entrance into the labour market, the gendered segregation of productive and reproductive activities is one of the key reasons for a series of inequalities, including though not limited to the pay gap. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO) (1995), even with the attempts made at addressing gender inequalities, "it would take 475 years for parity to be achieved between men and women in top level managerial and administrative positions." Furthermore, attributing reproductive activities as a historically and socially acceptable "feminine" role has extended well beyond the private sphere. As a result, women deal with double and triple work shifts that are not only burdensome, but cut into their own leisure time and prevent them from participating in what would be opportunities for political participation.

On a larger scale, these embedded practices are present throughout the world. As Moraes and Gassen note (2004), recent UN data reveals that:

- Women are responsible for 2/3 of the work carried out in the world and receive 1/3 of the salaries;
- Women receive 1/10 of the world income;
- Women represent 2/3 of the world's illiterate population;
- Women own less than 1/100 of the world's property;
- Of the 1.3 billion living in poverty, 70 per cent are women.

With such firmly entrenched inequalities, feminist struggles have called attention to the need for mainstreaming gender in policies and social projects. This agenda calls for both transversal and intersectional actions and policies.

The mainstreaming of gender has constituted itself as a power and critical instrument for reforms, monitoring and evaluation of processes involved in public policymaking and in social projects (Walby, 2005). It has been able to stimulate and reorganize actions and practices throughout the world. In the academic field and in public policymaking, the mainstreaming of gender is based on the consciousness that our actions are influenced by traditional and stereotypical values regarding gender that need to be revisited, deconstructed, and reformulated, particularly when they are placed in check by other intersectional forms of oppression such as race, class, age, sexuality, etc. Our project of intervention, which gave rise to this toolkit, considered the centrality of these dimensions.

With many years of communitarian and participatory interventions, NEPEM/UFMG joined this partnership with the aforementioned organizations based on the encounter between academic militancy and the movements of women waste pickers. The dialogue that has taken place has reassured us that this is certainly a productive path towards the construction of more equal and just gender relations.



We hope this toolkit can provide insights for other experiences of this nature throughout the world.

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1

Introduction



Recent studies have shown a large number of informal workers in developing countries make a living collecting, sorting, recycling, and selling valuable materials. In addition, many of these workers are women and children (Dias and Fernandez, 2013; Madsen, 2006; Hunt, 1996; Furedy, 1990).² Waste pickers face numerous challenges related to the very activity of handling waste, which is not always recognized for the environmental and economic benefits it may bring to a city. Women waste pickers also face the added burden of having to deal with the reproduction of hierarchical gender relations at home, in the workplace, and in their respective communities.

Despite the increased attention given to studies on waste picking and solid waste management, there is still a lack of understanding on the gender dynamics and sexual division of labour involved in waste picking activities. Adopting a gender and feminist approach to waste picking, therefore, recognizes the need to:

- address the multiple dimensions of subordination women are subject to on various fronts;
- discuss the ways men and women naturalize their social relations;
- focus on the threats and opportunities that men and women experience in their jobs;
- question how one of the ways the social division of labour manifests itself is through the sexual division of labour or the differentiation of job positions / roles according to gender;
- explore how the marginalization of waste pickers, and women waste pickers in particular, impedes access to greater economic independence;

² In India, for example, about 80 per cent of the waste pickers are women; while in Brazil, a small-scale study found that 56 per cent of the members of waste picker organizations are women (Dias and Fernandez, 2013). Another study conducted in Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, shows that there has been an increase in the number of women who are employed in one of the associations - ASMARE. The data reveals that the percentage of women working in the association jumped from 18 per cent in 1993 to 55 per cent in 1998 (Dias, 2002). In Thailand, about 93 per cent of street sweepers in the Bangsue district of Bangkok, and 60 per cent of waste pickers at dumpsites, are women (Madsen, 2006).

- recognize how gender stereotypes are often employed as a means of discouraging women's participation, especially at more formal levels.

A deeper understanding of the gender dynamics involved in waste picking, often masked or under-theorized, ultimately seeks to provide women waste pickers with the tools necessary to enhance their role as economic and political actors.

The Rethinking Gender and Waste Recycling research-action pilot project was created in light of the need for further exploration of the gendered dimensions of waste picking, but also as a result of the expressed concerns and interests of women waste pickers in Brazil and in Latin America in dealing with gender relations.

This toolkit, which has been divided into three parts, was designed as one of the products of the research-action project. The toolkit aims to integrate a variety of different focuses and resources so that it can be used by multiple audiences.

In Book 1: Theoretical Considerations on Gender, Empowerment and Waste, the toolkit begins by exploring the very notions and theoretical concepts of women's empowerment that guided the discussions and activities of the exploratory workshops conducted in Minas Gerais, Brazil. Bridging the gaps in the literature between gender and waste recycling, it also focuses on specific gender dynamics in waste recycling given the social, cultural, economic, and political context of Latin America and, more specifically, Brazil. In this section, the toolkit provides links to other projects and guides that offer further insights into gender and recycling.

Once gender issues pertinent to waste recycling have been contextualized, Book 2: Project Design, Tools and Recommendations goes on to highlight our own experiences with the exploratory workshops with women waste pickers, thus expanding the scope of the target audience by hoping to include those interested in mainstreaming gender in waste recycling. This content will also include links to other resources and toolkits that have been published on fieldwork in gender and recycling.

Lastly, in Book 3: Resource Book, the toolkit integrates a variety of information and resources that are available on the subject matter. While these resources are far from being exhaustive, they seek to provide an extensive starting point for those interested in gender equality in recycling.

The toolkit is designed to be user-friendly and hopes to engage academics, researchers, and practitioners. Each section provides links to other sources that may be of interest. The toolkit can also be read and used according to the needs and interests of the public. We encourage you to make use of the materials and adapt them to the needs of your own context. Finally, we would like to hear back from those who have used this toolkit, sharing critical comments and the specific ways in which this toolkit proved useful.

2 Conceptual Tools: How Gender and Empowerment Relate to Waste Picking



The term gender³ has been used to denote the differences between men and women. More specifically, gender calls attention to the socially and culturally constructed differences attributed to men and women throughout time, affecting their roles and the relationships of power among them. Hence, the term gender signals a clear refutation of biological determinism.

Gender, as an analytic category, stresses the fact that such relationships, often based on historical practices and beliefs of oppression and inequalities of power, can only be understood in a relational manner. Furthermore, these socially constructed differences are reproduced and sustained in a variety of spheres, including but not limited to religious, legal and political doctrines, educational systems, and scientific thought, among others.

What gender is

- ✓ Relational – looks at the roles of men and women
- ✓ Socially and historically constructed
- ✓ Focuses on relations of power
- ✓ Focuses on the possibility of deconstructing hierarchical gender relations with the intent of creating other more just and equal relations

What gender isn't

- ✓ A synonym for women
- ✓ A synonym for patriarchy

³ A useful definition of gender is provided by the UN: "Gender: refers to the social attributes and opportunities associated with being male and female and the relationships between women and men and girls and boys, as well as the relations between women and those between men. These attributes, opportunities and relationships are socially constructed and are learned through socialization processes. They are context/ time-specific and changeable. Gender determines what is expected, allowed and valued in a woman or a man in a given context. In most societies there are differences and inequalities between women and men in responsibilities assigned, activities undertaken, access to and control over resources, as well as decision-making opportunities. Gender is part of the broader socio-cultural context. Other important criteria for socio-cultural analysis include class, race, poverty level, ethnic group and age." For more information, see: <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/conceptsanddefinitions.htm>

One of the prominent feminist thinkers on the notion of gender, Joan Scott, claims that gender is a useful analytic tool given its ability to connect two propositions. First, it is important to understand that gender shapes social relations due to the ways in which we have attributed differences between the sexes. Second, gender cannot be disassociated from notions of power, since it is one of the primary ways of “signifying power relations” (Scott, 1986, p. 1067). In this sense, gender, as an analytic category, helps broaden the framework of analysis by seeking to unravel the very structures and practices that promote asymmetrical gender relations, as well as the political implications of such relations.

For more discussions on gender, consult these texts:

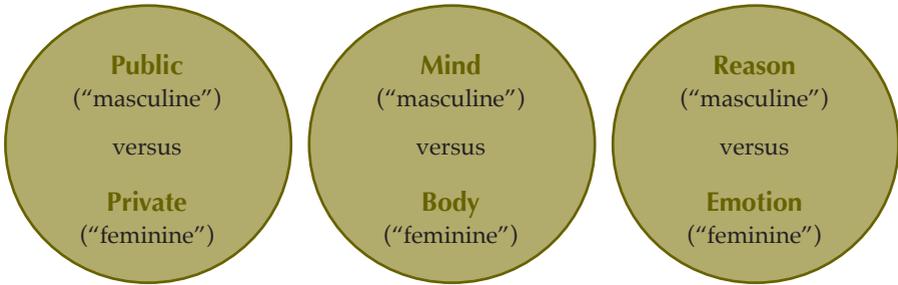
1. Flax, Jane. 1992. “Beyond equality: gender, justice and difference.” In Gisela Bock, Susan James, org., *Beyond Equality and Difference: citizenship, feminist politics, and female subjectivity*. London: Routledge, pp. 193-210.
2. Hawkesworth, Mary. 2013. “Sex, Gender, and Sexuality: From Naturalized Presumptions to Analytic Categories”. In Georgina Waylen, Karen Celis, Johanna Kantola, S. Laurel Weldon, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Gender and Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 31-56.
3. Scott, Joan. 1986. “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis”. *The American Historical Review* 91, No. 5, pp. 1053-1075.
4. Squires, Judith. 1999. “Framing Gender”. In Judith Squires, *Gender in Political Theory*. Cambridge: Polity Press, pp. 54-77.

2.1 Gender Relations, Roles and Inequalities

A gender perspective thus looks at how society, including both men and women, acts in terms of reinforcing and/or challenging patterns of domination in the multiplicity of social interactions. The difficulty of challenging such structures and habits is due to the fact that traditional gender roles inform the dynamics of social interactions.

Gender roles are often based on fixed binary oppositions serving the purpose of maintaining certain hierarchies in place. In other words, traditional gender roles operate within a system of power that values certain attributes to the detriment of others. Some of these binary oppositions also serve to limit the autonomy of individuals or groups in particular spheres of interaction, nominating one sphere as more “feminine” and the other as more “masculine”.

Examples of these oppositions include:



Since our identities are constituted relationally, how these oppositions are played out through gender roles clearly affects decision-making processes, the sexual division of labour, and cultural practices (Young, 1990). The central insight, then, is that hierarchical and traditional gender relations produce and reproduce gender inequalities at different levels and to different degrees according to specific contexts. As a result, that which is socially and culturally coded as “feminine” has lesser value in certain societies in comparison to that which is coded as “masculine”. As mentioned previously, these “androcentric value patterns” structure social interactions in a range of different areas, such as law, government policies, professional practices, and popular culture (Fraser, 2003).

As a result, women suffer gender-specific forms of *status subordination*, including:

- sexual assault and domestic violence;
- trivializing, objectifying, and demeaning stereotypical depictions in the media;
- harassment in everyday life;
- exclusion or marginalization in public spheres and deliberative bodies;
- denial of full rights and equal protections of citizenship.

Nancy Fraser, *Social Justice in the Age of Identity Politics: Redistribution, Recognition and Participation*, 2003, p. 21

Nevertheless, it is important to note that it is problematic to assume “women” as a homogenous group. In this sense, feminist theories have called attention to how women experience forms of oppression differently, particularly when considering women’s multiple identities. Broadening this scope of understanding avoids a reductionist perspective based on the premise that women are always subordinated by men. On the contrary, women have historically created strategies that challenge gender injustices perpetuated by

specific legal, economic, religious, familial, political, cultural contexts. Such strategies reveal women's active role in seeking to transform unjust practices and belief systems.

In addition to considering how different contexts affect and/or reinforce gender inequalities, much attention has also been dedicated to recognizing the complexity of the nature of such inequalities. That is to say, other identities, such as race, class, sexuality⁴, and age, among others, also influence the ways in which a woman experiences oppression in society. The term intersectionality has been used precisely to understand how the varying dimensions of power relations, including race, class, sexuality, gender, among others, are intertwined (Collins and Chepp, 2003).

Why is intersectionality important?

1. Different systems of power (e.g. race, gender, class, sexuality, ability, age, country of origin, citizenship status) cannot be understood in isolation from one another;
2. These systems intersect and coproduce one another;
3. Individuals and groups are differently positioned, influencing how we experience society;
4. An individual or group's social location produces its own worldviews and standpoints.

Patricia Hill Collins and Valerie Chepp *Intersectionality*, pp 59-61. 2003

This reflection is particularly relevant when considering women's status in the Global South. In other words, as a means of avoiding cultural reductionism, it is important to understand how women's locations within various structures have different meanings and political implications depending on the local and socio-historical context (Mohanty, 2003).

The marginality and invisibility of waste pickers in society, for example, not only cast light on economic forms of exclusion, but are also intricately related to other structures of oppression, such as gender, race, age, sexuality, and so forth. Once the work and contributions of these informal workers are taken for granted in urban landscapes, so are the intertwined axes of oppression that affect them. In this sense, an intersectional approach to the livelihoods of waste pickers, and more specifically here to women waste pickers, reveals how distinct oppressions impact their access to resources and power given their multiple identities. Often times, individuals or groups with intersecting identities may end up being further marginalized within an already historically marginalized group (Purdie-Vaughn and Eibach, 2008).

⁴ The UN has adopted the term sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI).

For more discussions on gender (in)equalities and gender analyses of the Third World, consult these texts:

1. Collins, Patricia Hill and Valerie Chepp. 2003. "Intersectionality". In Georgina Waylen, Georgina, Karen Celis, Johanna Kantola and S. Laurel Weldon, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Gender and Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 57-87.
2. Fraser, Nancy. 2003. "Social Justice in the Age of Identity Politics: Redistribution, Recognition and Participation". In Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth. *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange*. New York: Verso, pp. 7-109.
3. Mohanty, Chandra. 2003. *Feminism without Borders*. Durham: Duke University Press.
4. Mohanty, Chandra, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres. 1991. *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
5. Moser, Caroline. 1989. "Gender planning in the third world: Meeting practical and strategic gender needs." *World Development* 17, No. 11, pp. 1799-1825.
6. Narayan, Uma. 1997. *Dislocating cultures: Identities, Traditions and Third World Feminism*. New York: Routledge.
7. Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1988. "Can the subaltern speak?" In Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, pp. 271-313.
8. Young, Iris. 1990. *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

2.2 Empowerment and Feminist Struggles

There are numerous definitions of what empowerment entails. Broadly speaking, it is a dynamic and relational process by which individuals and/or groups increase their options and choices, thus gaining greater control over their own lives (Mahmud, et al, 2012). As a process impacting different spheres of women's lives, forms of empowerment may range from building up women's sense of self-worth to increasing gender awareness so as to critically address and question unequal power relations.

Empowerment as a dynamic and multidimensional process involves:

- ✓ Ability to define and act upon one's goals
- ✓ Access to and control over resources (human, financial, social, and physical capital) in different relationships and spheres of social interactions

(Kabeer, 1999; Kashor and Gupta, 2004 in Mahmud et al, 2012).

As Golla, et al (2011) note, there are different pathways towards increasing women's empowerment, which are dependent on contextual factors and a project's specific objectives. The inter-related components for increasing empowerment include paths towards advancing women economically or building women's power and agency (Golla, et al, 2011, p.5).

Empowerment can only occur if gender planning addresses a full range of issues in which women are subordinated, encompassing not only the economic and political dimensions, but the physical and symbolic as well (Wieringa, 1998). The transformative potential of empowerment considers the individual and collective capacity to reconsider and recreate new ways of thinking about gender roles in society. A feminist conception of power must consider the intricate web of power dynamics present in contemporary societies, but most importantly, it should highlight the instances where women do exercise power.

According to this broad feminist conception of power, and relying upon the research expertise of two of its partners – WIEGO and NEPEM – the Gender and Waste Project specifically concentrated on the axes of the economic and political empowerment of women waste pickers as an entry point. The project was also particularly interested in *solidarity* and *coalition-building*, which can foster power among and with other women and men, encouraging the symbolic empowerment of women.

In this sense, it works upon the idea of building empowerment from the bottom-up. For WIEGO, as Samson notes, part of the process of establishing and creating possibilities for women's empowerment involves building women's leadership. Our pilot project sought to promote and facilitate conditions that would allow for the women waste pickers to recognize their own knowledge and strength in this process of transformation. In other words, it was an initial process of bringing gender consciousness to the forefront of the discussion among women waste pickers so that they could collectively set forth plans for challenging gender hierarchies in their own lives. This coincides with the project's idea that any type of gender training should not focus on creating women leaders based on a few individuals but rather on a collective process. Ultimately, building women's leadership means building the capacity of all women to take on leadership roles, as well as transforming organizations so that they embrace

women playing these roles (Samson, 2014). This is particularly fundamental given that women's voices and concerns must gain space and validity within their own lives, communities, organizations, and workplaces. Once both women and men are sensitized to gender issues, challenges to widely held attitudes and beliefs are the paths toward effective processes of transformation (Samson, 2014)⁵.

During the workshops, women waste pickers narrowed in on certain dimensions of gender inequalities at home, in the workplace, and in the organizations and movements which cut across the axis of economic, political, and symbolic inequalities.

Below are three broad definitions of economic, political, and symbolic empowerment and how they served as guidelines that directed the activities with women waste pickers. Nevertheless, these dimensions of empowerment are intrinsically associated to an individual/personal and collective/communitarian dimension, and fundamentally need to be highlighted and stimulated through the experiences of each woman.

Political Empowerment

The gender gap in political participation and representation is often attributed to at least three dimensions: *structural factors*, which includes the levels of a country's socioeconomic development; *political institutions and rules*, which impact the likelihood of women being elected; and *cultural factors*, which impede women's participation based on asymmetrical and patriarchal gender roles (Norris and Inglehart, 2001; Matos, 2010).

For NEPEM, political empowerment involves an opportunity for establishing and/or encouraging a critical-feminist consciousness with respect to the need for women's entrance in distinct public spheres. This process entails contributing to women's knowledge in relevant areas such as human rights, social movements and citizenship, party systems, electoral laws, public policies, membership-based organizations, etc. The primary focus is on the conversion of these initiatives into concrete actions of broader political empowerment, in the sense that women can now play a relevant and critical role in the most diverse arenas of social life (Matos and Simões, 2014).

⁵ This important distinction regarding gender training and empowerment was made by Melanie Samson who moderated the Gender Empowerment Panel at WIEGO's General Assembly held in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, in November 2014.

Economic Empowerment

The economic empowerment of women has been defined variously in terms of increased access to and control over resources and markets and increased agency and choice, as well as improvements in and control over specific outcomes or achievements (such as enhanced wellbeing and dignity, better work-life balance, and improved economic opportunities). All dimensions of empowerment – resources, agency, and achievements – are critical to the wellbeing, dignity, and livelihood opportunities of working poor women.

For WIEGO, empowerment refers to the process of change that gives working poor women – as individual workers and as members of worker organizations – the ability to access the resources they need while also gaining the ability to influence the wider policy, regulatory, and institutional environment. Ultimately, “women’s economic empowerment initiatives need to engage directly in reducing the disproportionate share of domestic and care-related work carried out by women, which prevents their effective engagement in paid work” (WIEGO, 2010, p. 11).

Symbolic Empowerment

Symbolic empowerment involves challenging the codes, practices, and concepts that contribute to establishing gender and racialized subjectivities and power relations. A feminist and critical approach to symbolic empowerment critically assesses how patterns of subordination are present in myriad structures that range from “patriarchal modes of [capitalist] production, patriarchal relations with the State, domestic violence, patriarchal relations in paid work, patriarchal relations in sexuality, and patriarchal relations in cultural institutions such as religions, media and education” (Walby, 1990, p. 177).

Critical gender planning, in our understanding, must entail integrated concepts and theories that can be applied on a practical level. Such planning should be capable of mapping out the different dimensions of inequalities that cross women’s lives. In this sense, symbolic empowerment serves as a fundamental basis for women to better understand themselves as political, economic, and cultural actors that can challenge hierarchical gender and racialized relations.

2.3 Gender and Waste Picking

Women waste pickers confront numerous obstacles on a daily basis. In the workplace, gender inequalities manifest themselves through structures of exploitation and marginalization that also cut across race and class lines and may result in a lack of authority and recognition. In capitalist societies, gender exploitation in the workplace and at home can involve tasks that require “typically feminine” activities that are often unnoticed and undercompensated (Young, 1990, p. 51). The presence of oppressive structures coupled with feelings of powerlessness and experiences of violence are a direct extension of the social division of labour in capitalist societies, but may also result in the sexual division of labour.

At the workplace, women waste pickers experience such forms of oppression in at least three different ways. First, women might not be allowed access to recyclables with the highest values (Dias and Fernandez, 2013), therefore earning less than men. In Brazil, a gender analysis of an official database (the Annual Report of Social Information - RAIS from the Ministry of Labour and Employment), concluded that among waste pickers, men earn much more than women in all age groups, and no women are found in the highest income groups, which earn more than 10 times the minimum wage (Crivellari et al, 2008). These discrepancies may be why women are drawn to the cooperative model to find more favourable working conditions. The set up of activities also tends to follow a sexual division of labour with more women involved in the sorting processes, while men pick up materials on the streets or at large generators.

Second, it is important to recognize that both women and men are exposed to several health risks while working with waste materials. Despite the lack of documented studies, Muller and Scheinberg (2007) point out how people who have “physical contact with human excreta or other raw materials contract diseases like hepatitis and diarrhea and suffer eye and skin infections more frequently than people not so employed”. There are numerous occupational health and safety hazards informal workers deal with as a result of the insalubrious conditions of their workplaces, such as poor lighting, lack of ventilation, excessive heat, lack of proper tools and equipment including individual protective equipment, exposure to chemicals and dust, long hours of work, and noise (Wrigley-Assante, 2013). Women are even more affected given that they may not always have access to restroom facilities. All these conditions aggravate their psychological and emotional stress, and lead to high levels of musculoskeletal and respiratory illness (Wrigley-Assante, 2013). Some women may also be vulnerable to sexual harassment in their attempts to negotiate and acquire materials.

Finally, women may not occupy positions of authority within their cooperatives or communities. When women do occupy such positions, they may not be as respected as their male counterparts. In addition, women’s participation seems to be higher at the community and local level, with stronger gender gaps appearing as the distance from the community and the formality of the setting increases (Muller and Scheinberg, 2007). Stereotypical assumptions regarding women’s use of emotion and different communicative patterns contribute to women waste pickers being ignored or silenced in group meetings or formal settings.

Away from the workplace, women also confront gender inequalities, mainly in the private sphere given their double or triple work shifts. Asymmetrical power relations at the household level affect women’s abilities to take part in public committees or to exercise leadership within their representative organizations. This can mainly be attributed to the fact that women are responsible for raising

children and fulfilling most (if not all) domestic chores, ultimately limiting their time and energy for taking up leadership opportunities (Dias and Fernandez, 2013). Besides the unequal division of domestic labour, women are often subjected to sexual exploitation and violence within the private sphere.

Gender differences also impact women given a series of other factors and constraints. Some of the literature on gender inequalities in the informal economy has signaled constraints resulting from the following (Mayoux, 2001; Kabeer, 2003; Molyneux, 2002):

- ✓ (1) lower education than men (tied to lack of technical, business, and/or computer skills)
- ✓ (2) different type of social capital than men
- ✓ (3) different access to types of credit (which may very well be influenced by the social networks and associations women do take part in)
- ✓ (4) lack of mobility (due to patriarchal stronghold in some societies)
- ✓ (5) overburdened by unequal domestic division of labour (less time to devote to work and/or participation in associations or education)
- ✓ (6) more physical problems related to occupational health hazards (more stress disorders, more prone to sexual harassment/violence, more musculoskeletal illnesses)
- ✓ (7) restricted access to property
- ✓ (8) less bargaining power within households

3 Reflections on Gender and Waste Picking in Latin America



Adopting a gender approach to waste picking in Latin America has helped reveal the gendered dimensions of waste picking activities, particularly in light of the fact that many cooperatives and associations are composed of women waste pickers. The research projects detailed below are interested in studying how gender differences impact the work and livelihoods of women waste pickers.

3.1 Experiences in Latin America

“Women Workers For the City: Women’s Contributions to the Environmental Management of Solid Waste in Latin America.”

(“Trabajadoras por la ciudad aporte: de las mujeres a la gestión ambiental de los residuos sólidos en América Latina”)

A comparative research project focusing on the gender dimension of solid waste management in Latin America was conducted in four cities from 2009-2012 with funding from [International Development Research Centre: IDRC](#). The project involved four cities: Cochabamba, Bolivia; Montevideo, Uruguay; Lima, Peru; and São Paulo, Brazil. The project sought to observe the conditions of women waste pickers in the informal sector, the activities they carry out, and the main inequalities they have faced. The research entailed focus groups and in-depth interviews with the workers. By adopting a gender perspective, the research project attempted to highlight how a gender perspective broadens the understanding of which actors intervene in the management of solid waste, how the sexual division of labour is established and how women and children are affected by the work they do.

Highlights of the study:

- ✓ Specifically looks at differences between individual women waste pickers and organized women waste pickers in cooperatives
- ✓ Focus on sexual division of labour in cooperatives and also within households
- ✓ How men and women deal differently with certain aspects of waste picking
- ✓ Why women choose waste picking

Nevertheless, the project does not deal with the issue of women's empowerment within the movement or within the workplaces or cooperatives.

For more information and findings on the research project, see here:

http://www.clacso.org.ar/libreria_cm/archivos/pdf_41.pdf

“Study on the Issue of Gender in Urban Solid Waste Management in the State of Mexico.”

(“Estudio sobre la Cuestión de Género en la Gestión de Residuos Sólidos Urbanos en el estado de México”)

The study conducted in 2005 in the state of Mexico⁶ looks at the perceptions and understandings of gender relations in solid waste management by interviewing workers, municipal agents and the respective city departments, personnel at waste treatment facilities, and other civil society actors such as members of trade unions and NGOs. The project was conducted with the help of the German and Mexican governments and was under the responsibility of *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit* (GTZ) and the Secretary of Ecology for the State of Mexico.

The study's main objective was to provide a more comprehensive picture of the relations of power and participation of men and women in the different stages of solid waste management in order to promote greater gender equality and to provide recommendations for policies for the sector.

⁶ The state of Mexico is one of 31 states in the country of Mexico.

Highlights of the study:

- ✓ Conducted in nine municipalities in the State of Mexico. The choice and division of the municipalities was made according to whether the municipality was governed by a woman or man
- ✓ The study was framed around two central concepts: equality and the transversality of gender in public policies
- ✓ Provides recommendations for how to incorporate gender in solid waste management policies at all three levels of government
- ✓ Findings point to gender inequalities in both the public and private spheres
- ✓ Discusses insights as to the practical and strategic interests of women and they would transfer into public policies

For more on the study, see here:

<http://www.bvsde.paho.org/bvsacd/cd48/genero-residuos.pdf>

3.2 Experiences in Brazil

Polís – Gender Dimensions in the Handling of Domestic Waste in São Paulo (Dimensões de Gênero no Manejo dos Resíduos Domésticos em São Paulo)

This research project is part of the larger investigation with funding from the IDRC in Latin America as discussed above. This report discusses the project that took place in São Paulo, Brazil. More specifically, it gathers information and perceptions on gender and waste picking from the waste pickers, leaders of the National Waste Pickers Movement (MNCR) and political authorities and technicians from various city government departments.

The findings based on the perspectives of women waste pickers reinforce the notion that gender inequalities are present both at home and in the workplace. Some of the main concerns of the women waste pickers include: the unequal division of domestic labour, the little free time women have to take care of themselves and their health as a result of pressures from work and home, the need for women's work to be valued, the naturalization of the division of labour within cooperatives that assume women must take on specific "feminine" tasks, the pressures of meeting work goals, how women are still blamed for not leaving violent homes, and the need for public policies to address concerns regarding health, education, and housing. These are just some of the issues the women waste pickers discussed, and they reveal how these women view the gender inequalities negatively impacting their work, health, and livelihoods.

Highlights of the study:

- ✓ The discussions with public authorities and technicians revealed how many are unable to grasp the effects gender inequalities have on gender-blind public policies. Many believe that public policies should have an inclusive nature, though not necessarily one focused on gender.
- ✓ The project has two important sections that provide recommendations for (1) a model of solid waste management with a gender perspective and (2) recommendations for the national solid waste law to incorporate a gender perspective.

For more on the project, see here:

<http://www.polis.org.br/uploads/1703/1703.pdf>

Gender relations in people's recycling cooperatives: a path towards the construction of self-management?

This study is the result of a master's dissertation done by Ioli Wirth in Campinas, São Paulo, in 2010. The study looks at two recycling cooperatives through a gender perspective, by particularly focusing on the production process, the sexual division of labour and the management processes. The author also conducted 15 interviews with men and women so as to understand their perspectives on the work they do.

Highlights of the study:

- ✓ The study reveals tensions given certain hierarchies in the management process that do not necessarily reflect solidarity or a more democratic management.
- ✓ The detailed analysis of the division of labour reveals that the sorting process is overwhelmingly done by the female waste pickers.
- ✓ The interviews conducted reflect a naturalization of "feminine" stereotypes for justifying the sexual division of labour.
- ✓ An exercise on inverting roles in the production process shows possibilities for denaturalizing "feminine" abilities.

For more on the study, see here:

<http://www.bibliotecadigital.unicamp.br/document/?code=000773989&fd=y>

National meeting with women waste pickers in Curitiba, Paraná

Since 2008, women waste pickers from Paraná state have been organizing a women's meeting on the outskirts of Curitiba. These meetings are important for bringing women waste pickers together in order to discuss their roles as workers and leaders in their own cooperatives and associations.

For more information on the four national meetings and others held with women waste pickers from other states, see here:

<http://www.mncr.org.br/setores/mulheres-catadoras>

News From Around The World:

Breaking Gender Barriers Around the World - Experiences from India⁷

Compared to its inception in 1993, the membership of Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakari Panchayat now reflects a higher proportion of female waste pickers. Whereas itinerant buyers, typically males, use a handcart, weighing scale, and some capital to purchase scrap, waste pickers carry just a sack and hand fashioned rake. An equal number of girls and boys picked waste as children but at adolescence the numbers of both declined. While girls reentered the profession as waste pickers as young adults, after marriage and motherhood, young men worked as itinerant buyers or scrap dealers.

KKPKP has discussed, analyzed, and reflected on the gender aspects of its membership and resolved that, in the spirit of democracy and participation, its leadership and decision making positions would reflect the composition of the sector.

The first gendered public debate was over the logo of KKPKP – a woman carrying a sack. Itinerant buyers argued for a “male” logo, but the majority justified the woman on the logo as the composition of the trade union was largely female. Two hundred male members initially quit, only to return two years later after accepting that the real gains for workers belied arguments over symbolism!

KKPKP, which has organized waste pickers with the intent of promoting recognition for the work of waste pickers, supports SWaCH (Solid Waste Collection and Handling or, officially, the SWaCH Seva Sahakari Sanstha Maryadit, Pune). The by-laws of SWaCH, India's first wholly-owned cooperative of self-employed waste pickers, established 75 per cent of representation of women in the Executive Committee. In tune with the ideology and the history of both organizations, and in the true spirit of rising to newer challenges, women waste pickers of SWaCH have broken existing stereotypes and stepped into typically male dominated roles, such as becoming garbage-truck drivers, managers or supervisors within SWaCH. These women have successfully juggled various responsibilities and challenges.

For more on KKPKP, see here: <http://wiego.org/wiego/kagad-kach-patra-kashtakari-panchayat-kkpkp> For more on SWaCH, see here: <http://www.swachcoop.com/>

⁷ Text was provided and written by Laxmi Narayan from KKPKP.

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About WIEGO: Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing is a global research-policy-action network that seeks to improve the status of the working poor, especially women, in the informal economy. WIEGO builds alliances with, and draws its membership from, three constituencies: membership-based organizations of informal workers, researchers and statisticians working on the informal economy, and professionals from development agencies interested in the informal economy. WIEGO pursues its objectives by helping to build and strengthen networks of informal worker organizations; undertaking policy analysis, statistical research and data analysis on the informal economy; providing policy advice and convening policy dialogues on the informal economy; and documenting and disseminating good practice in support of the informal workforce. For more information visit: www.wiego.org

