

# Gender and waste nexus

Experiences from  
Bhutan, Mongolia and Nepal



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*In memory of our late colleague Victor Tsang, who lost his life prematurely in the Ethiopian plane crash on 10 March 2019 near Addis Ababa. Victor was a passionate and dedicated champion of gender mainstreaming and sustainable development and contributed to this report with constructive inputs as the former gender focal point of the United Nations Environment Programme. His charisma and dedication will not be forgotten. He is sincerely missed.*

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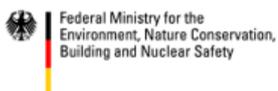
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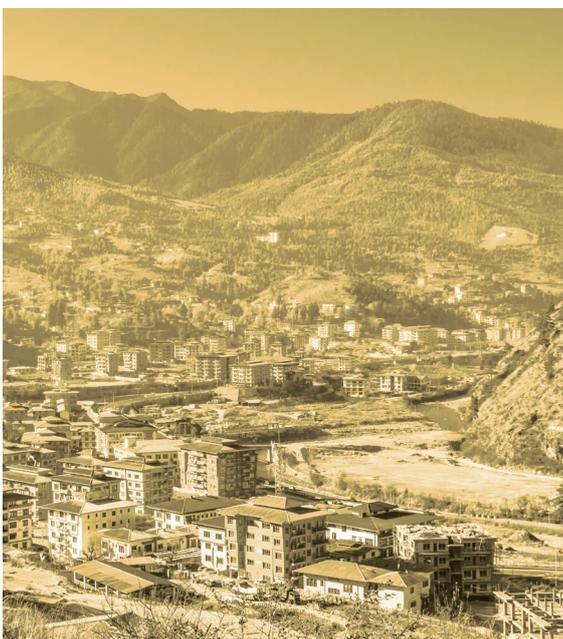
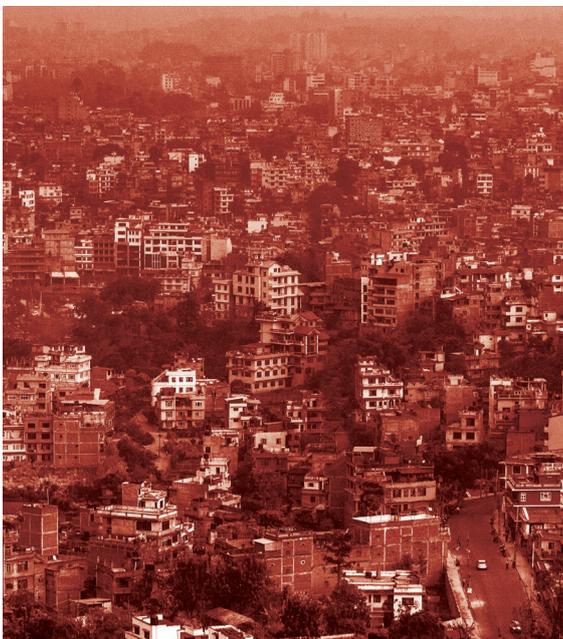
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## Contents

Foreword	7
Executive summary	8
Introduction	10
<b>PART 1</b>	
<b>Gender, waste and climate change</b>	<b>13</b>
The waste management hierarchy	14
Stakeholders and structural characteristics of the waste sector	15
Gender and waste management	16
<b>PART 2</b>	
<b>Country analyses</b>	<b>19</b>
■ Mongolia	21
■ Nepal	41
■ Bhutan	57
<b>PART 3</b>	
<b>Conclusion and the way forward</b>	<b>77</b>
Structures and conditions of the waste sector	78
Gender mainstreaming in the waste sector	80
Interventions and tools to enable gender equality	82
<b>Footnotes</b>	<b>84</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>85</b>
<b>ANNEXES</b>	<b>89</b>
Annex 1: Methodology	90
Annex 2: Objectives of gender mainstreaming in the waste sector	99
Annex 3: Summary of feedback during the stakeholder consultation in Mongolia in April 2019	100
Annex 4: Summary of feedback during the stakeholder consultation in Nepal in April 2019	101
Annex 5: Summary of feedback during the stakeholder consultation in Bhutan in April 2019	102



## Acronyms

BAOWE	Bhutan Association of Women Entrepreneurs
CH <sub>4</sub>	methane
CSIR	Council for Scientific and Industrial Research
CSO	civil society organization
CSR	corporate social responsibility
EPR	extended producer responsibility
GESI	Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Working Group
GHG	greenhouse gas
GNH	Gross National Happiness
IGES	Institute for Global Environmental Strategies
IKI	International Climate Initiative
ILO	International Labour Organization
INDC	Intended Nationally Determined Contribution
IPCC	International Panel on Climate Change
ISWM	integrated solid waste management
LEAD	Leadership for Environment and Development
NCWC	National Commission for Women and Children
NDC	Nationally Determined Contribution
NEPEM	Women's Research Center
NGO	non-governmental organization
NKRA	National Key Result Areas
NPAG	National Plan of Action for Gender
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
SAARC	South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SIGI	Social Institutions and Gender Index
SLCP	short-lived climate pollutant
SME	small and medium-sized enterprise
STEM	science, technology, engineering and mathematics
SWaCH	Solid Waste Collection and Handling
UFMG	University of Minas Gerais
UNEA	United Nations Environment Assembly
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
UNEP-IETC	UNEP International Environmental Technology Centre
UNFCCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
WIEGO	Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing
WWF	World Wildlife Fund

# Foreword

How to better manage waste is a key challenge for countries and cities around the world. Poorly managed waste threatens human and ecosystem health and depletes resources. It also contributes to climate change. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, GHG emissions from the waste and wastewater sector accounts for about 2.8 per cent of global anthropogenic GHG emissions (IPCC 2007).

While we have paid significant attention to better managing waste to address such issues, we have not been as mindful of the gendered nature of waste management and the critical role women play in achieving a pollution-free planet. This Gender and Waste Assessment underlines the positive role women can play in waste management, learning from the experiences of Mongolia, Nepal and Bhutan.

The division of labour based on conventional gender roles and stereotypes dominates various sectors. Waste management is no exception. Social and cultural stereotypes create unconscious gender bias in formal waste management operations.

Women are often left out once waste activities are formalized. In the case of Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia for instance, more men were employed when street cleaning activities were professionalized, even though women had played more active roles when the activities were voluntary or informal.

Mainstreaming gender in the waste sector can be an opportunity to drive improvements to the overall system. Women generally manage household waste and could play a valuable role in further waste reduction, segregation, composting and recycling.

Gender mainstreaming in the waste sector is also an opportunity for governments to meet their gender equality commitments, and can unlock economic benefits. Strengthening the participation of women in the waste sector can lead to more efficient and effective waste management operations.

It is my hope that this publication will inspire policymakers, businesses, communities and all other stakeholders to recognize unconscious gender biases where these occur, and create opportunities for women to take active roles in the waste sector. This will benefit us all – men and women, government, community and individuals – and help to reduce the environmental burden through sound management of waste.



A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read 'Inger Andersen'.

**Inger Andersen**  
Executive Director  
United Nations Environment Programme

# Executive summary

Waste, unwanted and discarded material, is a growing problem worldwide that concerns everyone. Waste management is a cross-cutting issue linked to socioeconomic and environmental aspects. Sound waste management can address a number of challenges, particularly those relating to health, poverty, food security, resource management, climate change and equal participation.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which are overarching global commitments to achieve sustainable development, promote waste reforms that prioritize the reduction of waste generation through prevention, recycling and reuse and aim to achieve environmentally sound management of waste throughout its life cycle. These commitments, including the overall mandate of the SDGs to "leave no one behind", underscore the importance of the gender issues in the waste sector.

Over the past few years, the issue of gender in waste management has received increasing attention, highlighting that waste production and management is not gender neutral. In fact, existing gender inequalities, responsibilities and roles largely shape how waste is situated in many social and economic systems. This report examines the relationship between gender and waste through case studies carried out in the capital cities of Bhutan (Thimphu), Mongolia (Ulaanbaatar) and Nepal (Kathmandu).

The current gendered profile of the waste sector in the three countries is the product of people's attitudes about men and women and the associated stereotypes directly linked to everyday life. Gender inequalities and norms are embedded in almost every aspect of waste management and are distinctly evident throughout the entire value chain, mirroring existing socioeconomic structures.

Waste management is an essential utility service governed by the public sector and is often implemented

Mongolia and Nepal, their governments do not recognize or protect this informal sector. As modernization progresses, actors in the current informal sector may find themselves at risk of losing their livelihoods.

The shift towards a more technological and engineering-based waste sector is under way in all three countries, and higher levels of education and training will therefore be required. At present, more men enrol and complete studies within science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) than women. If education opportunities are not equal for both genders, women will be excluded from the sector's critical entry points.

Households, which currently have the least formal engagement with the waste sector's power and policy structures, could be a fundamental area to reform, as household management and separation of waste supports the entire waste management chain. As of yet, neither the social and monetary value of households' services, nor the unpaid labour of women managing waste within households has been measured or even officially acknowledged. The alienation of men and boys from domestic and community waste management activities has significant social and economic costs, which will undermine any waste sector reforms if left unaddressed.

Equal opportunities and recognition for both women and men is needed to move the waste sector forward. Gender-based quotas, affirmative action or training opportunities for women in jobs with the biggest

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