Discussing women’s empowerment and changes in their relationships with men.
TECHNICAL SHEET

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If you read this booklet, please send us comments on how you used it and whether it was useful.
Suggestions on how to improve it can be sent to: sonia.dias@wiego.org.
Working on women’s empowerment does not imply the exclusion of men; on the contrary, it works towards contributing to everyone’s emancipation, including that of both men and women.

Keeping this in mind, the Latin American and Caribbean Network of Waste Pickers (Red Lacre), the National Movement of Waste Pickers of Recyclable Materials in Brazil (MNCR) and WIEGO began discussions on the importance of creating an open debate on the issue of gender and waste picking in 2012. Taking advantage of the relationship established with The Women’s Studies Research Centre (NEPEM) at the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG), a pilot programme was developed in Minas Gerais, which sought to map out and explore the main issues for a future programme on gender training at both the national level and also for the Latin American continent.

Throughout 2012, the process of elaborating the project occurred in a participatory manner. Several meetings with women waste pickers from local cooperatives in the state were held. As a result of these meetings, it was decided that exploratory workshops would occur in four regions across the state. After this participatory process, the Gender and Waste Project was created in 2013 with support from MNCR/ANCAT, WIEGO, NEPEM and INSEA.

This exploratory project had the objective of involving women waste pickers in discussions regarding the multiple areas where women face discriminations, including at home, at work and as political leaders. In addition, the project also initially mapped out the strategic and practical needs of the women waste pickers in relation to training and professional qualification that are considered necessary for women to gain political and economic empowerment.
Focusing on this objective, workshops were held in various regions of the state of Minas Gerais. Women discussed themes such as autonomy, masculinities and femininities, the barriers to their empowerment, as well as suggestions on how to confront them. The energy, the quality of the discussions, the women's commitment and their passion in the struggle for a more just society for all, but specifically for men and women waste pickers, was quite evident in the workshops. It became clear that discussing gender should not be seen as a problem, but a means for a solution instead. Adding gender issues to the debate is important because it can not only contribute to and promote internal democracy within organizations, but also help establish more egalitarian relationships between men and women.

In other words, discussing gender is closely related to the agendas of the waste picker’s movement, which, upon the movement’s creation, confronted the issue of the invisibility of this sector.

Congratulations to the women waste pickers, congratulations to MNCR for embracing this cause. Congratulations to all the partners involved in this project. Sonia Dias.

WIEGO
Hello Waste Pickers!
My name is Marineté and I am part of Brazil's Waste Picker's Association. There are many issues we need to address in order to establish some progress: poor working conditions, the state government policy for recyclers, laws, alcoholism... well, there's certainly a lot to talk about!!! But this booklet aims to discuss women's issues in our sector.

It's a booklet for you to engage in D-E-B-A-T-E with others, not to be read on your own. Therefore, let's make a deal: at least try to read it in pairs! However, in the best of worlds, while using this booklet as a guide, it would be even better if you created a reflection group in your association, at work or at home.

I guarantee that using the booklet this way will be more enjoyable and more productive. It's like that African saying: "Two heads are better than one". So let's get started, keep your mind open and get your family, workmates, and companions in the struggle together and make the most of it!
A BIT OF HISTORY

FROM 2011 TO 2012, MANY TALKS WITH WASTE PICKERS’ NETWORKS TOOK PLACE...

THE IDEA OF TACKLING GENDER WAS DISCUSSED IN VARIOUS MEETINGS, INCLUDING REDLACRE’S MEETING IN NICARAGUA.

AND IN 2013, A TOTAL OF 60 WOMEN PARTICIPATED IN THE 4 WORKSHOPS HELD IN MINAS GERAIS.

OK FRIENDS SO THIS IS HOW IT WORKS. WE’LL ASK SOME QUESTIONS, YOU DISCUSS THEM AND SOMEBODY COULD EVEN TAKE NOTES. ONLY ON THE FOLLOWING PAGE WILL WE SHOW YOU WHAT WAS DISCUSSED DURING THE WORKSHOPS … AND THEN YOU CAN TALK ABOUT WHAT CAME UP IN THE WORKSHOPS. SO, LET’S GET STARTED?!

I WANT TO THANK EVERYONE FOR TAKING THE TIME TO COME TOGETHER. LET’S BEGIN BY TALKING ABOUT HOW THIS BOOKLET WAS CREATED.

This booklet touches on the main topics that came up during the workshops. The booklet is not a shortened report of the workshops, nor does it reproduce the activities the women waste pickers participated in. It mainly looks at how women waste pickers from Minas Gerais see themselves at HOME, at WORK and within the MOVEMENT. This booklet highlights some statements made during the meetings; however the women's names do not appear in order to protect their identity.
1. ARE THERE CERTAIN THINGS THAT ARE ONLY FOR MEN AND OTHERS ONLY FOR WOMEN?

This is a good question, isn’t it?! You can start talking about this, but there’s also another question on the other side.

2-AND WHAT ABOUT IN RECYCLING, ARE THERE CERTAIN TASKS ONLY FOR MEN AND OTHERS ONLY FOR WOMEN?

Is anybody taking notes?
In the old days, it was very clear what men and women's roles were in society. Men went to work while women took care of the house and the children.

Given all the feminist struggles, and especially women's presence in the labour market, it's more difficult to figure out what is a man's role and what is a woman's role. Nowadays, there are women who work as aircraft pilots and men who work as chefs.

Men are physically stronger, but in many associations, women are the ones who compress the materials, drive trucks and negotiate with businesses.

In recycling, the majority of the workers are women, but in the management of the associations, the majority are men.

Women give birth, but raising children is also a man's duty.

In the associations, people have to work in shifts: we do a bit of everything so we are aware of the difficulties involved in each task.
**LET’S HAVE A LOOK AT THE POSITION WOMEN CURRENTLY HOLD IN SOCIETY.**

- **Women are still in a subordinate position in society.**
- **Women earn less than men.**
- **On average their salaries are 70% of those earned by men.**
- **So as a matter of fact, we still live in a highly sexist society where men hold most of the power, and in order to confront this, women need to gain autonomy.**

**Women represent around 22% of all national parliament members in the world.**

**Of the waste pickers who work in private scrap shops and earn up to 3 or 4 minimum wage salaries, 95% are men.**

**QUESTION: WHAT DOES WOMEN’S AUTONOMY MEAN IN WASTE PICKING?**
Women need to be masters of their own selves.

Many men feel uneasy when women gain power.

Women have the right to choose what they want to do.

Always hold one’s head up high and face life.

Be free, to have an active voice, be happy.

To work and not financially depend on their husbands.

Pay bills and negotiate with businesses.

Fight together, being closer to each other.

Wear whatever we want without being judged or harassed.

So what if I want to have a hot dog with ice cream? That’s OK by me.

Women have the right to have an active voice, be happy.
Women began thinking about their situation at home, at the work place and in the movement. 6 main key points stood out: Violence, ignorance, fear, sexism and discrimination, illnesses and work overload.

Now let’s think about each one of these:

**Violence**

Violence comes from different sources: parents, uncles, grandfathers and also from work colleagues and mates. Despite these difficulties, women have started to present their complaints about violence, though this is never easy.

“My stepfather tried to abuse me. When I told my mother, she didn’t believe me. I ended up in the streets at the age of 13 or 14 with a friend who was in the same situation as me.”

“When I get home after work, he takes all my money, leaving me with nothing. He beats me, he mistreats me.”

“Violence is not just sexual, but also psychological, which is even worse because you can’t protect yourself.”

“There is no respect towards homosexuals.”
FEAR / EMBARRASSMENT

“I was only certain that when I disagreed with something, my heart would start beating harder and I felt like talking but I didn’t...I was scared to death to talk.”

“Many women are embarrassed of talking. They are afraid of saying something wrong, afraid of being cast aside.”

“Afraid of expressing their sexual orientation and not be respected.”

LACK OF QUALIFICATIONS

Isn’t it nice to see a leader talking and debating with so much confidence? It’s during these moments that women take note of the skills they lack, what they still have to learn. Take a look at this statement:

“I would look at Valdilene and think I had to be as brave as her, fight until the end, speak passionately. My eyes would sparkle when I used to see her and Eduardo.”

During the discussions in the workshops, it became clear there was a general lack of understanding about waste picking, the cooperatives and politics.
SEXISM AND DISCRIMINATION

Sexism is directly linked to discrimination. Most men discriminate against women because they think women are inferior; they think women are unable to do many things. This discrimination is not always obvious and is often concealed. There are also some women who think men make better leaders. This is a result of the fact men have socially and historically been given more space to be at the forefront of businesses and politics. Women are now looking to gain more recognition in such spheres since they have either been excluded or marginalized from public spaces.

Since this has been embedded in our culture and history, both men and women end up reproducing these sexist attitudes and ideas on a daily basis.

“...we know 85% of the workers (in the warehouses) are women. We know most of them are the ones who support their families’ livelihoods.”

“In the association, I never participated in anything, they never invite anybody to the auditing process, everything is done behind closed doors, I’m powerless there.”

“Our peers don’t understand the difficulties of collecting materials with the truck when we are suffering from menstrual cramps.”

“Men stay away during the sorting process, they think this is a women’s job.”

“You have the right to feel sexual desire, to touch yourself without feeling guilty...”
Finally, women have to face two obstacles, which include illnesses due to hard work and the strains of having to work both at home and in the warehouse. Women have many duties: looking after children, the sick, the elderly and even inmates. How are they going to find any time for the struggle?

HEALTH ISSUES/SICKNESS AND WORK OVERLOAD
We have double and triple shifts.

"Some women suffer from back problems - due to being bent down for long hours and having to carry heavy bundles."

SO MANY PROBLEMS, DON'T YOU AGREE? AND WE STILL HAVEN'T MENTIONED ISSUES SUCH AS DRUG USE AND THE NATIONAL WASTE MANAGEMENT POLICIES. BUT LET'S KEEP OUR HEADS HELD HIGH AND NEVER GIVE UP!

“What happens to your arms and back when you lift a 200 to 300 kilo bundle?”
**QUESTION: WHAT ARE THE NEEDS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR WOMEN TO GUARANTEE THEIR AUTONOMY?**

**WHAT ARE THESE NEEDS?**
THE ISSUE THAT MOST CAME UP WAS THEIR DESIRE TO LEARN MORE!

DO YOU KNOW WHAT DEMANDS WERE BROUGHT UP DURING THE WORKSHOPS?

AND THERE WERE OTHER PROPOSALS...
As women, we need to improve our material conditions.

And do you think that was it?
Women don’t want to be just remembered on Mother’s Day.

We want two very important things:

**Advisory Services**
- Lawyers
- Psychologists
- Enforcement of gender violence laws

**Men's Involvement**
- Support
- Recognition
- Partners in the struggle for women's rights

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- Partners in the struggle for women's rights
Women waste pickers aren’t only discriminated against by men waste pickers... Women, in general, are treated as inferior by men at home, at work and in politics.

Women waste pickers are not the only ones being discriminated against. Both men and women waste pickers are marginalized for dealing with waste, for being poor and for being black!!

Societies are still racist and sexist.

As a result of all of this, we are now aware of two things.
SO WHAT EMERGED FROM ALL THESE TALKS?

- Women’s voices are becoming stronger
- We are conquering more space
- Cooperatives are spaces where we have support and also learn
- Many women have already overcome adversity
- I take pride in being a waste picker
WOMEN
WASTE PICKERS DON'T WANT TO MISS OUT ON BEING PART OF HISTORY...

WOMEN NEED TO SUPPORT EACH OTHER

IT'S NOT AN ISSUE OF INFERIORITY, IT'S ABOUT A LACK OF OPPORTUNITIES

WE WANT TO BE LEADERS IN THE ASSOCIATIONS AND IN THE MOVEMENT

WOMEN NEED MORE CONFIDENCE

IT'S NOT AN ISSUE OF INFERIORITY, IT'S ABOUT A LACK OF OPPORTUNITIES

WE DON'T WANT TO JUST BE AT THE BASES

WE HAVE TO FIGHT FOR OUR RIGHTS!

WE NEED TO HAVE THE DESIRE TO FIGHT, TO PARTICIPATE

WE WANT ECONOMIC, POLITICAL AND SYMBOLIC POWER!!!

WE WANT TO PARTICIPATE MORE IN THE MANAGEMENT OF THE ASSOCIATIONS

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WE WANT A PERMANENT WOMEN'S FORUM.
So, my friends, now we need to humbly think about how to address all these issues in order to build a more just and kinder country.

That deserves a round of applause!
TO LEARN MORE


Addressing gender issues means a lot more than just organizing some events for women. These events are important, but they should reflect a plan for continuous action. In other words, they should not just be sporadic, but based on a group of coherent and inclusive actions integrating both men and women.

**The following key issues must be taken into account:** work to transform the structures that perpetuate women’s discrimination; develop and implement empowerment programmes for women on a continuous basis; include gender demands in the waste pickers’ collective claims at the local, state and national levels.

Transforming gender relationships implies not only making changes in one’s attitudes, but also making changes in the structures within the organizations that perpetuate structural gender inequalities. This means:

- Setting up gender forums or committees within the regional and national waste picker’s movements.

- Establishing representative participation of women in leadership/coordination positions in the cooperatives and in the movement.

- Creating a gender-based programme that includes continuous and inclusive actions: literacy programs, political training, management and public speaking training, educational campaigns on issues such as gender violence, day care centres, sexuality, women’s health, and actions against homophobia, etc... The main demands of women waste pickers were identified in the workshops held in Minas Gerais, Brazil (see pages 17, 18 and 21).

**Helpful resources to develop gender-based programmes in your cooperative, network or movement:**


Chapter 3 of this booklet provides tools for working with gender issues in recycling.

Let’s get to work and good luck.

Sonia Dias _ WIEGO
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THANK YOU
VERY MUCH!