



**Women in Informal Employment:  
Globalizing and Organizing**

## **Gender and Waste: Rethinking Relations for Empowerment**

*Participatory methods are essential in exploring the many levels of submission and discrimination women waste pickers face and in creating resources for their empowerment and opportunities for their economic autonomy.*



Group photo of women participants in the workshop for the metropolitan region of Belo Horizonte

In 2012, the Latin American Waste Pickers' Network (Red Lacre), the National Movement of Waste Pickers in Brazil (MNCR), and WIEGO agreed on the importance of opening up a dialogue about gender in informal recycling. A critical analysis borne out of such dialogue—examining “invisible” issues like gender relations, violence, prejudice, and women’s autonomy—is essential for strengthening women’s role as active citizens and for building a gender sensitive system that will strengthen democratic processes from the ground up.

An existing relationship with the Center for Study and Research on Women (NEPEM) of the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG) allowed these groups to start a pilot project in the state of Minas Gerais, Brazil. Later INSEA, an NGO, joined the project.

## A Participatory Process

From the outset, the gender and waste project focused on identifying women waste pickers' needs from their own perspectives as the foundation of developing the pilot project. So, in 2012, a consultative series of meetings was held with women from cooperatives across Minas Gerais and in meetings like 2012's meeting of REDLACRE in Nicaragua and the Waste and Citizenship Festival in Belo Horizonte. These meetings served to inform the project of women waste pickers' demands and concerns, which ultimately influenced the design of the project. The women identified practical as well as strategic needs for their empowerment.

**“ We have to get involved in politics to better achieve our rights.”**

– Project Participant



Feedback meeting about phase one of the project at the Waste and Citizenship Festival, 2012.

## The Gender and Waste Project Comes to Life

Informed by the participatory meetings, the Gender and Waste project launched in 2013. By implementing gender workshops in four regions of Minas Gerais, the project began to explore the multiple levels of discrimination that women waste pickers face in the home, in the workplace, and as leaders in their networks and movements. The project also aimed to map the needs—such as professional and educational qualifications—of women waste pickers so that they can be economically and politically empowered.

**“ In most of the world—even in countries that prohibit gender discrimination in the workplace—women are denied equal participation and opportunities to participate in a public life in a just and dignified way.”**

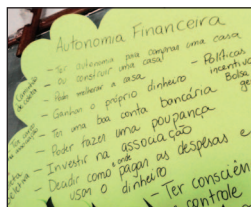
– Marlise Matos, Professor and Coordinator of NEPEM

During the workshops, women were asked to describe what autonomy for women is—at home, at work, within the cooperative, and within the waste pickers' movement. Their answers were used to form an “autonomy tree”—a visual reference that allowed them to see how interlinked women's private and public experiences of power and powerlessness are. The women identified:

- A strong desire to be recognized as leaders in all spheres.
- A goal to learn—literacy, computer literacy, public speaking, and training in policy.



Autonomy tree exercise – different dimensions of gender empowerment are discussed.



## Creating Resources

Through enhancing researchers' understanding of women waste pickers' situation and what strategies would work better in their life context, the workshops proved foundational in the creation of two resources for the empowerment of women waste pickers across Latin America.

The academic/practitioner toolkit will include an annotated bibliography of existing literature on waste and gender (in English and Portuguese), learnings from the workshops with women waste pickers and a list of teaching resources (videos, manuals, etc.) with summaries of each resource, key points, and links.

The team has also crafted a popular publication targeted at waste pickers that includes key lessons learned and discussions around the importance of mainstreaming gender.

## Creating a Legacy

Angela Oliveira of INSEA says there's been a marked increase in women's participation in the waste pickers' associations and cooperatives. With that comes the need to further analyze the gender relations in the workplace. "Our goal is that these discussions are shared with male waste pickers," said Oliveira. Sonia Dias, of WIEGO, agrees: "the empowerment of women does not mean the exclusion of men—it means the emancipation of all people. Discussions on the ways in which gender relations impact women's and men's lives—in the home and in the workplace—are imperative for awareness and change."

Women waste pickers have also seen positive change as the result of the project. Madalena Duarte, a waste picker leader with the MNCR said, "this project is very important for us women waste pickers because it has trained us to exercise our autonomy. As women waste pickers,

**“It would be nice if all the women from my social base could have the same opportunity I am having here today in this women’s meeting. I want to participate in future meetings.”**

– Project Participant



Drafting the popular gender toolkit.

**“What we need is to be in a collective discussing autonomy, when things are done as a group we are able to advance our autonomy...”**

– Madalena Duarte



Waste picker Madalena Duarte oversees the project budget.

## Creating a Legacy (continued)

we play a very important role in society. Together we can go much further. With organization, dialogue, and understanding, we can multiply our impact, exercise what we've learned in our associations, and train new women leaders."

“ **Autonomy is to have a position, it is to be able to take a stand at my home with my children, to deal with problems at home and at work (...) to achieve all we want.**”

### MORE INFO

To learn more about the project and its methodology, please contact Sonia Dias at [sonia.dias@wiego.org](mailto:sonia.dias@wiego.org) or Madalena Duarte at [madalenuaduarte47@gmail.com](mailto:madalenuaduarte47@gmail.com).



[www.wiego.org](http://www.wiego.org)



[www.facebook.com/wiego global](https://www.facebook.com/wiego global)



[@WIEGOglobal](https://twitter.com/WIEGOglobal)

Gender roles in discussion.

