

TURNING PROMISES INTO ACTION:

GENDER EQUALITY
IN THE 2030 AGENDA
FOR SUSTAINABLE
DEVELOPMENT



Unsustainable production and consumption patterns are the key drivers of natural resource depletion, climate change, food insecurity, water scarcity and chemical pollution, all of which have far-reaching implications for the lives and livelihoods of women and girls, particularly in developing countries.¹ Women, including indigenous and afro-descendant women, are often at the forefront of organizing for environmental conservation, protection and restoration, facing threats and violence as a result.² Governments and corporations as key duty-bearers should recognize women's roles, respect their dignity and rights and take active measures to steer the transition to more sustainable and gender-equitable patterns of production and consumption.

At a glance

- Over-production and over-consumption are mainly driven by the affluent; but it is the poorest who are most exposed to their devastating effects
- Environmental degradation and gender inequalities converge in current strategies of global production premised on low wages and natural resource extraction
- High levels of consumption result in enormous quantities of waste. Women make important contributions to waste management, but often do so under hazardous conditions.
- Both governments and corporations have a key role to play in steering consumption and production patterns towards more sustainable and gender-equitable paths.

Key messages

- 1) Over-production and over-consumption are mainly driven by the affluent; but it is the poorest who are most exposed to their devastating effects.**

Discussions on SDG 12 focus mainly on overproduction and overconsumption. But these take place in an increasingly unequal world where as many as 767 million people live on less than US\$2 a day and struggle to cover their basic consumption needs. The richest 10 per cent of people in the world are responsible for half of global emissions.³ Poor people who often struggle to meet their basic consumption needs produce the least emissions, and yet they are most vulnerable to climate change induced disasters, such as droughts, heat waves and floods. Particularly in rural Africa and Asia, small-scale farmers, many of them women, are seeing their crop yields shrink as a result.⁴ Reductions in crop yields is likely to affect food distribution within households and increase food insecurity with women and girls bearing the brunt. In two thirds of countries with available data, women report higher levels of food insecurity than men.

- 2) Environmental and gender inequalities converge in current strategies of global production premised on low wages and natural resource extraction.**

A key part of the strategy of global production is not only to seek (often feminized) low-wage production sites, but also to locate production in countries with low or poorly enforced workplace and environmental protection capacities.⁵ The fact that women's labour wages are usually set at lower levels than men's means women typically predominate on the bottom tier of most under-regulated global production systems. In the context of under-regulated production chains, the exploitation of women's labour often goes hand in hand with significant environmental damage. Global garment and textile production, for example, is not only a low-wage and highly feminized industry; it is also one of the biggest water polluters which in turn contaminates agricultural fields and fish stocks.

3) High levels of consumption result in enormous quantities of waste. Women make important contributions to waste management, but often do so under hazardous conditions.

With global consumption on the rise, many countries face waste management crises. Particularly in developing countries, a large share of municipal solid waste is collected and recycled by informal workers who harvest waste as a means of livelihood while providing a vital public service in cities with little to no formal household waste collection and recycling coverage.⁶ Although sex-disaggregated data is scarce, studies have shown that women make up between a third and half of waste pickers; and in some West African and India cities they constitute the majority. Women engaged in this occupation typically collect low-value waste such as cardboard and cans, with higher value items such as scrap metal being reserved for men. Although waste picking can be extremely hazardous for women, it is often one of the few sources of income available to them. Policies aimed at formalizing waste collection and recycling should hence not displace but integrate waste pickers and their organizations into waste management and planning, recognizing their contributions and ensuring decent livelihoods at the bottom of the recycling chain.⁷

4) Governments and corporations have a key role in steering production and consumption patterns onto a more sustainable and gender-equitable path.

Public investments and incentives can steer production patterns towards greater sustainability *and* greater equality while gender-responsive regulations can reduce public health and environments risks and enhance respect for labour rights. In terms of consumption patterns, transport is one area where significant synergies would be possible. In many parts of the world, passenger cars, which leave large material and carbon footprints, are largely consumed by a privileged minority, while poor women disproportionately rely on their feet and public transport. Where data is available it indicates that women are less likely to own and drive motorized vehicles than men, while valuing and relying on public transport to a much greater degree. Investment in affordable, safe and reliable public transport systems would hence not only reduce emissions, but also respond to the rights and needs of women, particularly those from lower-income households.⁸

References

¹ UN Women. 2018. *Turning Promises into Action: Gender Equality in the 2030 Agenda*. New York: UN Women.

² AWID. 2017. *Women Human Rights Defenders Confronting Extractive Industries an Overview of Critical Risks and Human Rights Obligations*. AWID.

³ Oxfam. 2015. *Extreme carbon inequality: Why the Paris climate deal must put the poorest, lowest emitting and most vulnerable people first*. Oxford, UK.

⁴ UN Women. 2018, op cit.

⁵ UNEP. 2016. *Global Gender and Environment Outlook 2016*. Nairobi: UNEP.

⁶ Dias, S. 2016. "Waste pickers and cities." *Environment and Urbanization* 28(2), 375-390.

⁷ WIEGO. 2013. *Waste Pickers: The Right to Be Recognized as Workers*. WIEGO.

⁸ UN Women. 2018, op cit.