

Afri-Plastics Summit 2023: Ensuring gender empowerment for women in waste management

 By [Shan Raddiffe](#)

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Speaking during her keynote address at the Afri-Plastics Summit and Awards 2023 in Nairobi, Kenya yesterday, Jocelyne Landry Tsonang of the African Circular Economy Network, put the spotlight on the gender roles in waste management.



Image source: Muntahina Tanni from [Pexels](#)

Tsonang, an executive team member and Cameroon country representative for the African Circular Economy Network, pointed out the stark differences between the involvement of men and women when it comes to household waste management. The Nigerian study she referred to revealed that mothers manage 45.71% of household waste; children handle 45.18%; while fathers manage just 9.11%.

"This is a study that was carried out in Nigeria but ... these results pretty much reflect the situation in Africa and maybe other parts of the world but mostly in Africa.

"This is just as a snapshot of household levels in terms of waste management generally, but particularly in terms of plastics."

She said that considering these numbers, waste management strategies need be more focused on women, while still including men because there is a need to equalise levels of management in terms of household waste.

Groceries

As women are often the ones to do the majority of grocery shopping, it falls on them to be selective as to which products to buy. "When women have the responsibility of doing grocery [shopping] it means that they also have the responsibility of choosing maybe the least wasteful products on the market because they will be the one to take care of the waste," Tsonang explained.

"Women also play now a vital role in minimisation, separation and pre-treatment of household waste ... It's very important to show the strong role that they have in the waste production value chain."



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As women are key decision-makers in households, Tsonang emphasised how vital it is to empower them with the knowledge to make better choices through the use of informative packaging, or to simply design products that will generate less waste.

She pointed to policies that should be in place to regulate the amount of waste imported into countries so as to reduce the burden that women carry in terms of waste disposal.

Efficient technology is also vital to ensure the ease in which women can access waste disposal. Women are often overworked "so they don't necessarily have the time to carry the garbage to the truck," said Tsonang.

"Me, for instance, I have to drive like 5km away from my home before I can get a suitable place to dispose of my garbage and that is not sustainable." There are times, she said, that she's unable to get to a dump site so the garbage just remains at the house for weeks, which becomes a health risk for her and her family.

"So the need to put in place efficient technologies that help these women is definitely important. And women also need to be empowered to be given the right information on the kind of products they are purchasing because they are responsible for sourcing, and separating waste at the source. They need to be empowered in choosing less wasteful products."

Labour division

While women hold the greater role in waste management in the household, labour in the sector is a different story.

"We have fewer women in the plastic sector involved in technical roles, such as processing engineers, or maybe garbage truck drivers. It's mostly a male-dominated environment. So it is very important to also make sure that women also have access to these more technical roles in order to also improve their livelihoods and their participation in the waste management," stated Tsonang.

"It is also [vital] to have the women empowered [with knowledge] to be engaged in the financial negotiation in the waste trade industry. It is very important because they need to know how to bargain the price of the goods that they are selling locally to do that."

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Equipping them with the knowledge to bargain better prices will also enable them to pay their waste pickers more.

"We need to increase the wage of women with workers by incentivising virgin plastic and then setting up strong EPR regulations and transparent implementation framework.

"We also need gender inclusive waste management policies," so that technology used in the sector can just as easily be used by women as it would be for men - for instance ensuring a pregnant woman could just as comfortably drive a truck as a man would.

Health of wastepickers

When looking at wastepickers, women are more involved in picking plastic waste than other materials, as men will steer toward the heavy materials such as scrap metal. However, the cost-to-volume ratio is incredibly disproportionate, as 1kg of plastic is only worth \$0.05. It is estimated that 35 plastic bottles would amount to just 1kg.

Many of these women will go to the dumps to collect this waste "and the downside is it's not always a safe place for women. It's true that the men and the women are in the same environment on the dump site. But then you have harmful chemicals in most of these plastics that women are more vulnerable to," as these toxins tend to accumulate in the fatty tissue, which women tend to have more of, Tsonang explained.

"These harmful chemicals are a common cause of endocrine disorder, cancer, genetic disorders, immune system disorders, and all the other kinds of diseases.

"Waste workers need to be organised into cooperatives in order to give them a common voice, and not only [that], but also legal recognition. And they need to enact strong regulation to stop the use of harmful chemicals in the plastic manufacturing industry."



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Stop waste exports

"There should be strict regulation to ban the export of waste to poor countries which do not have adequate waste management infrastructure," Tsonang reiterated.

"Exporting waste to the south because of cheap labour is not helping the south - those jobs created out of it are not sustainable because there is no regulation."

She pointed out that women often do not have protective equipment when working in these waste-ridden environments, so when they fall sick, the public health system has to cover the cost of medical care. She implored governments to intervene and take care of their people's health by banning waste imports.

"Wherever the waste is being produced, it should be processed there or not exported to poor countries. They should also develop material passports for recycled plastics for traceability of recycling to ensure that human rights and most especially

women's rights are being protected.

"It's big firms - I don't want to name them - buying recycling, or claiming that they are buying recycling; there needs to be a material passport, [which] is going to help us to know to trace the value chain of the recycled plastics they are buying, to know if at the source where they bought the plastics, women's rights are protected," Tsonang concluded.

ABOUT SHAN RADCLIFFE

Shan Radcliffe is the editor of Bizcommunity HR, Education and Legal.

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