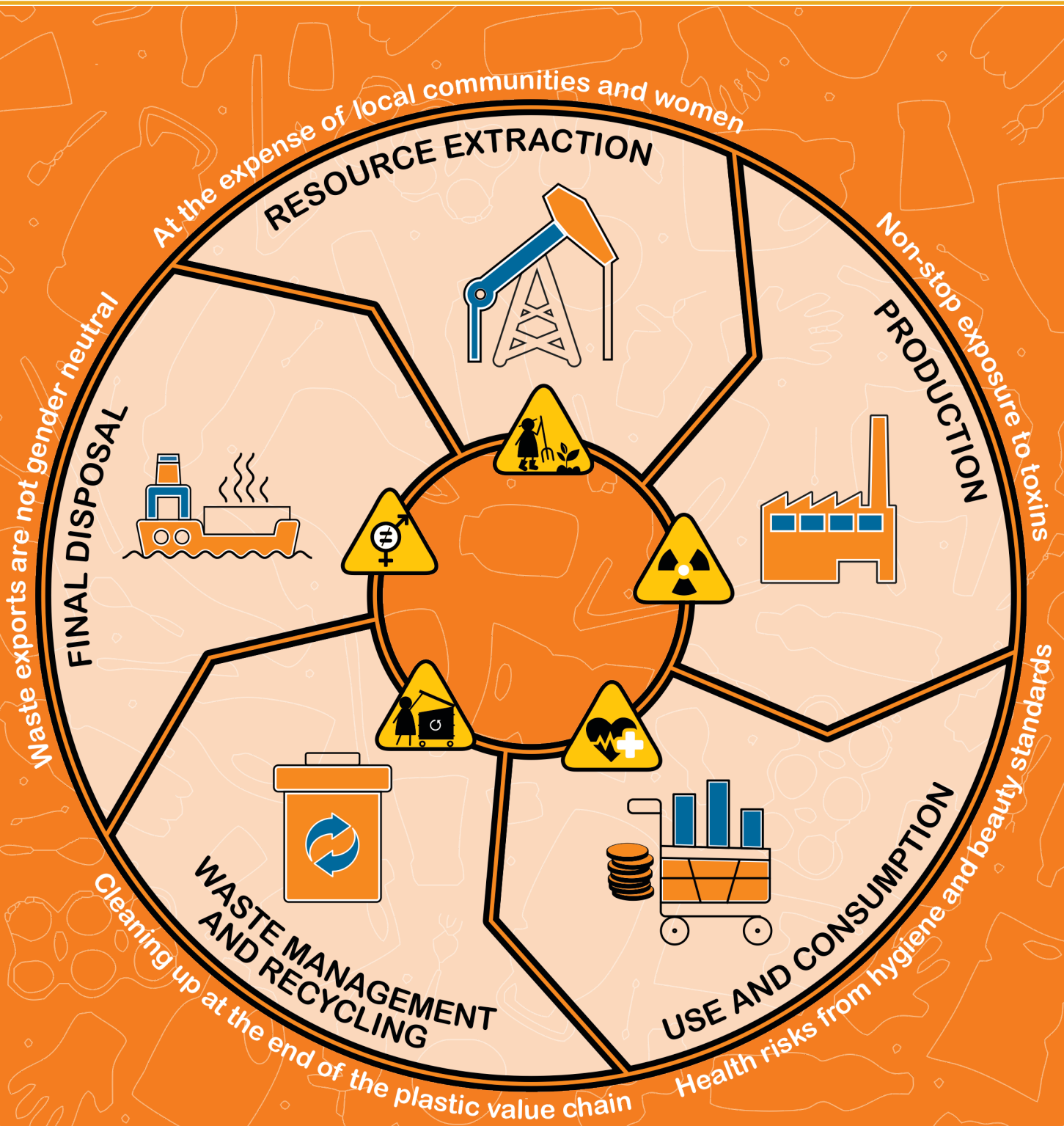
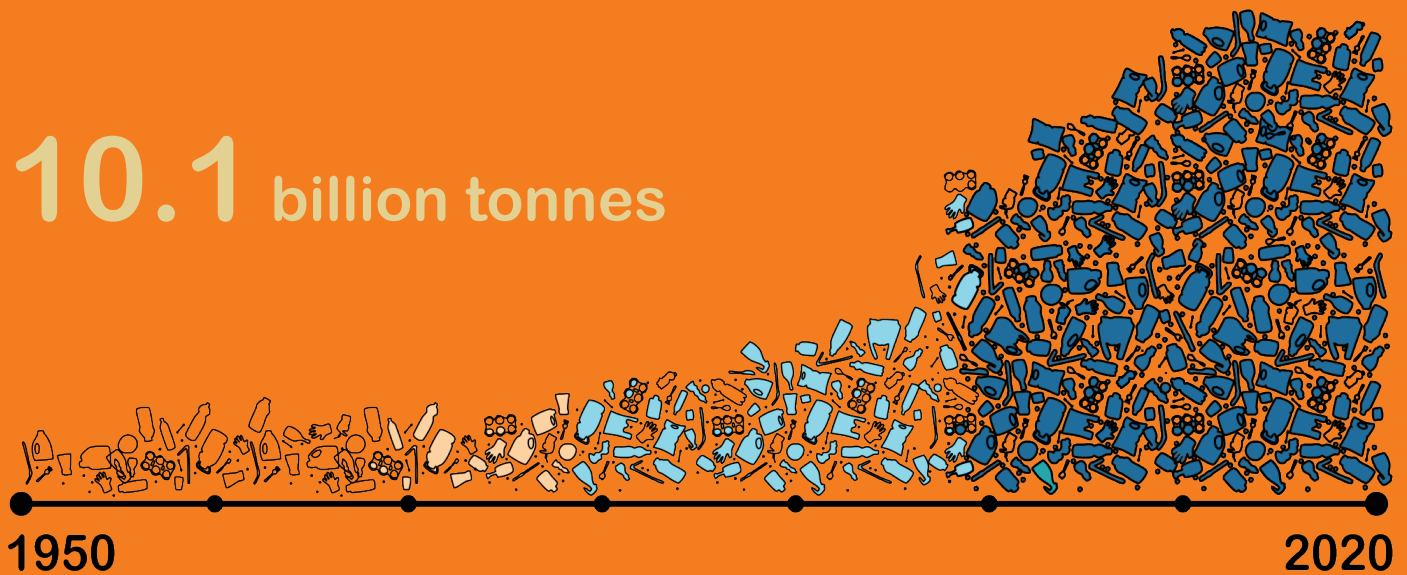


COMBATTING GLOBAL PLASTIC POLLUTION — FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES FOR A GENDER-JUST APPROACH



10.1 billion tonnes



Plastic pollution is a global problem. Every minute, a volume equivalent to a lorry load is dumped into the sea. Around 7 billion of the more than 10 billion tonnes of plastic produced between 1950 and 2020 have gone into landfills and the environment at large.¹ Given this magnitude, negotiations were launched in November 2022 on a binding global agreement to stem the enormous tide of plastic waste. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) warns that the environmental, social, economic and health risks of plastics are now as extensive and severe as those of climate change, the loss of ecosystems and the exploitation of natural resources.

Many people, including policy makers, are becoming increasingly aware of the destructive consequences of plastic waste. But what does this have to do with gender inequality? To what extent do plastic hazards affect the sexes and genders differently? And why can the plastic problem worsen existing disadvantages and discrimination?

Plastic pollution changes our living spaces and reduces the ability of ecosystems to adapt to climate change. But not

only that – it also directly affects the ability of millions of people to secure their livelihoods. That means we have to look at the division of labour, in particular between women and men. Around the world, women are responsible to a far higher degree than men for ensuring the survival of their households. At the same time, their access to resources like land, water and loans has been greatly reduced. That impacts their work not only in farming and fishing but also in industry, retail and the informal sector. Women are affected directly and existentially by the loss of arable land and the contamination of water and coastal areas.²

Numbers alone, however, do not convey the extent of the plastic crisis and the magnitude of global destruction creeping up on us. We are seeing only the tip of the proverbial iceberg of rubbish. Plastics cause problems throughout their entire “lifecycle”. Environmental organisations and the global movement Break Free From Plastic (BFFP) have long been urging us to name and ban the dangers plastics pose to people and the environment in every stage of their cycle, including fossil fuel-based resource extraction, production,

The Heinrich Böll Foundation’s concept of gender is inclusive and intersectional. We understand ‘women’ as a non-binary social category that covers all who identify with it, also and especially trans and intersex persons. This paper, however, refers primarily to the very different effects of the plastic crisis on women and men as formed by social norms and hierarchical constraints but also by biological and genetic factors – in their organs, hormones and other physiological features. Scientific research has thus far focused only on these two categories, so we lack the data to draw conclusions about people of other genders and non-binary identities. However, we explicitly note the hazards and discrimination they face from biological and social consequences of the plastic crisis.

¹ Geyer et al, 2017: “Production, use, and fate of all plastics ever made”, in: *Science Advances* 2017, Jul. 19 (<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/28776036/>)

² All references in this text to hierarchical gender relations are based on our non-binary and inclusive understanding of gender. Data on how plastic pollution affects non-binary persons are limited, and we can refer only to scientific studies and reports worldwide whose data differentiate primarily between women and men.

especially affects women and disadvantaged groups

MORE THAN **10.1** BILLION TONNES OF PLASTIC WERE **PRODUCED** WORLDWIDE FROM 1950 TO 2020. THAT IS MORE THAN **ONE TONNE FOR EVERY PERSON** ON THE PLANET TODAY.

OVER **1/2** OF THIS AMOUNT WAS PRODUCED IN THE **LAST TWO DECADES**.

use, consumption and disposal. Taking a critical look at the stages raw materials go through to become plastics, and at the growing production of plastics as such, activists from civil society have succeeded in revealing the responsibilities of the plastics industry. For its part, however, the industry seeks to divert attention to what are often small-scale and secondary waste management and recycling efforts.

A critical look at the entire plastics cycle is also of crucial importance from a feminist perspective, because the plastic problem cannot simply be reduced to consumer use patterns or to harmful microplastics in cosmetic products. On the contrary, every stage of the plastics cycle reflects different gender-specific experiences and exposures. From petrochemicals and microplastics to waste export and management, the plastics lifecycle has different and gender-specific consequences. The only way to develop just and sustainable solutions to the destruction of the environment is to start by recognising the extent to which discriminatory structures and gender inequality contribute to the plastic problem, and conversely, the degree to which the plastic crisis exacerbates gender power discrepancies.

EVERY MINUTE, A VOLUME OF PLASTIC WASTE EQUIVALENT TO A **LORRY LOAD** IS DUMPED INTO **OUR OCEANS**.



RESOURCE EXTRACTION:

AT THE EXPENSE OF LOCAL COMMUNITIES AND WOMEN



Plastics and synthetic fibres are made from oil and gas. The high levels of greenhouse gas emissions from extracting petroleum, fracking for gas, and refining and processing these fossil resources are very harmful for the climate. In addition, the development of oil and gas deposits and the construction of refineries have profound effects on the environment and social structures of local and usually BIPoC³ communities. Abrupt industrialisation deepens gender power gaps and further marginalises especially women and ethnic and gender minorities who do not have a voice in these decisions. Not infrequently, installation of these plants and facilities is associated with sexual exploitation and violence. Soil contamination from oil spills eliminates sources of revenue primarily for women and marginalised groups engaged in small-scale farming, fishing and trade. Health problems arise from methane and carbon dioxide gas emissions as well as carcinogenic soot particles. Comparative studies show that women are disproportionately affected by these changes, whether that means loss of income, migration or greater levels of care work, whereas at least some men can find new jobs in the fossil fuel industry. Viewed locally or globally, women have held only 20 percent of jobs in the oil and gas industry.⁴

³ Black, Indigenous and People of Colour

⁴ The World Bank (ed.), 2013: *Extracting lessons on gender in the oil and gas sector* (<https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/266311468161347063/pdf/798940NW/P0280E0Box0379795B00PUBLIC0.pdf>)

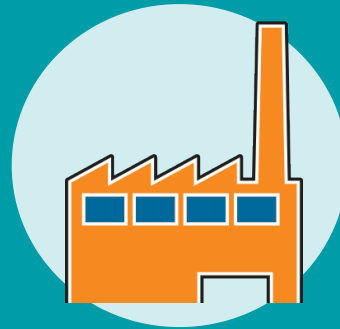
PRODUCTION:

NON-STOP EXPOSURE TO TOXINS



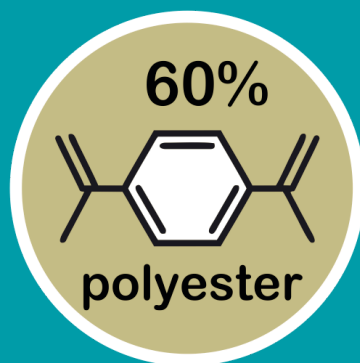
We can no longer imagine a world without plastics. And people who do care work, especially those who provide intensive care for one or more people, are essentially dependent on the convenient properties of plastics – whether in their own homes or in institutional care settings. All the more overburdened and understaffed at present, hospitals and care homes could not function at all without plastic-based single-use products like gloves, liners, needles, tubes, infusion bags and more.

Hard and break-resistant, soft and flexible, waterproof and washable, suitable for sterilisation and vacuum packaging – depending on the properties desired, plastics can be based on a wide range of chemical compounds. Many use-specific properties, however, are the result of chemical additives. And many of these additives, such as plasticisers or resins with hardening qualities, are health hazards. Chemicals that behave in similar ways to hormones are especially problematic. Known as endocrine disruptors, they pose invisible dangers to everyone, in particular at workplaces. A closer look at gender patterns on the global labour market, however, shows that women are at greater risk because of certain physiological characteristics (see boxed text). Above all, socially constructed gender hierarchies and gender-specific labour markets channel women and people facing multiple forms of discrimination into poorly paid and dangerous types of work in industrial mass production with high levels of chemical exposure.



Biological factors and gender

- Women generally have a higher percentage of body fat and therefore take on greater proportions of bio-accumulative and fat-soluble chemicals such as phthalate plasticisers.
- Many female bodies metabolise toxins differently, with different effects on their respective e.g. nervous, cardiac and/or circulatory systems. Only recently taken into account, these gender-specific divergences have not been sufficiently studied.
- Female bodies are generally especially sensitive to toxins in hormonally active phases like puberty, menstruation, pregnancy, lactation and menopause. Chemicals with hormonal (endocrinological) effects can be especially disruptive to development processes.
- Risks multiply during pregnancy and lactation because harmful chemicals reach the foetus or infant via the placenta or breast milk.



The extent to which gender inequality heightens women's exposure to toxic substances in plastic production is especially evident in sectors where plastics are hardly suspected. Women make up around 30% of the workforce in the plastics industry, but at least 70% in the textile and footwear industries worldwide. Their jobs are largely precarious, low-wage, and without social benefits. The association of textiles with cotton is a fallacy. Around 60% of our clothing contains polyester, and textiles alone account for 15% of the world's plastic production. Workers at textile plants are continually exposed to synthetic substances like acrylic, nylon and highly toxic dyes, usually without adequate protective equipment. Eighty percent of women in the textile industry are between 18 and 35 years of age, and are therefore especially at risk for breast cancer and pregnancy-related problems.⁵

⁵ OECD/DAC (ed.), 2020: *Issues Note: Differentiated environmental impacts on women's and men's health and well-being* (<https://www.oecd.org/env/GFE-Gender-Issues-Note-Session-3.pdf>)

especially affects women and disadvantaged groups

USE AND CONSUMPTION:

HEALTH RISKS OF HYGIENE AND BEAUTY STANDARDS



Unequal gender power relations and the societal norms behind gender roles are also reasons for the unequal distribution of health risks in how plastics are used. Around the world, women continue to do the majority of unpaid care work and housework for their families. As a result, they are exposed considerably more than men to harmful cleaning agents, among other things. Moreover, over 80% of domestic workers worldwide are women, and more than 70% of this group are migrants. They have highly precarious working conditions without any type of labour protection, and therefore face especially high exposure levels to e.g. phthalates, formaldehyde and “forever chemicals” such as PFAs and PFCs.⁶

Socially constructed and industry promoted standards of beauty fuel the use of cosmetics and personal care products. Around a quarter of women in western industrial countries use up to 15 different such products daily. Most of these products contain microplastics, formaldehyde, parabens and other harmful chemicals. Around a third of cosmetic products on the market in German-speaking countries – such as shower gels, lipsticks and hair sprays – contain harmful endocrine-disrupting chemicals (EDCs). Campaigns by the cosmetics industry to increase profits and reach new target groups, coupled with changing conceptions of gender, are leading ever more men from the global North to use significantly more personal care products.⁷ While this might be seen as a positive sign of social change, it also signals increased personal and environmental exposure to harmful products and the resulting risks.

ACCORDING TO A EUROPEAN STUDY IN 2017, MORE THAN **49 BILLION UNITS** OF SINGLE-USE MENSTRUAL PRODUCTS WERE USED IN THE **28 EU MEMBER STATES**, GENERATING A TOTAL OF **590,000 TONNES OF WASTE**. THIS WASTE ENDS UP IN **LANDFILLS (87%)** OR **INCINERATORS (13%)**, WHICH WASTES RESOURCES AND GENERATES NEGATIVE IMPACTS ON THE ENVIRONMENT (E.G., RESOURCE CONSUMPTION, AIR, SOIL AND GROUNDWATER POLLUTION, HIGHER CO₂ EMISSIONS).



CONVENTIONAL SINGLE-USE **MENSTRUAL PADS** ARE USUALLY **MADE OUT OF 90% PLASTIC** AND CONTAIN HUNDREDS OF CHEMICALS IN THEIR COMPOSITION, WHICH AFFECT NOT ONLY THE ENVIRONMENT BUT ALSO **CONSUMERS' HEALTH**. THESE ITEMS OFTEN CONTAIN FRAGRANCES AND SYNTHETIC AROMATIZERS THAT CAN CARRY UP TO **3,900 CHEMICALS**, WHICH HAVE BEEN IDENTIFIED AS **CARCINOGENS, NEUROTOXINS**, SUBSTANCES THAT CAN CAUSE **SKIN IRRITATION**, DISRUPT THE HORMONAL AND REPRODUCTIVE SYSTEMS, DESTROY THE HUMAN ENDOCRINE SYSTEM AND CAUSE **HEART DISEASES, INFERTILITY, AND CANCER**.⁸



Menstruation and hygiene products

Feminist environmental activists from the anti-plastic movement have been raising the alarm in recent years about the enormous levels of toxins in single-use hygiene products. Plastics are especially prevalent in mass-produced items such as sanitary pads, whose plastic content approaches 90%. Endocrine disruptors in these fossil fuel-based plastics can accelerate hormonally triggered and other forms of cancer. In wealthy countries of the global North, women are estimated to use an average of more than 12,000 menstrual products. The harmful effects on both health and the environment are colossal.

⁶ PFA: polyfluoroalkyl substances; PFC: per- and polyfluorinated chemicals.

⁷ <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/05/17/men-are-a-multibillion-dollar-growth-opportunity-for-the-beauty-industry.html>

⁸ <https://zerowasteurope.eu/2021/02/why-we-need-a-bloody-manifesto-in-europe/>



WASTE MANAGEMENT AND RECYCLING:

CLEANING UP AT THE END OF THE PLASTIC VALUE CHAIN



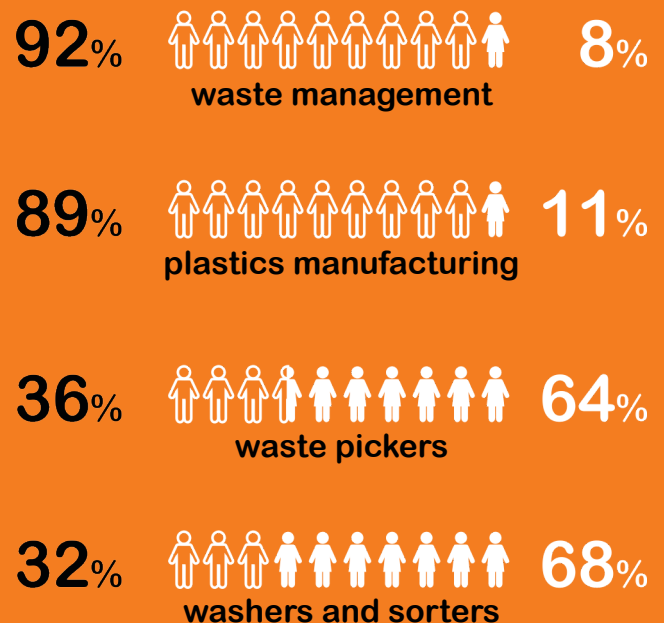
The plastic problem is closely related to social inequalities in the final stages of its cycle as well. A global perspective is especially important when looking at waste management, recycling – and final disposal:

Multinational corporations in the petrochemical industry are happy to promote “recycling”, or the sorting and re-using of plastic waste, as a solution to the plastic problem. This focus prevents a decline in profits and shifts responsibility to end consumers. However, recycling itself figures prominently in the global plastic crisis because thus far less than 20% of the world’s plastic waste has in fact been recycled. Moreover, waste picking and recycling have been a source of income primarily for low-income people in poorer countries – which reinforces existing social and economic gender disparities. Collecting, sorting and selling rubbish are informal labour activities nearly everywhere, but men have better access than women to the sector’s few formalised or higher-status jobs. In addition, studies from individual countries show that poor women continue to have little access to higher-grade plastics such as PET and PE.⁹

In Ghana, for example, little data is available on labour force participation within the plastics value chain, of which men constitute about 61% and women about 39%. However their respective roles are not equal. Women work predominantly in the informal economy as itinerant waste pickers (64%) and in recycling companies as washers and sorters (68%). The formal economy within the value chain, with greater protections, social security and higher status (i.e. waste management firms, plastic sourcing, production and manufacturing companies), had the lowest representation of female workforce (12%); men constitute 89% of plastics manufacturing and 92% of waste management workforce.¹⁰



Labour force participation within the plastics value chain



⁹ PE: Polyethylene; PET: Polyethylene terephthalate
¹⁰ <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/05/gender-women-plastics-ghana/>

especially affects women and disadvantaged groups

FINAL DISPOSAL:

WASTE EXPORTS ARE NOT GENDER NEUTRAL



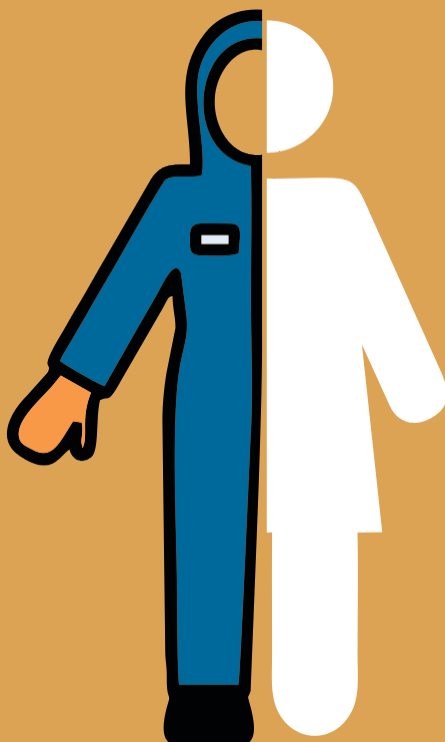
Countries of the Global South and of moderate per capita income continue to produce and dispose of lower levels of plastic waste on average than wealthy countries of the global North. Communities in poorer countries, however, face higher levels of plastic pollution in water and soil due to unregulated disposal processes and open landfill sites. Overlooked in such comparisons is the fact that countries of the Global North – led by the USA, Japan and Germany – ship tonnes of their non-recyclable plastic waste to Asia.

Women and children often earn their livelihoods at the lower end of global plastic waste flows, for example at unofficial landfills or illegal dumps. Their activities, such as burning plastic products to recover metal components, are gruelling as well as extremely dangerous over the long term. The gases and toxins thereby released, including carbon monoxide, particulates and dioxins, lead to severe respiratory and neurological diseases. Personal protective equipment for the plastics production industry and formalised areas of waste management is made primarily with men's sizes and needs in mind, and can therefore be useless for the majority of female workers. In the informal sector, women and children frequently lack even gloves or other simple protective apparel. Here it should be noted that informal



waste pickers in large cities like Cairo, Lima, Lusaka or São Paulo often perform the equivalent of municipal services in handling the growing volumes of rubbish. Recognising the expertise involved, civil society organisations have begun commissioning these workers to conduct brand audits, namely studies that identify and classify environmentally harmful waste. However, only a few NGOs such as WIEGO (Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing) support women subject to multiple forms of discrimination who routinely face egregious racist, sexist and social pressures – and who are far from seeing anything approaching effective anti-discrimination policies.

And finally – to return full circle – those who are responsible for the survival of their families are in all probability those who suffer the greatest consequences from the slow destruction of natural resources, water, soil, air and biodiversity when unregulated “disposal” of plastic leads to the release of billions of tonnes of microplastics and toxins.



PERSONAL **PROTECTIVE**

EQUIPMENT FOR THE PLASTICS

PRODUCTION INDUSTRY AND FORMALISED

AREAS OF WASTE MANAGEMENT **IS**

MADE PRIMARILY WITH MEN'S

SIZES AND NEEDS IN MIND, AND CAN

THEREFORE BE **USELESS** FOR THE

MAJORITY OF **FEMALE WORKERS.**

INSIGHT

How activists around the globe are combining environmental and social justice

As part of the global Green political movement, the Heinrich Böll Foundation (hbs) had been confronting the plastic crisis with its European and worldwide partners long before the onset of COVID-19. Guided by the vision of a socially and gender-just world without plastic pollution, hbs international offices have been focusing their ecopolitical educational efforts on understanding the big picture and the overall repercussions of the plastic crisis. To change attitudes on this scale, comprehensive knowledge of causes and structures is needed, along with participation by all the very diverse people affected. With its projects to combat environmental destruction from plastic waste, the hbs is not only addressing the responsibilities of plastic-producing companies. It is also working to reveal intersectional discrimination against women and LGBTIQ+ people who in many respects are especially hard hit by the crisis.



ONLINE: INTEGRATE INTERSECTIONALITY! WEBINARS HEIGHTEN ACTIVISTS' AWARENESS OF DISCRIMINATION

Do we realise that bans on disposable plastic products can also have negative effects? Many products – from hygiene materials to drinking straws – make it easier to care for seniors or people with special health needs, or even make it possible in the first place. Low-cost menstrual pads – which contain plastic contaminants – can enable girls in disadvantaged areas to attend school when having their periods. And single-use plastic bottles are not necessarily used for reasons of “convenience” but also because some households lack access to clean drinking water.

In order to ensure that environmental protection measures do not complicate life for people with disabilities, and in order for environmental information and education to reach all groups in society and remain free of discrimination, the Rethink Plastic Alliance – the European arm of the global Break Free From Plastic Alliance – has developed an internal series of workshops for anti-plastic activists. Its “Intersectionality Matters” webinars create space for underrepresented groups in the movement to discuss discriminatory experience in connection with plastic pollution. That in turn helps environmental activists examine their own approaches and policy positions. This is an important example of gender and discrimination-sensitive policy awareness in advocacy and campaign work, which should serve as an example for other environmental organisations.

<https://rethinkplasticalliance.eu/>

RETHINK PLASTIC

BRUSSELS: ECOFEMINIST ADVOCACY FOR GENDER-JUST EU ENVIRONMENTAL POLICIES

The European Green Deal was initiated in 2019 with the aim of achieving climate neutrality in the European Union by 2050. The new Gender Equality Strategy from the European Commission, also launched in 2019, sent a positive signal to NGOs. Finally – or so they hoped – European policy makers would be devoting greater attention to analytical and political links between environmental policy and gender inequality. However, the European Green Deal and other environmental directives are essentially gender-blind. Tired of empty declarations of intent from the EU Commission, Women Engage for a Common Future (WECF) joined forces with other European NGOs and the Heinrich Böll Foundation in Brussels to produce a feminist analysis on environmental policy in fields including business, climate and energy. An ecofeminist perspective shows the need to rechart the course against the plastic crisis with the help of gender-sensitive chemical policies. The analysis calls on the EU and its member states to extensively analyse gender-specific chemical hazards, and to integrate both information and effects into their policies and all relevant directives.

<https://eu.boell.org/en/2021/07/16/why-european-green-deal-needs-ecofeminism>

EL SALVADOR: ENVIRONMENTAL JOURNALISTS AT RISK

With inadequate government regulation and insufficient municipal oversight, the flow of plastic waste from the USA to El Salvador increased enormously during the COVID-19 pandemic. This became obvious when a remarkable amount of hard-to-recycle substances accumulated on El Salvador's Pacific coast. The hbs office in San Salvador proceeded to support an environmental activist who was investigating all stages of the destructive phenomenon and the entire hierarchy of policy decisions. As part of her coverage, she accompanied a recycling specialist who lives on her waste-picking work and is currently advising an NGO on a brand audit in order to hold the relevant companies to account. The journalist identifies loopholes in the law as well as decision makers who fail to take action. Her gripping report shows that women possess expertise and are politically active on all levels pertaining to plastic waste. However, environmental journalists are under threat in Latin America, all the more so when uncovering illegal practices often connected in some way with major corporations. Gender-sensitive journalism on the effects of waste exports and the lack of government control is therefore all the more important.

<https://sv.boell.org/es/2022/05/16/el-salvador-sin-controles-para-los-plasticos>

THESSALONIKI: HOW PLASTICS MAKE WOMEN ILL

More than 20 hbs international offices have now translated the *Plastic Atlas* and released it in multiple exciting formats. Although menstruation and reproductive cycles are still a taboo topic in many countries, hbs offices and their partner organisations do not hesitate to highlight the chapter on gender-based exposure and adverse effects. The office in Thessaloniki, for instance, worked with Greek environmental organisations to make a ten-part video series on the plastic problem. One video examines the major risks associated with hygiene products. By mimicking, blocking, suppressing or otherwise interfering with hormones and their messenger substances, plastics can cause enormous endocrinological harm. Women and LGBTIQ+ people are exposed to these “endocrinological disrupters” to a high degree.

<https://gr.boell.org/en/media/remote-video/plastic-greece-9-risk-hormonal-chaos>

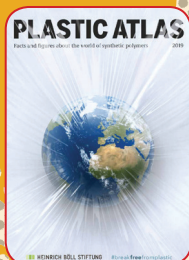
From recycling to rights: environmental justice, anti-discrimination and the fight against plastic



BERLIN: UNPACKING THE PROBLEM – PLASTIC WASTE DIVIDES GENERATIONS

“Nothing’s going to change until people understand that plastic is absolutely everywhere! But we haven’t covered the plastic problem in school yet.” What kinds of outreach are especially suited to help young people take action against the flood of plastic? What do they need and want to know about the crisis without getting overwhelmed by the sheer size of the problem? How can abstract facts about plastic types and components be made more accessible so we can all keep closer tabs on the industry? The hbs headquarters has released a special publication entitled *Unpacked! Plastic, Waste, and Me*. It answers 70 questions about the plastic crisis with the help of graphics and stories. Moreover, the booklet itself is a plastic-free product of international dialogue, because a youth advisory board was part of the development process. Its discussions covered very personal topics like how chemical substances can affect their bodies and growth.

<https://www.boell.de/en/unpacked-plastic-waste-me>



BERLIN: THE *PLASTIC ATLAS*

The *Plastic Atlas* was launched in 2019 to provide hard facts and figures about the huge risks that plastics pose to human health – from their production and use to disposal. Here a gender imbalance should be noted: because of physiological factors and the social division of labour, the toxic chemicals in plastics affect women and LGBTIQ+ people far more than men. The booklet’s figures make this clear in striking ways. For example, disposable menstrual products mean that their users have close bodily contact with fossil fuel-based and hormonally active plastics over decades. The market in this field is dominated by companies that offer cheap disposable plastics along with other toxic and harmful products. They prioritise profits from items like disposable sanitary pads and diapers over the health of people. This is an urgent topic of feminist discussion that has now entered mainstream awareness in the anti-plastic movement.

<https://www.boell.de/en/plastikatlanten>

THAILAND: GENDER ANALYSIS CONSIDERS MULTIPLE FORMS OF DISCRIMINATION

The international waste business propagates a creed of three Rs: “reduce, reuse, recycle”. But this does not reflect the experience of many women in Asian countries. Their reality is: “produce, use, recycle”. Poor women, in particular, are overrepresented in the low-wage sector which includes the textile and electronics industries as well as cleaning work. As producers and users in these sectors, and also in the informal recycling industry, they are exposed to chemicals and toxic plastic waste. The hbs office in Bangkok has produced an online dossier on plastic waste that shows the wide range of social roles women are required to play in the “lifecycle” of plastics, without any monetary or social recognition. Further research and an analysis of the plastic crisis from a feminist perspective have revealed not only the important role played by economically and socially disadvantaged women in combatting the crisis with innovative means of reducing and recycling plastics. They have also highlighted approaches to policy and action: Gender-sensitive protective measures are of crucial importance in all parts of the plastics industry.

<https://th.boell.org/en/2022/03/18/plastic-crisis-must-be-feminist-agenda>



JORDAN: ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE NOT POSSIBLE WITHOUT GENDER JUSTICE

Around 60 percent of the waste in the Red Sea consists of plastic, and nearly 40 percent of that consists of single-use plastic bottles. The effects of plastic waste on the aquatic environment and public health in the port city of Aqaba are grave. The Royal Marine Conservation Society (JREDS), which has partnered with the hbs in Jordan for many years, is raising environmental awareness in the region and advocating for a plastic-free bay. Action by local women’s organisations is very important in developing and implementing more effective environmental regulations. However, a patriarchal system of values in Jordanian society consistently undermines gender equality and leaves women in particular little opportunity to shape policy. Project work, therefore, concentrates in part on empowering female activists to gain expertise on plastic waste and strengthen their scope and public presence in environmental policy bodies and processes. JREDS itself has also gone through an internal learning process and developed a gender strategy for its own work.

<https://ps.boell.org/en/environmental-justice-program>

Stereotypical gender roles are slowly changing in large urban centres. From a global perspective, however, there is hardly any sign of change in the unjust division of labour overall between genders. On the household level, women continue to bear the main responsibility for waste separation and disposal. They also make most purchases of everyday goods. Yet how much power do they actually have – especially in countries of the global North – to reduce the consumption of raw materials and the waste thereby produced, by exercising choice in the items they buy? Given that per capita material consumption in OECD countries is still 60% higher on average than global levels and that waste production lies at an average of 1.5 kg per person per day, gender can in fact be a key factor in changing consumer behaviour.



WOMEN ARE MORE KNOWLEDGEABLE ABOUT LABELS WITH **ENVIRONMENTAL INFORMATION**, AND MEN MORE KNOWLEDGEABLE ABOUT LABELS WITH **ENERGY-SAVING INFORMATION**.¹¹

Spurred by the fact that women and people socialised as women use many cosmetic and hygiene products contaminated with microplastics and endocrine disruptors, feminist environmental organisations are calling for greater transparency to give consumers more power. As a first step, the NGO Women Engage for a Common Future (WECF) is demanding comprehensive and easily understandable labelling on the toxicity levels of plastics used in workplaces and households. Consumers “must be empowered to make informed purchasing decisions” (WECF, 2021).

Better informational policies, however, are not nearly enough to counter the plastic crisis and its social and gender-specific effects. Although information and education can encourage more critical consumer behaviour, which in turn can increase pressure on producers, sellers and policy makers, the greatest need is for clear and strict national and international regulations that not only prohibit the production of toxins but also penalise foreseeable violations.

POLICY DEMANDS OF FEMINIST ENVIRONMENTALISTS

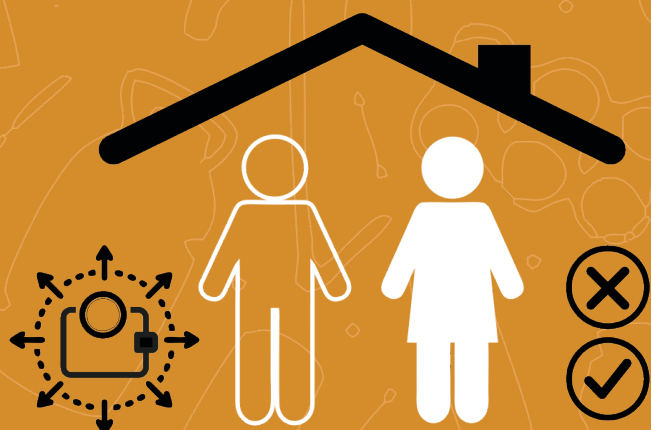
The anti-plastic movement in civil society, led by the global “Break Free From Plastic” alliance launched in 2016, has already achieved considerable results with policy makers and also exerted pressure on manufacturers. Various governments have taken numerous initiatives to lower the volume of single-use plastic waste. Yet far too little has been done in the production stage to reduce the use of microplastics and other toxins in the first place. And everyone involved in this issue – not only companies but also governments, researchers and civil society – must face the fact that they have paid little or no attention to gender-specific or gender-responsive aspects of the damage to health and the environment.

The feminist organisation WECF is therefore demanding that the most vulnerable groups, namely children and pregnant people, be taken as the norm for assessing risks and determining guidelines. It is also calling for strict application of the precautionary principle. Consistent use of this principle, which prevents or largely reduces potential harm in advance, would require far-reaching bans on toxic plastics along the entire plastic production chain.

Here it should be noted that all attempts thus far to stem the flow of plastic waste into waterways or to other countries via exports – whether they be banning plastic bags in many African and Asian countries, regulating single-use utensils as the EU now does, limiting microplastics in cosmetics as in the USA, or continuing the half-hearted decades-old “green dot dual system” in Germany – do nothing about the underlying problem but instead focus on disposal and thereby place the burden almost exclusively on consumers. These measures tackle the wrong end of the problem. In short, they place hardly any pressure on manufacturers to limit their production. Moreover, these end-of-pipe policies reinforce the unjust division of labour between genders. To some extent they even target women as primary consumers, as unpaid cleaning personnel, and as low-wage workers at the contaminated facilities of industries with plastic-based production. Alarmed

¹¹ OECD (2014): *Greening Household Behaviour: Overview from the 2011 Survey — Revised edition, OECD Studies on Environmental Policy and Household Behaviour*, Paris (<https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264214651-en>)

plastic pollution requires gender-responsive action



WOMEN MAKE MORE THAN 80% OF HOUSEHOLD PURCHASING **DECISIONS**, BUT MEN **SPEND** MORE THAN 80% OF HOUSEHOLD INCOME.¹¹

by the fact that women come into contact with more than 200 hazardous chemical substances a day, the World Health Organisation (WHO) is calling to stop burdening those affected, and instead to apply the “polluter pays” principle on a large scale, for example by imposing taxes and penalties on the production of toxic substances.

The plastic problem is one of the greatest environmental challenges of our time. It has to be addressed systematically and without delay. However, any solution that does not combine environmental with gender considerations will fall short. Gender analyses and feminist demands reveal the enormous damage to the health of many disadvantaged people and those subject to multiple and intersectional forms of discrimination. They show very close connections between the gender-hierarchical division of labour worldwide on the one hand and mass plastics production and plastic industry profits on the other. Women’s unequal rights, their lack of decisional and other power over resources, their shortage of time due to disproportionate cleaning and related tasks in households and communities as well as their double and triple burdens of unpaid care work, and the consequent hurdles they face in acquiring education and participating in public life – all of these issues are also part of the plastic crisis.

And precisely that is what is missing: comprehensive and gender-sensitive analyses and approaches to all stages of the plastic cycle – from raw material extraction and processing, production and consumption to recycling and final disposal. Business interests are not alone in neglecting the role of gender. Research on waste reduction and recycling that ignores the expertise of the main users of plastics does essentially the same thing. Policy makers are also gender-blind, for example when they base regulations intended to protect people against the dangers of plastics on stereotypical gender norms. Even anti-plastic activists from civil society have thus far not formulated their demands or designed their actions in ways that are sufficiently gender-responsive and sensitive to people facing multiple forms of discrimination.

High hopes are understandably being placed on a legally binding global treaty on plastic pollution that seeks to stem the flood of plastics even against resistance from industry. However, all stages of the plastic cycle need to be taken into account. Above all, all groups affected and harmed throughout all stages of the plastic cycle require equal representation and participation in these international negotiations. And finally, above and beyond all the official preparations and intergovernmental negotiations for this UN treaty, the rights of women, LGBTIQ+ people and all minorities to help shape policy decisions regarding petrochemical production and the use and disposal of plastics and their components must be upheld and strengthened.

WOMEN BUY PRIMARILY **SHORT-LIVED CONSUMER GOODS**, MEN PRIMARILY **LONG-LASTING (LUXURY) ITEMS**.¹¹



WOMEN TEND TO SHOW MORE **SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION PATTERNS** AND GREATER AWARENESS OF **ENVIRONMENT AND HEALTH-RELATED MATTERS**.¹¹

SOURCES AND FURTHER MATERIALS

Heinrich Böll Foundation

- Plastic Atlas: Facts and figures about the world of synthetic polymers, 2019
<https://www.boell.de/de/plastikatlas>
<https://www.boell.de/en/plasticatlas>
- On gender:
<https://www.boell.de/en/2022/03/11/overexposed>
- Website for the publication *Plastic, Waste and Me. Unpacked*, 2021
https://www.boell.de/sites/default/files/2022-09/220207-plasticbook_v102.pdf
<https://plastic.boell.org>
- Dossier: *Feminist perspectives on global environmental justice*, 2022
<https://www.boell.de/en/feminist-perspectives-on-global-environmental-justice>

Non-governmental organisations (studies, investigations, projects)

- EEB and WECF (publishers), 2021: *Why the European Green Deal needs Ecofeminism*
https://www.wecf.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Report_Green-Deal-Gender.pdf
- WECF (publisher), 2017: *Plastics, Gender and the Environment: Findings of a literature study on the lifecycle of plastics and its impacts on women and men, from production to litter*
<https://www.boell.de/sites/default/files/2022-02/plastics-gender-environment.pdf>
- WECF, 2021: *Gender Just Chemicals Policy: Together for a Toxic-Free Future*
<https://www.wen.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Gender-Just-Chemicals-Policy-WECF-and-Wen.pdf>
- The MSP Institute on Gender and Chemicals
<http://gender-chemicals.org/>
<http://gender-chemicals.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Gender-Road-Map-final.pdf>
- Webinar series on gender equality in various chemical sectors:
<http://gender-chemicals.org/45min-for-gender>
- WIEGO on self-organisation by waste pickers:
<https://www.wiego.org/waste-gender-rethinking-relations-empowerment>
<https://www.wiego.org/sites/default/files/resources/files/WIEGO-Dias-Gender-Perspective-Recycling.pdf>
<https://www.wiego.org/gender-waste-project#toolkits>

International organisations and institutions

- UNEP/Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee (INC)
<https://www.unep.org/about-un-environment/inc-plastic-pollution>
- World Economic Forum (2021): *Guide to Ensure Gender-Responsive Action in Eliminating Plastic Pollution*
<https://pacecircular.org/sites/default/files/2021-05/GPAP-Global-Gender-Guidance-May-2021.pdf>
- Case study on Ghana and circular economy:
<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/05/gender-women-plastics-ghana/>

Intersectional, inclusive advocacy alliances on combatting plastic waste

- Break Free from Plastic (BFFP):
<https://www.breakfreefromplastic.org/2022/04/27/over-90-global-youth-leaders-band-together-in-break-free-from-plastic-youth-summit/>
- Exit-Plastik Deutschland:
<https://exit-plastik.de/chemikalien-in-plastik/>
- Chemiepolitische Mittagstalks 2021/2022:
<https://exit-plastik.de/mittagstalks/>
- HEJ!Support: Health, Environment, Justice:
<https://hej-support.org/women-and-chemicals/>
- On plastic and toxic-free menstrual products:
<http://ptfperiod.info/>
- Plastic Pollution Coalition:
<https://www.plasticpollutioncoalition.org/blog/2017/8/17/plastic-pollution-coalition-stands-for-inclusivity-and-respect-for-all>
- Rethink Plastic Alliance EU:
<https://rethinkplasticalliance.eu/news/the-movement-towards-a-global-treaty-on-plastic/>
- Menstruation and plastic-free hygiene items:
<https://rethinkplasticalliance.eu/news/vulva-la-revolucion/>
- Zero Waste Europe:
<https://zerowasteurope.eu/2021/02/why-we-need-a-bloody-manifesto-in-europe/>
- International Alliance of Waste Pickers:
<https://globalrec.org/tag/women-waste-pickers/>

Unless otherwise stated, this paper is based in large part on data and findings from the sources listed here, in particular the 2019 hbs Plastic Atlas, the 2017 WECF literature study, the 2021 WECF background paper on chemicals policy, and the policy briefing from the Exit-Plastik.de alliance. We would like to thank Niamh Cullen of the Rethink Plastic EU alliance for providing unpublished material

IMPRINT

Published by the Global Unit for Feminism and Gender Democracy of the Heinrich Böll Foundation, February 2023

Research and text: Birte Rodenberg

Concept: Birte Rodenberg and Jana Proisinger

Design: Maja Ilić

This work is made available under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-SA 4.0 DE) licence. Full details of this licence are available at: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/legalcode>.