

# A United Nations Program for Gender Equality in Standardization

The **UN Economic Commission for Europe** looks to mainstream gender perspective in developing and implementing standards.

By Lorenza Jachia

**The UN system-wide policy on “Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women” commits all UN bodies to mainstream gender equality throughout their operations.**

I am a UN staff member, responsible for a large area of work on standards-related issues. I saw it as a personal and professional responsibility to present member states with a proposal to mainstream a gender perspective into the development and implementation of standards and standardization policies. The proposal was approved in November 2016, resulting in the creation of the “Gender-Responsive Standards Initiative.”

Standards and norms spell out the desired characteristics of the products we use every day and the equipment we depend upon. They are the foundation of many laws and bylaws that compel change in consumer and producer behavior. So it’s crucial that standards represent the interests, needs, experiences, and expectations of both men and women.

The Gender-Responsive Standards Initiative has two interlocking goals: to ensure a more balanced participation of men and women in the development of standards and to develop ways to identify standards that are gender-biased, and correct that bias if present.

Gender-responsive standards are one way to reduce gender inequalities in access to and control over resources, innovations, and more generally the benefits of development. By advancing women’s equal participation with men as innovators and decision-makers, this initiative helps correct a historic imbalance in standard-setting and enhance the contribution of standards in reaching the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goal #5 on Empowering Women and Girls.

**The initiative’s concrete actions include:**

- Promoting women’s participation in standard setting and processes for the development and implementation of technical regulations;
- Developing and sharing best practices for taking biological and cultural differences into account in standards development and implementation;
- Developing gender indicators and criteria that can be used in standards development; and
- Identifying and undertaking actions to ensure that standards contribute to gender equality.

One area we should prioritize is health and safety standards. For example, gender-specific sensitivities are not sufficiently taken into account in defining occupational exposure to hazardous substances. Workplaces, in many sectors, are ill-adapted to women’s needs, leading to their exclusion from professional opportunities. This is the case, for example, in the construction and home-building industry where, according to the International Labor Organization, women represent fewer than 5 percent of workers. Standards bodies and policymakers can contribute to, for example, changing the standards on personal protective equipment to make sure they meet the needs of women, too.

Another example is the potential for gender discrimination in management system standards. Mainstreaming gender in management practices will lead to workplaces that are inclusive for staff and the community and radically transform relationships, processes, and social outcomes. In this area, the work of the initiative can be aspirational and share best practices from innovative experiences in businesses and communities.

Gender is a fundamental tenet of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. While the empowerment of women and girls constitutes just one of the 17 goals, it is a prerequisite to achieving each and every one of the goals. So it’s appropriate to consider standards through a gendered lens; one that recognizes systematic misrepresentation and asks how the process can better support the fight for gender equality.



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