

**Report of the 27 September 2023 meeting on “Standards and circular economy:  
Incorporating a gender perspective in standards for sustainability”**

## **I. Introduction**

1. The Team of Specialists on Gender-Responsive Standards (ToS-GRS) organized on 27 September 2024 a webinar on “Standards and circular economy: Incorporating a gender perspective in standards for sustainability”. Experts from the following ECE member States participated: Belgium, Canada, France, Georgia, Germany, Ireland, Kyrgyzstan, Luxembourg, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Serbia, Spain, Switzerland, Türkiye, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and the United States of America. Experts from the following United Nations Member States also participated in the meeting: Argentina, Costa Rica, Egypt, India, Mexico, Morocco, New Zealand, Peru, Rwanda, Senegal, Somalia and Thailand. There were 79 total participants, of which 57 women.

2. The ECE Economic Cooperation and Trade Division (ECTD) Director, Elisabeth Tuerk, welcomed the participants. She reminded participants of the role of the ECE to help countries work on economic integration with a Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) perspective in mind by harnessing the power of trade, innovation and investment to achieve the SDGs. The webinar concentrated on the interrelation between SDG 12 on sustainable consumption and production and SDG 5 on gender equality. In 2021, ECE member States asked all working parties to mainstream circular economy into our work streams.

3. The ECE ECTD Director continued by providing an overview of circular economy. A circular economy is a new and inclusive paradigm aiming to minimize pollution and waste, prolong product lifecycles, improve efficiencies, reduce demand for primary materials. Circular economy is an economic concept which will have different implications for each country, with different opportunities and challenges. The ECTD has considered the link between trade and circular economy with reducing food loss and wasted, sustainable procurement, traceability and value chains and the relationship with the World Customs Organization’s Harmonized System codes. WP.6 has developed a portal with mappings of international standards of major standards development organizations to the SDGs. There are around 130 standards clearly linked to SDG 12 on this portal, demonstrating the strong connection between standardization and circular economy.

4. The Chair of the ToS-GRS, Michelle Parkouda, welcomed the participants and thanked the Secretary, the Director, speakers and moderator for their contributions to this webinar. She reminded that WP.6 has been raising awareness on the need for gender-responsive standards since 2016 which resulted in the *Recommendation U on Gender-Responsive Standards* and the *Declaration on Gender-Responsive Standards and Standards Development* which to date has over 80 signatories. She stressed the progress WP.6 has been making on this topic and the guidance and training which has been developed. There is still more progress which needs to be made, though. Women’s representation in technical committees is still only around 30% in Canadian international mirror committee members and the vast majority of technical committees of the International Organization of Standardization (ISO) and of the International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC) still do not consider gender relevant to their work. But just being able to have these statistics is a sign of progress and such considerations were not captured in the past. ISO and IEC have also created a joint strategic advisory group working on this topic, which also reflects progress and raising awareness on this theme.

## II. Political point of view

5. The Deputy Permanent Representative at the Mission of Ecuador and Coordinator of the World Trade Organization (WTO) dialogue on plastic pollution, Ms. Daniela Garcia, underlined the importance of standards, circular economy and gender. She reminded that women continue to face exclusion, discrimination and disproportionate exposure to economic vulnerabilities as well as health vulnerabilities. A safe, circular economy is key to ensure human health and to achieve this, it is important to know the impact of environmental concerns. For example, plastic chemicals are especially dangerous for young children and pregnant women. And there are studies which show that electronic waste negatively impacts women. She underlined the importance of developing gender-responsive policies and to ensure this inclusiveness from the outset. This could address not only non-toxic products, but also ensuring that they are effective in a circular economy approach. There is still not a common understanding within the WTO Technical Barriers to Trade Committee on what is a circular good.

## III. Regulatory point of view

6. The Principle Technical Advisor on energy safety at WorkSafe New Zealand, Mr. Peter Morfee, underlined that as the world responds to climate change, regulatory agencies will encounter a number of challenges for energy safety of products. The regulatory regimes for household and similar appliances currently makes the assumption that these products have a finite lifetime after which they are scrapped. A circular economy approach will see these products refurbished, used for parts, converted to other applications or used for materials recovery. With this change will come a change of risk where guidelines will be needed to ensure that safety and gender-responsiveness are maintained and continue to evolve.

7. Within New Zealand, the regulatory regime requires that all low and extra-low voltage electrical appliances that are sold are safe. This applies to all new and used products but also to appliances not suitable for reuse. Furthermore, the repair of appliances must be carried out by or under the supervision of a competent and licensed individual. All second-hand appliances have clear labelling requirements. The regime also lists some particular appliances that are not allowed to be sold for reuse because they cannot be verified to be safe. The latter products can be resold for parts recycling transactions as long as it is properly labelled as being unsafe for reuse.

8. There may be a basis of standards needed for circular economy; however, there is a distinction to be made between products which are repaired for reuse and preparing a product to be used again / giving it a new life (overhaul). There is a joint Australia – New Zealand standard for electrical equipment for explosive atmospheres repair and overhaul; this could provide a good foundation on how to approach overhaul of domestic appliances. This standard establishes the premises, tools, equipment, management systems, work practices and competencies which a recognized facility would need in order to basically remanufacture a product out of a product that has already been through a lifecycle. Based on this, for overhauled appliances, it would be necessary to ensure that the resulting product is more in line with what the current requirements would be. And in this process, it would be necessary to bear in mind that the appliance gender resilience is a part of that (because that will be evolving). During the first lifecycle of the product, there may not have been a gender perspective applied; this will need to be considered in the remanufacture and it may be pertinent to add labelling which outline that the products are in fact gender responsive.

9. Moving forward, the strategy needs to be closely considered because the introduction of circular economy without considering gender responsiveness may actually slow the achievements made so far on gender mainstreaming. The evolution of electrical appliance safety needs to be accompanied by the introduction of requirements for inclusivity, resilience and sustainability. As electrical safety status procedures are being considered for circular economy, it is important to ensure that other things need to be improved as well. Technical committees should record what is being done in

standardization for circular economy approaches, especially the participation of women and the elements considered in developing circular economy standards; and this information should be exchanged with other technical committees which would help to capitalize on positive approaches.

#### IV. Industrial point of view

10. The Senior Program Manager Industry Standards of HP, Ms. Mercedes Mira Costa, underlined that sustainability standards and the importance of incorporating a gender perspective in the development of these standards is very relevant to HP. The extraction and processing of materials, fuels and food make up about half of the total greenhouse emissions and more than 90 per cent of biodiversity loss and water stress.<sup>1</sup> HP has a long-standing history of commitment to climate action, and, by 2030 HP's climate action mission is to take urgent and decisive action to achieve net zero carbon emissions across our entire value chain, give back more to forests than we take, and innovate their products and services for a more circular economy. Standards play an essential role in driving sustainability and circular economy.

11. Circularity is a way to achieve a responsible consumption and production in support of the Sustainable Development Goal 12. HP has set a goal to reach 75 per cent circularity for products and packaging by 2030. She underlined that standardization has historically focused on energy efficiency during the use-phase. However, the current focus of attention is on the development of more sustainable products by extending their lifetime, ability to reuse components or recycle materials from products at the end-of-life, and use or reuse and/or recycled materials in products. Standards are required at each step of the product lifetime to ensure that components can be recovered and maintained in the economy. A number of circular economy and material efficiency standards have been developed which provide methods to assess the material efficiency of energy related products and others are under developments, such as methods to actually achieve the circular design of products.

12. The key factors for gender-responsive circular economy standards require diversity in the standards development which will help to produce standards that suit the needs of everybody. For this, it is important to understand the impact and needs of gender differences of the resulting products and ensure a gender lens for physiological, physical as well as socially constructed roles of the impact that climate change has in men versus women. HP is committed to continue to improve the representation of women at HP in key technical areas such as technical and leadership positions.

#### V. Academic point of view

13. The Director of the Master's in international development at the University of Galway, Dr. Una Murray, reminded why quality and equity is important for standards and how circular economy can affect gender issues. She underlined that gender is a central organizing factor in society and that it affects processes of production, decision making and consumption. Women are still primarily responsible for domestic tasks in many cultures and so they could potentially have a greater interest in household waste and recycling. Relations with entities outside the household (state agencies or private sector) are also influenced by gender. She provided an example of a young woman who studied electrical radio repair and received top marks in her class, but when proposing her services after her studies at an exposition, no one would come to her stall because they didn't trust that women could repair radios.

14. Another topic often discussed is the difference between equality of opportunity (looking at the starting point) or equity of outcome (looking at ending equal). The two approaches may be necessary depending on the topic such as creating a favourable

<sup>1</sup> See UN Environment's *Sixth Global Environment Outlook*, 2019. <https://sdghelpdesk.unescap.org/e-library/global-environment-outlook-2019>

environment to support gender equality in the circular economy ensuring there are opportunities for all to engage versus ensuring there is sometimes special attention or a strong focus on overcoming barriers to support gender equity in response opportunities that arise. Taking these a step further, a transformative approach would be to look at the root causes of inequalities and the attitudes towards gender roles and how these could be changed.

15. The fifth assessment report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) states with evidence that people who are marginalized (socially, economically, culturally, politically, institutionally, or otherwise) are especially vulnerable to climate change and also vulnerable to some adaptation and mitigation responses.<sup>2</sup> If gender concerns are not considered in climate change policies, this can unintentionally make the situation worse for some or have differential effects across social groups. However, beyond vulnerability, women can (and do) play a critical role in response to climate change and should be considered ‘agents of change’. Recent examples include fashion and the circular economy or leading sustainable practices at the household and community levels.

16. She reminded the importance of gender-responsive standards. They help improve product and services design, taking into consideration all stakeholders and users rather than assume a stereotype user. They ensure that equipment is designed with different shapes and sizes in mind. They help to reduce discrimination, biases and stereotypes. They can contribute to women’s economic empowerment. And they can help reshape industries and business to better meet the needs of all individuals regardless of their gender.

17. Delving more into circular economy approaches, a transformative approach is needed so many different groups are on board. This will require new innovators and new thinking which is another reason that diversity is needed, allowing many perspectives which may result in different angles and different ways of looking at the use of products and services.

18. Two publications done with the United Nations Development Programme are also available, one on guidance for government stakeholders<sup>3</sup>, the other on gender responsive indicators<sup>4</sup>.

## VI. Conclusions

19. The webinar provided several points which could be explored for future work within the ToS-GRS. These may be picked up at subsequent meetings, the next of which will be 15 November from 20:00 Geneva-time.

- How can we engage women and other groups that may not normally be involved (informal workers, youth, minorities) in local, national and regional dialogue on standard setting and circular economy? How do we ensure the innovative role of both women and men are highlighted to standard setting bodies?
- How can we ensure that the standards and new opportunities created in the Circular Economy create decent work for both women and men? Will some standards deter some groups from engaging in the circular economy because the entry point investment is too high?

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<sup>2</sup> See IPCC AR5 *Climate Change 2014: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability*.  
<https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar5/wg2/>

<sup>3</sup> See UNDP *Gender Analysis and NDCs: Short Guidance for Government Stakeholder*. 2019.  
<https://climatepromise.undp.org/research-and-reports/gender-analysis-and-ndcs-short-guidance-government-stakeholders>

<sup>4</sup> See UNDP *Gender responsive indicators: Gender and NDC planning for implementation*. 2020.  
<https://climatepromise.undp.org/research-and-reports/gender-responsive-indicators-gender-and-ndc-planning-implementation>

- Are both male and female interests and roles and uses of products assessed when considering standards for the circular economy? Have we considered diversity aspects in our analysis of resilient and productive CE systems?
  - How can we bring attention to the gender gap and the role of gender-responsive standards in addressing additional global challenges?
  - How to increase the representation of women in standards development in sectors where they are typically under-represented?
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