



Why Gender-Responsive Standards are Better for Everyone



WP.6

Working Party on Regulatory
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Policies



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Why gender-responsive standards?

Standards are an integral part of everything that surrounds us, from cell phones to toothbrushes, even if most consumers don't realize it. These help ensure that products conform to safety and security requirements as well as other priorities (for the environment, for society or other). Standards aim to create consistency and reliability such that users can depend on a predictable result.

Standards aim to be gender neutral; however, studies have shown that standards are very often developed for a reference individual which is based on a Caucasian man aged 25-30, weighing 70 kg.¹ This androcentric approach can neglect important considerations of ages, gender, size, etc. which are often considered niche. This leaves at least half of the population – women – as not being actively considered in the setting of standards. The World Bank and the World Trade Organization underline that women and girls represent half of the potential of the world's population and that reducing the gender gap will promote economic development.² This is why a gender-responsive approach to standards and their making processes is necessary.

The development of standards is often done through technical committees and statistics demonstrate that women are typically under-represented in these decision-making bodies. Though the development of gender-responsive standards is not solely a woman's issue, the absence of women at the development table exacerbates the problem that women's needs are not taken into consideration. Concerted efforts need to be taken to ensure a balanced representation.

Some specific examples of products which may have adversely affected women because they had not been developed with a gender lens include:

- Personal protective equipment
- Clothing for professional and recreational use
- Passive restraint systems in vehicle
- Construction equipment
- Pharmaceuticals



1 Caroline Criado-Perez, *Invisible Women: Exposing Data Bias in a World Designed for Men* (Vintage Publishing 2020), 116.
2 World Bank and WTO, 'Women and Trade: The Role of Trade in Promoting Gender Equality' (2020), https://www.wto.org/english/res_e/booksp_e/women_trade_pub2807_e.pdf accessed 8 May 2022.

Aren't standards **neutral by nature**?



It has long been assumed that standards are neutral. As demonstrated above, this is often not the case. Gender bias can exist even in highly technical areas. Artificial intelligence systems are based upon hard coding and information that is made available to it. If the system is teaching itself based on what it finds on the internet, for example, it will most likely reinforce traditional gendered stereotypes. The data alone cannot fix this problem; the change has to be societal.³

There can also be indirect impacts with some technologies. Geo-localisation technologies are widely used in cell phone applications to enhance the user experience. However, such technology can also be hacked, and the individual tracked. This cyber-stalking can be potentially very dangerous, especially for women. The technology itself on the surface may seem neutral or even beneficial, but the implications of misuse are not equal for men and women.

³ See Zoë Corbyn « AI expert Meredith Broussard: Racism, sexism and ableism are systemic problems' », The Observer, 26 March 2023: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2023/mar/26/artificial-intelligence-meredith-broussard-more-than-a-glitch-racism-sexism-ableism>.

Gender-responsive standards improve the desired outcome

The COVID 19 pandemic saw a proliferation of use of personal protective equipment and clothing such as face masks in order to stop the spread of the outbreak. The main objective is health safety. The standards for face masks were therefore aiming to protect the health and safety of those who wear the masks – however, the initial standards were developed with a Caucasian man aged 25-30 as the model. This left women, who are over-represented in the health care industry at greater risk. The technical committees responsible for this standard saw this problem and resolved it, ensuring that the standard this product is based upon took into account the anthropometric needs of women. The result is an improved health safety.

Chemicals in daily household products are often based upon standards that were tested against a man's biology even if women are more often performing household maintenance. The standards that these products are based upon are intended to ensure that there are no adverse side effects for the user and that consumers purchase products with the confidence that these have been cleared for safety. By ensuring that the testing and resulting standards take into consideration a woman's biology, the resulting standard again improve the desired outcome.



Why should **government bodies** want gender-responsive standards?

The establishment of technical regulations can occur in a number of different ministries (trade, finance, agriculture, health, environment, transport, among others). This is therefore not an issue of a single administration, but a consideration that needs to be taken on an all-of-government approach.

It should be self-evident that governments should want to ensure equal protection and opportunities for all its citizens. Gender-responsive standards (and gender-responsive technical regulations) contribute to gender equality and protecting women and girls to the same level as men and boys.

In order to help to end gender discrimination and inequalities, in 2015 countries adopted the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), including SDG 5 on gender equality and explicitly mentioning gender in 10 of the other 17 goals. One of the targets of SDG5 (5.5) is to ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life. Given the foundational role that standards play in society, it is essential that women have an equal place at the standards development table and that equally address women's and men's specificities in all standards in order to achieve this target.

Gender-responsive standards in particular supports the target 5.c of the UN SDGs, to strengthen policies and legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. Standards affect everything – products, services, processes and systems – and both directly and indirectly affect people in countless ways every single day. They also can underpin regulation and guide policy making. That being the case, standards developed with a gender lens, equally taking into account the need of women and men, should have a significant impact on gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls.



Why should **technical committee experts** want gender-responsive standards?

It is in the interest of the technical committee experts to have gender-balanced group. The main objective of the technical committee should be to create standards that will produce the same result all the time (i.e. the product, process, system or service will consistently be the same and function the same way for all consumers). If the results are not the same for men and women, then the standard is not working properly, and the credibility of the technical committee is diminished. Furthermore, a gender mix within a team may offer an assortment of knowledge and skills, making the team more performant than if it is only all men or all women.⁴

Technical committee experts are often volunteers from either government agencies or, more often, the private sector. They are offering their time and knowledge to developing standards and, depending on the standards development organization, they may also be paying for their participation in the technical committee. It is not necessarily the responsibility of these experts to ensure a gender balance – the standards development organization should make best efforts to attract qualified female experts to participate. The leadership of committees can also set parity objectives or create spaces to ensure that women are equally included and heard.

There are some sectors of activity that are more traditionally occupied by men and finding qualified women may be a challenge. In this case, it would be useful for the standards development organization to provide focused training for committee members and all staff involved on gender-responsive standards to ensure that the gap is acknowledged and mitigated to the best degree possible. It would also be useful to engage gender experts or groups and setting up processes to ensure that standards being developed are gender responsive.



⁴ Hoogendoorn, Sander, Hessel Oosterbeek, and Mirjam Van Praag. "The impact of gender diversity on the performance of business teams: Evidence from a field experiment." *Management Science* 59.7 (2013): 1514-1528.

Gender-responsive standards are important for **current global challenges**

There are a number of cross-cutting themes for environmental, social and governance (ESG) concerns which are becoming more urgent than ever. The integration of a specific ESG concern into standards development does not imply that only one concern should be considered at a time. As we move towards more awareness and action in ESG concerns, it becomes even more important to ensure that the resulting standards and their development are gender responsive. Indeed, it is essential to make sure that the standards resulting from ESG concerns will bring benefits to men and women in the same way. Furthermore, there may be some additional gender concerns that need to be taken into consideration in some of these cross-cutting themes.

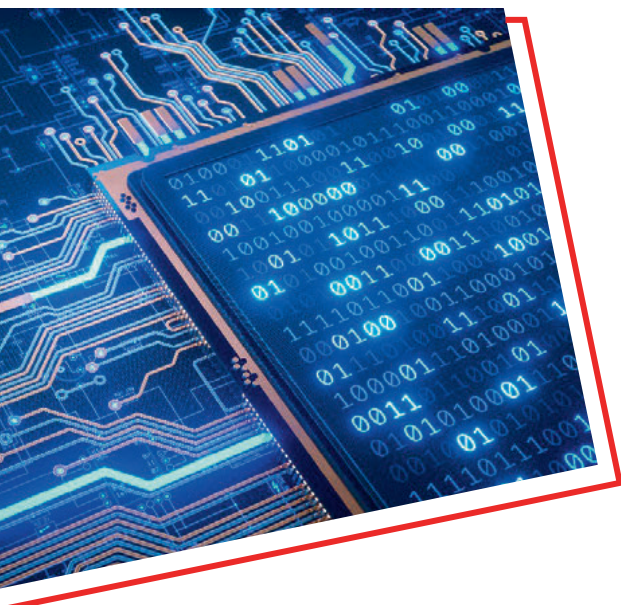


Gender concerns to consider in **digital standards**

Certain technologies may affect individuals differently based on gender differences. The digital environment is still dominated by men and often (unintentionally) creating research results that do not empower women and girls.

Artificial intelligence, for example, that can learn on its own from information available on the internet or elsewhere, may learn to become prejudiced against

women or gender minorities. For example, a home assistant device may have more difficulty to understand female voices compared to men's voices; they can also make proposals which are not gender neutral (such as suggesting management jobs to men and support jobs to women). The initial hardcoding needs to consider these potential prejudices and how to deal with these biases.





Gender concerns to consider in environmental standards

The actions needed to preserve the environment are multi-faceted englobing climate, nature and pollution (i.e. addressing the triple planetary crisis). If left unaddressed, there are a number of societal problems that also result that also have a gender dimension. For example, the increase in frequency and strength of hurricanes in the Gulf of Mexico result in housing precarity, loss of jobs, destroyed infrastructure and exacerbating pre-existing inequalities. Women minorities within a country are often the hardest hit in such catastrophes.

According to UN Women, “climate change is a ‘threat multiplier,’ which escalates social, political and economic tensions in fragile and conflict-affected settings. When disaster strikes, women are less likely to survive and more likely to be injured due to long standing gender inequalities that have created disparities in information, mobility, decision-making and access to resources and training.”⁵

Addressing these challenges in a wholistic manner will require applying a gender lens in order to ensure that the resulting solutions leave no one behind.

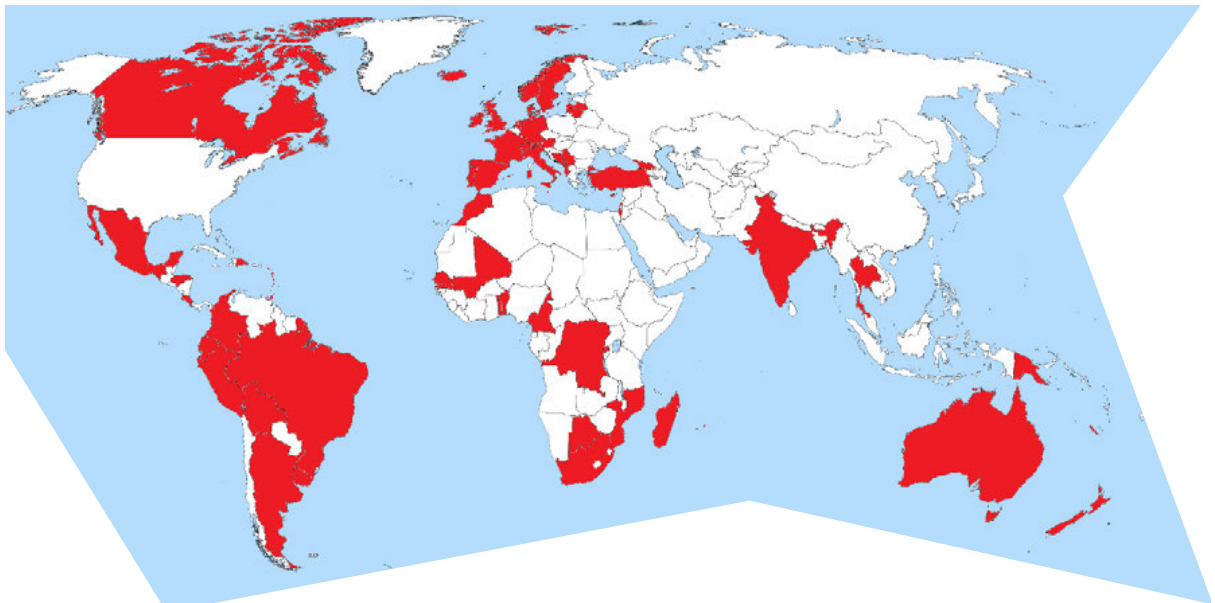
Gender concerns to consider in circular economy standards

Products for re-use or recycling are often shipped to countries with developing economies or least developed economies. The processing of these materials is often performed by women and children, potentially exposing them to health hazards. The standards about such cross-border re-use or recycling could potentially affect women differently from men.



5 See: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/explainer/2022/02/explainer-how-gender-inequality-and-climate-change-are-interconnected>

UNECE WP.6 leads the way on gender-responsive standards



The United Nations Economic Commission for Europe Working Party on Regulatory Cooperation and Standardization Policies began work on gender-responsive standards in 2016. It has actively developed the [UNECE Recommendation U on Gender-Responsive Standards](#)⁶ as well as a [Declaration on Gender-Responsive Standards and Standards Development](#)⁷ which outline key activities that need to be taken to

ensure standards are gender-responsive and which standards development organizations can sign to reflect their engagement in taking action; as of March 2023, 81 organizations have signed the declaration.

The [UNECE Guidelines on Developing Gender-Responsive Standards](#)⁸ provides guidance on how organizations and standards committees can achieve gender-

responsiveness in standards development. An [e-learning training](#) has also been developed.⁹ As well as a number of [short videos](#) from relevant stakeholders.¹⁰

More information is available on the [UNECE WP.6 GRS website](#).¹¹

- 6 See: https://unece.org/DAM/trade/wp6/Recommendations/Rec_U_en.pdf
7 See: <https://unece.org/trade/wp6/Gender-Resp%20Standards-declaration>
8 See: <https://unece.org/trade/publications/guidelines-developing-gender-responsive-standards-ecetrade472>
9 See: <https://learnqi.unece.org/>
10 See: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL4iZR0KyjSQ9qBPejBhcfIke_HcF9M6r3
11 See: <https://unece.org/trade/wp6/gender-responsive-standards>



How to get involved

All experts are welcome to join the Team of Specialists on Gender-Responsive Standards (GRS) free of charge. The GRS meets on a bi-monthly basis and on an ad-hoc basis on specific projects. There is also an annual meeting which is organized at the same week as the annual meetings of other subgroups of the working party in order to enhance cooperation, cross-fertilization and networking.

For more information, please check the website at:
<https://unece.org/trade/wp6/gender-responsive-standards>

You can also contact the secretariat at:
regulatory.cooperation@un.org

You can also follow us on social media the work of UNECE:

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YouTube: [GRS playlist](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL1234567890)



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The Working Party on Regulatory Cooperation and Standardization Policies (WP.6) was founded in the 1970s as a forum for exchange on the harmonization of non-agricultural product regulations. WP.6 aims to promote regulatory cooperation, standardization policies and activities which contribute towards reducing technical barriers to trade, promoting sustainable development in its all dimensions including, for example, gender equality, climate and environmental protection, circular economy and the adaptation to new technologies.

The Team of Specialists on Gender-Responsive Standards (GRS) within WP.6 aims at providing a practical way forward for standards bodies wishing to take a step towards gender equality through the standards they develop and their standards development process. The GRS also seeks to provide a forum for specialists to come together to collaboratively develop expertise and guidance which can be shared.

This work is hosted under the UNECE Market Access Section within the UNECE Economic Cooperation and Trade Division (ECTD). The ECTD assists member States with economic integration and in promoting and enabling a better policy, financial and regulatory environment. These support an inclusive and sustainable post-COVID-19 recovery, a transition to a more circular economy, e.g. through the promotion of gender-responsive standards and through digital and green transformations.

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