

The gender dimension of standards

We live in a world profoundly reliant on standards. They make worldwide telecommunication systems or year-round provision of fresh vegetables in supermarkets possible. From birth to death, they regulate how each and every one of us engage with the world around us. Education and healthcare services, housing and workplace environments, industries and markets, transport and logistics systems, banking and finance institutions, water, sewerage, gas or electricity infrastructures, all rely on standards to ensure at least three basic objectives: product or service quality and compatibility, health and safety of humans and animals as well as reduced environmental impact.

Yet, although standards have implications for both women and men, they are rarely examined for their gender dimensions. This has had severe consequences in the past. One striking example is the conventional 3-point seatbelt used in cars: designed in the 1950's, they did not take into consideration bodies of women, and in particular pregnant women. As a result, women have been more likely than men to sustain severe injuries in automotive crashes, and these have been the leading cause of accidental foetal death related to maternal trauma for decades. Taking both men and women as the norm has led to the development of safer seatbelts, designed for broader populations.

This flyer is intended to highlight the gender dimension of standards development and diffusion in the ECOWAS region and provide national standardization bodies with key entry points for integrating gender in their activities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Integration of biological differences. As the seatbelt example illustrates, failing to consider sex differences and adopting a gender neutral approach can lead to adverse consequences. Asking the right questions is a key entry point: Does the standard proposal differentiate between women and men? If not, is it based on research on both sexes, or is it a male (or female) reference model? If it does, how adequate are the implications investigated in relation to other social or biological factors?

2. Development of standards conducive to gender equality. When planning their annual work programmes, standardization bodies should favour the development of standards that have a high potential for gender equality and the empowerment of women. These include standards for products and services that help to relieve the strain of childcare and domestic work or contribute to decrease maternal mortality ratio and adolescent fertility rate, as well as standards in sectors with high female labour force participation rate.

3. Participation of women. As outlined in this document, ensuring participation of women in project activities, particularly in capacity building activities, can lead to enhanced results and sometimes greater project efficacy. This was clearly demonstrated at the ECOWAS Quality Awards and National Quality awards. Through targeted advocacy and effective inclusion of both men and women, both equitable and efficient results can be achieved.

Further reading: –European Commission. 2013. Gendered innovations. How gender analysis contributes to research. Brussels. European Commission, Directorate for Research and Innovation. doi:10.2777/11868 –United Nations Economic and Social Council. 2016. Gender mainstreaming in standards. Economic Commission for Europe, Steering Committee on Trade Capacity and Standards, Working Party on Regulatory Cooperation and Standardization Policies. ECE/SCTCS/WP.6/2016/3 –UNIDO. 2015. Guide on Gender Mainstreaming: Trade Capacity-Building Projects. Vienna. United Nations Industrial Development Organization. URL: unido.org/sites/default/files/2015-02/Gender_TCB_Guide_0.pdf

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WEST AFRICA QUALITY SYSTEM PROGRAMME (WAQSP)

Gender & standards

WAQSP



Integrating gender in standards: the case of the WAQSP

1. Active participation of women and men

Ensuring a balanced representation of women and men in technical committees, nurturing an environment favourable to female leadership and building capacity of advocacy groups on gender are the first steps towards making standards more relevant to women, achieving gender equality and empowering women. One of the key results in the region is the inclusion of women in all ECOSHAM Technical Harmonisation committees (see box on the right).

2. Gender indicators or criteria within standards

Particularly relevant to sustainability and social responsibility standards (e.g. ISO 26000), the inclusion of gender indicators or criteria at the preliminary or drafting stages ensures that gender considerations are an integral part of the standard. These can range from numerical targets (e.g. employment levels) to broader empowerment actions (e.g. requirement of a personal bank account for issuing salaries). In the framework of the ECOWAS Quality Awards, one of the evaluation criteria for the Resource Management Award is gender-related.

3. Access to standards

Location, opening hours or staff hospitality of National Enquiry Points have a decisive impact on the accessibility of standards as well as other relevant business information delivered by standardization bodies, in particular to the most economically vulnerable. Outreach and communication activities

should be inclusive and designed to leave no one behind. The WAQSP has made the ISO 9000 (Quality management systems fundamentals and vocabulary), ISO 9001 (Quality Management systems requirements), ISO 9004 (Quality of an organisation) and ISO 19011 (Guidelines for auditing management systems) standards available in all national standardization bodies. Furthermore, a catalogue of adopted ECOWAS Standards (ECOSTANDS) was created and published.

4. Leadership

In cognizance with their standard-setting mandate, standardization bodies should demonstrate leadership in gender equality. In particular, including women in the board of governance and initiating and maintaining dialogue with gender advocacy groups pave the way of an economic environment where women and men engage at the same level. Furthermore, spotlighting female professionals as role models, to girls and boys alike, creates the conditions for a social change towards greater fairness. For example, the WAQSP promotes leadership through the inclusion of women in the ECOSHAM technical harmonization committees and technical management committees.

5. Sensitisation on standards

Seminars, training sessions and quality promotion activities should systematically include female entrepreneurs, employees and students. The inclusion of women as beneficiaries of knowledge sharing activities should be actively sought in order to stimulate new opportunities and ultimately a change of mindset. The Programme has managed to successfully include women in national and regional training sessions and has supported the qualification of 69 female auditors on food safety management systems based on ISO 22000.

WAQSP gender approach achievements in the field of standardization

Women have been actively involved in the development and revision of standards as part of the ECOWAS Standardization Scheme (ECOSHAM). Women's participation in the elaboration and harmonization of harmonized ECOWAS standards (ECOSTAND) varied between 18% and 50% depending on the meetings organized, an average of 27% for all 17 meetings organized since 2015. In total, 94 ECOSTAND standards have been adopted as at August 2018. The standards adopted through ECOSHAM cover agricultural products, food products, chemical products, construction and building materials and tourism. 363 journalists from all ECOWAS Member States were trained in the field of quality, among which 90 were female participants (24%). 212 consultants were trained on Food Safety Management System (ISO 22000), including 69 women (33%). 42% of participants in the ECOWAS Quality Awards and national Quality Awards workshops were women. A special Quality Award is granted to the best awarded company led by a woman to promote women entrepreneurs and leadership in the region. In order to qualify the 7 best of each country, the WAQSP presented 105 resource persons at an ISO 22000 qualifying test: 100 were qualified. There were 35% of women (37) at the qualifying test and 41% (37) of qualified female experts at the end of the process. This considerable result shows that 100% of women presented at the ISO 22000 qualifying test are now qualified against 88% of the men involved. These results mean that the involvement of female actors leads, not only to a better equity between women and men but also to better results in terms of projects implementation, particularly in quality. The lesson learned is that involving more women in technical activities will significantly contribute to human capacity building and economic development in the ECOWAS region.