



Policies  
to Promote  
Sustainable  
Consumption  
Patterns

EUPOPP Work Package 1  
Deliverable 1.1: Gender aspects of sustainable  
consumption strategies and instruments –  
Executive Summary

Dr. Immanuel Stieß

Dr. Irmgard Schultz (ISOE)

Frankfurt

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Gender offers a new and challenging approach to analysing sustainable consumption. Gender issues have been increasingly recognized in international policy debates on sustainable development. In an international context, gender aspects of sustainable consumption relate in particular to inhumane working conditions in globalised production chains, the role of women in maintaining healthy nutrition, health issues and reproductive health, and vulnerability to disasters and financial crises. The European Union also has made commitments to gender equality in its fundamental treaties, and has recently implemented a 'Roadmap of equality between men and women' (COM(2006)92). In Europe, particular focus is placed on women in the labour market, women entrepreneurs, equal access to decision making, demography and migration, combating multiple discrimination, work-life balance and gender stereotypes.

However, gender equality as a fundamental dimension of sustainability has not yet been fully integrated into the European policy frameworks for sustainable consumption. Approaches to link gender policy more closely to the field of sustainable consumption should be embedded in a comprehensive analytical framework, taking the following dimensions of gender aspects into account: (1) the gendered division of labour and work, (2) the gendered body, health and the societal organization of intimacy and (3) empowerment and access to decision making of women and men.

Gender debates and gender policies link the question of sustainable consumption to the question of livelihood rights, good livelihood and everyday life. A gender approach stresses the agency of women and men in consumption practices which are social rather than individual processes. Consumption practices are embedded in a social context, including the context of household, family and community life. Moreover, they are shaped by structural factors, such as participation in unpaid housework and the labour market, as well as the distribution of income.

With respect to the gendered division of labour, a gender approach highlights that women bear a large responsibility for housework, even though they today usually participate in the labour market. Women are more often in charge of consumption decisions related to food, clothing and household articles, and they are key decision-makers in the fields of food, washing and cleaning. Women and men have different consumption-related competencies, with women tending to be more food-literate, and men tending to be more knowledgeable about technical aspects of household energy consumption. As surveys indicate, women in many cases pay more attention to environmental and ethical aspects of consumption, they are often key targets for sustainable consumption campaigns. Furthermore, time budget studies prove different patterns of time use and a persisting core of household work of women. As a result, women have to find ways to reconcile obligations from professional work and housework when organising their everyday life, a task which is often accomplished with time saving products and services. Compared to men, they suffer more from time scarcity and have a less generous access to leisure time.

With respect to the issue of body, health and societal intimacy, women tend to be more concerned about health issues because of their responsibility for care duties. Physical

vulnerability to harmful substances in everyday products differs highly depending on the respective age (children, grown up and old people) and to women and men.

The gender dimension empowerment and access to decision making has particular relevance for the design of policy strategies and instruments to promote sustainable consumption. Consumption, long believed to be the domain of women, has largely been viewed as a private and apolitical sphere of life. The notion of political consumerism challenges this view of consumption as a purely private matter. It also transcends the division between 'individual-level factors' and 'framework conditions' of consumption. When consumers are conceived of as political actors, they are part of a collective movement that aims to change the framework conditions via individual (and collectively co-ordinated) action.

Thus, the promotion of sustainable consumption is not likely to succeed purely as a top-down process, but rather requires a reconceptualisation of consumption as more than a private and self-interested activity. Consumers need to be addressed and empowered as consumer-citizens, i.e., not only private but also political actors. In designing instruments to promote sustainable consumption patterns, a gender approach suggests that women and men need to participate in all stages of the policy cycle, which in turn requires access to decision making and the development of suitable institutional settings.

Available knowledge on 'gender responsiveness to sustainable consumption instruments' is scarce and mainly restricted to labels and other communicative instruments. With respect to other types of instruments some conclusions can be drawn from the experience with gender impact assessments on environmental laws and regulations or from the implementation of gender budgeting. There is some evidence that policy instruments seem to be more effective if women and men are not addressed in general but in intersection with other aspects of cultural diversity and social differences. Target groups are to be addressed specifically according to the social areas affected by the respective instrument. We should also take into consideration that the effectiveness of regulatory or market based instruments can be enhanced by communication measures which are directed to the target groups affected by the respective instrument.

All in all, a gendered approach thus calls for a more differentiated approach to consumption patterns and the individual and framework conditions influencing consumption. When we try to influence consumption, we are influencing the activities of people acting under very different circumstances. Gender is one of the core issues shaping these circumstances, but other aspects such as household type, age, lifestyle orientation and various socio-demographic aspects also have an influence on what people can do and to what kinds of arguments they are likely to respond.