A Gender Lens on Circularity

From Women's Voices to Collective Action

Insights and recommendations
from the Global South
WCEF2026 → WCEF2027



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DEUTSCHE ZUSAMMENARBEIT

Por meio da giz Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH

PromEC
Promoção da Economia Circular

MINISTÉRIO DA FAZENDA

GOVERNO DO BRASIL
DO LADO DO POVO BRASILEIRO

Promoting a Circular Economy for a Socio-Ecological Economic Transformation in Brazil (PromEC)

A Gender Lens on Circularity
From Women's Voices to Collective Action

Published by
Deutsche Gesellschaft für
Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH

Registered offices
Bonn e Eschborn, Alemanha

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This study was prepared by the Promotion of Circular Economy for a Socio-Ecological Economic Transformation (PromEC) project. PromEC is part of the Brazil–Germany Cooperation for Sustainable Development and is implemented by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH in cooperation with the Brazilian Ministry of Finance, with funding from the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ).

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November 24, 2026

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Panel group photo, WCEF2026, Gandhinagar

Opening perspectives and institutional message

Women's Inclusion in the Circular Economy

Building a circular economy must go hand in hand with promoting social inclusion and equal opportunities.



Débora Freire
Secretary of Economic Policy at Brazil's Ministry of Finance

Photo: Washington Costa/MF

The Economic Policy Secretariat of Brazil's Ministry of Finance (MF) welcomes readers to this publication, dedicated to advancing the inclusion of women in the circular economy.

Building a circular economy must go hand in hand with social inclusion and equal opportunities. In Brazil, expanding women's participation and leadership is recognized as essential to accelerating innovation, strengthening sustainable value chains and ensuring that the benefits of economic transformation are shared more equitably.

Through the Ecological Transformation Plan (PTE), coordinated by the Ministry of Finance, Brazil seeks to promote a transition that is not only environmentally sustainable but also socially inclusive. This requires creating better conditions for women to access employment, entrepreneurship, skills development and financing opportunities in sectors driving the circular economy. The partnership between the Ministry of Finance and the PromEC project, implemented by GIZ Brazil within the framework of German Cooperation for Sustainable Development, has made an important contribution to advancing this agenda.

This publication brings together initiatives, experiences and perspectives that demonstrate how women's inclusion strengthens circularity, generates positive impacts in local communities and contributes to building a more resilient, innovative and equitable economy.

Part 1

Opening

01. Context and purpose
02. The challenge: Circularity for whom?
03. The pathways: Circularity by whom?





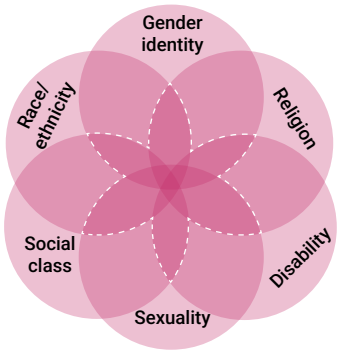
Tatiana Caiado and Anita Ahuja, WCEF2026, Gandhinagar

01 Context and purpose

Circular economy (CE) has become a key idea in sustainability policy. It aims to separate economic growth from resource use and environmental damage by keeping materials in use through eco-design, repair, remanufacturing, and recycling. However, most CE frameworks are technical and market driven. They often ignore the social side of production and consumption and assume that circular transitions are neutral and benefit everyone. In response, many scholars and practitioners have turned to the idea of Just Transition, which began in labor movements to protect workers' rights and livelihoods. It asks who pays the costs of circular change and who gains the value.

Adding a gender approach to the CE means recognizing that resource flows, product lifecycles, and green jobs are shaped by gender roles and power relations. Evidence from the ILO and UNIDO shows clear segregation in the circular transition. Men mostly hold high-value, formal, and decision-making roles in engineering, clean technology, and corporate governance. Women are concentrated at the bottom of the value chain, in informal waste picking, sorting, textiles, and unpaid care work. A gender lens also reveals hidden burdens at home, where zero-waste habits and reuse systems often depend on women's unpaid time and labor. Women also face specific health and chemical risks at the end of a product's life.

Intersectionality



But treating gender as a single, uniform category hides other inequalities. Intersectionality, a concept from Kimberlé Crenshaw, explains how overlapping identities such as gender, race, class, ethnicity, age, disability, and migration status create combined forms of privilege and disadvantage. This matters because environmental and economic burdens are not shared equally among all women or all workers.

In the Global South and in marginalized urban areas, informal waste pickers and repair workers are often Black, Indigenous, migrant, or low-income women.

Their livelihoods are at risk when waste management is "formalized" or privatized from the top down without social protections. Without an intersectional lens, circular policies can reproduce existing inequalities and injustice by taking value from marginalized workers while excluding them from governance, finance, and innovation.

4
plenaries

16
parallel panels

75
accelerator sessions

Only 1 of the 95
sessions was dedicated to gender: **ours**.

Linking CE with Just Transition principles through an intersectional gender approach is therefore not only a matter of fairness. It is a requirement for a resilient and sustainable system.

It was based on this perspective and concern that the accelerator session "A Gender Lens on Circularity" was proposed to the World Circular Economy Forum 2026 (WCEF2026).

The annual Global event on Circular Economy took place in Gandhinagar, India, bringing together global circular economy stakeholders. The session "A Gender Lens on Circularity" was convened by PromEC.

The session featured seven women speakers and one moderator, with perspectives from Brazil, India and South Africa. It was the only session specifically focused on gender in the event programme, among 4 plenaries, 16 parallel panels and 75 accelerator sessions (WCEF, 2026).

02 The challenge: Circularity for whom?

The circular economy is often discussed in terms of resource efficiency, waste reduction, material recovery, technological innovation and new business opportunities. However, these conversations do not always give equal attention to the people who make circular systems function, particularly women and workers in the informal economy.

In India, women have long been part of circular practices through activities such as collecting, sorting, repairing, reusing, processing and transforming materials. Women artisans, home-based workers and informal waste workers contribute significantly to resource recovery and local production systems. Yet, their work often remains undervalued, poorly paid and outside formal systems of recognition, protection and decision-making. In this context, Brazilian reality is very similar to the Indian one.

On the other hand, in Brazil, since the National Circular Economy Strategy (ENEC) was released in 2024, women leaders have emerged in government institutions, the private sector and civil society.

One example is the Women in Circular Economy Institute (Elas na Economia Circular), dedicated to strengthening the role of women as key drivers in the transition toward a circular, regenerative, and socially just economy in Brazil.

The question, therefore, is not simply how women can be included in the circular economy, but how circular economy systems can be designed to recognise their contributions, address structural barriers and create equitable opportunities for them to progress.

740 million
women work informally

89% | 95%
of women workers in Africa · in South Asia work informally

Women are present in the circular economy, but mostly at its least valued end. They are over-represented in low-value, informal activities such as recycling, reuse and waste management, and largely absent from design, innovation and advanced technologies. Globally, around 740 million women work informally, including 89% of women workers in Africa and 95% in South Asia (GACERE, 2026). In waste picking, textiles, electronics and small-scale mining, this means unstable income, little protection and greater exposure to toxic substances, with safety standards and protective equipment designed around men's bodies. Much of women's contribution also happens outside the market: repairing, reusing, sharing and managing household waste. This work is rarely recognised or counted.

Women make up only

28% of the

Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM)workforce

and

12%

of STEM executives

Women make up only about 28% of the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) workforce and 12% of STEM executives, even though one in three STEM graduates is a woman (GACERE, 2026). Because many circular jobs draw on technical and trade skills mostly held by men, a transition that ignores gender may simply hire men first. This is a loss for everyone: innovative firms tend to be more circular when women hold leadership positions. Unpaid care work is a major obstacle. Women do roughly three-quarters of it worldwide, which leaves less time for training, business or decision-making (GACERE, 2026). Finance is a further barrier, since only about 2% of climate finance is gender responsive.

2%

of climate finance is gender responsive

The potential is large: the International Labor Organization (ILO) estimates that six million new jobs could be created by 2030 through circular economy efforts, and modelling for Europe also points to net job gains (Yilan et al., 2026). Yet jobs may grow in sectors where women are fewer and shrink where they are many, or the reverse, depending on how the shift is managed. Informal workers, mostly women, can lose their livelihoods when waste systems are formalised without them (GACERE, 2026). We also lack the data to see this happening: the EU bioeconomy monitoring framework, for example, covers social issues only through jobs and value added (Yilan et al., 2026), and circular economy planning rarely uses gender-disaggregated data, so women's health risks and economic contributions go unseen. Finally, expecting women to be natural "green stewards" can add to their unpaid burden rather than reward their work (GACERE, 2026).

> "women" are never a single group

Some barriers appear almost everywhere: the unequal care burden, stereotypes in technical education and careers, concentration in low-value roles, limited access to finance and missing data. Others depend on the setting. In many low- and middle-income countries, the priority is informal work and the rights of waste pickers. In higher-income economies, the challenge is more often STEM and skilled-trade segregation, pay gaps and work-life balance. Class, ethnicity, disability, age, migration status and sexual orientation shape these experiences further, so "women" are never a single group (GACERE, 2026). The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) highlights the same point: gender equality, circularity and climate action must be tackled together, including by expanding women's leadership in the transition (UNDP, n.d.).

03 The pathways: Circularity by whom?

PromEC

The project Promotion of a Circular Economy for a Socio-Ecological Economic Transformation in Brazil (PromEC) is implemented by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH in partnership with Brazil's Ministry of Finance, within the framework of the Brazil–Germany Cooperation for Sustainable Development, and commissioned by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ).

PromEC supports Brazil's circular economy transition through four interconnected areas: public policy, circular business models, access to finance, and participatory governance. The gender agenda is cross-cutting.

That is why PromEC organized the WCEF2026 Accelerator Session "A Gender Lens on Circularity," placing women's voices and lived experiences at the centre of the conversation. The session brought together women leaders from Brazil and India, two of the world's largest emerging economies, as well as South Africa, for a South–South exchange on gender, leadership, and the circular economy.

Conserve India

One of the experiences shared during our session at WCEF2026 was Conserve India, a Delhi-based social enterprise that works on plastic and textile waste. It employs and trains informal waste workers and artisans, often from marginalized communities, in collection, processing and the production of upcycled goods. It also advocates for the formal recognition of reuse, repair and upcycling in national policy and skills frameworks. Its mission includes empowering women and improving the livelihoods of grassroots communities. From Conserve's experience, one of the central challenges is the difference between participation and meaningful economic agency. Women may be present across a value chain without having control over the income they generate, the resources they use, the technology they work with or the decisions that shape their livelihoods. They may contribute to production but remain disconnected from buyers and markets. They may possess considerable practical knowledge but lack access to formal skills recognition, finance and opportunities for enterprise development.

These inequalities can also be reinforced when circular economy initiatives are designed without understanding existing livelihood systems. For instance, introducing new technologies, formalising operations or reorganising waste recovery systems may improve efficiency, but can also create risks for informal workers if their roles, knowledge and economic interests are not considered from the beginning.

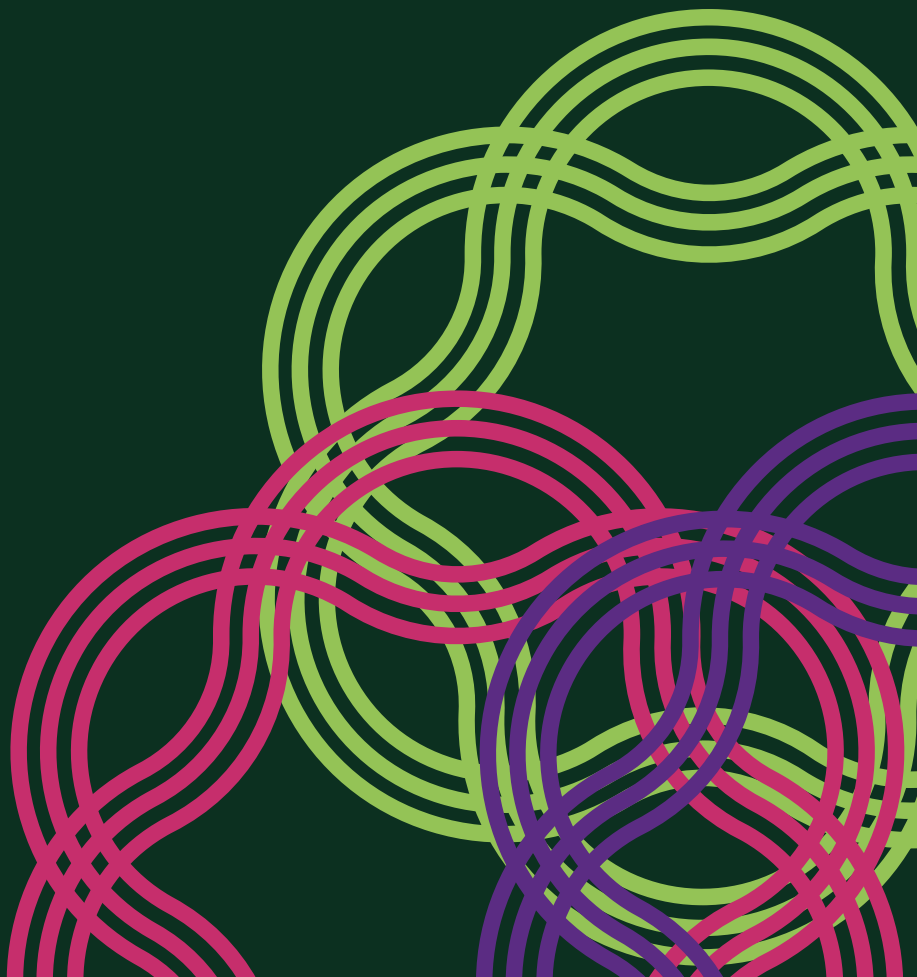
Gender inequalities are also shaped by unpaid care responsibilities, mobility restrictions, social norms, access to education and digital infrastructure, and the availability of safe and dignified workplaces. These barriers are not experienced equally by all women. A woman waste picker, a home-based artisan, a migrant worker and a woman entrepreneur may face very different constraints.

In Conserve's perspective , gender-responsive circular transition must move beyond counting women's participation. It must examine the quality of work, access to resources, control over income, opportunities for progression and the extent to which women can influence decisions within the value chains they are part of.

Part 2

In Depth

04. Innovation, technology and inclusive design
05. Gender-disaggregated data and visibility
06. Women-led SMEs, entrepreneurship and finance
07. Voice, representation and decision-making
08. Care work, time poverty and decent work



04 Innovation, technology and inclusive design

Women should not be viewed only as beneficiaries of circular economy innovation. They are also knowledge holders, producers, entrepreneurs and innovators. Across traditional crafts, waste recovery and community-based production, women possess practical knowledge of materials, techniques, local markets and resource use. Circular innovation should build on this existing knowledge rather than overlooking it in favour of formal or technology-led expertise alone.

However, access to innovation is not automatically equitable. New technologies and digital platforms can create opportunities, but they can also deepen existing inequalities if women do not have access to training, devices, finance, information or the confidence to use them. Technology must therefore be designed around the realities of its users, including their existing skills, working conditions, time constraints and access to infrastructure.

Brazil
PromEC

In line with Axis 2 of the ENEC, PromEC brings together innovation, technology and inclusive design. The project recognizes the challenge of bridging upstream design and implementation, especially when investment is necessary to put solutions into practice. In this sense, the role of funding agencies, Scientific, Technological, and Innovation Institutions (ICTs), and the "S System" is fundamental to promoting the circular economy, as well as new business models. To illustrate this, the Brazilian Innovation Agency (FINEP), a public company under the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovations (MCTI), funds circular economy projects in Brazil, but still lacks gender-specific indicators.

INDIA
Conserve

For Conserve, inclusive innovation means connecting technical capacity with economic opportunity. Training in recycling, material recovery, digital tools or sustainable production needs to be accompanied by pathways to markets, enterprise development, financial access and opportunities for better-quality work. It is equally important to ensure that women are able to participate in decisions about the technologies and production systems being introduced.

INDIA

Conserve

Case Study 01: Artisan 2.0 – Digital Pathways for Women Artisans in Kashmir, India

Through Artisan 2.0, Conserve is working to strengthen the digital and economic participation of women artisans in Kashmir. While these women possess established craft skills, many face barriers such as limited digital literacy, low online visibility and dependence on intermediaries to reach markets. The programme is designed to address these barriers through practical capacity building in digital literacy, smartphone use, digital payments, product photography, content creation, e-commerce and marketplace onboarding. It also supports artisans in developing digital identities and product catalogues while building local digital champions who can sustain learning within artisan communities.

The central objective is to help women move beyond being only producers and strengthen their ability to access markets, communicate directly with customers and participate in digital enterprise. As the programme is ongoing, its longer-term outcomes will need to be assessed through changes in market access, income control and enterprise participation.

05 Gender-disaggregated data and visibility

A significant challenge in building gender-responsive circular systems is the lack of reliable and sufficiently detailed data. Existing information often captures formal employment, registered enterprises and recognised business activity, while overlooking informal work, home-based production, unpaid contributions and small-scale material recovery activities. Even where women are counted as workers or beneficiaries, the data may not explain the nature of their work, the security of their livelihoods or their position within the value chain.

Case Study 02: Analytical Framework of Indicators – Circular Economy Dashboard, Brazil

Brazil
PromEC

In Brazil we have started the journey to collect data specifically in regard to the circular economy. Initially, we did not have a clear definition of circularity from a data perspective, or the gender perspective.

- ✓ We do have data for municipal waste management, but it is self-reported.
- ✓ We do have data for employment, but it is only the formal sector.
- ✓ We do have data for innovation, but just registered patents.

In other words, we do have data, but the data we have does not fully represent what we want to measure.

To address this challenge, PromEC, together with its partners, started developing the Analytical Framework of Indicators – Circular Economy Dashboard, led by the Brazilian Ministry of Development, Industry, Trade and Services (MDIC), with indicators and database analysis for monitoring circularity in Brazil. We realize that the databases we have, often cannot provide gender-disaggregated data. Also, we do not even have some indicators we need, nor the mechanism to collect the data required to measure them once implemented.

Therefore, working groups were established to define the scope, across four main topics:



Material Consumption



Waste Generation and Recycling



Circular Innovation



Investment and Employment

The dashboard is still a work in progress, and gender-specific indicators are one of the main priorities.

INDIA

Conserve

From Conserve's experience in the textile and waste management sectors, understanding gender requires looking beyond the number of women participating in an intervention. We need to understand where women are positioned, what work they undertake, what they earn, what resources they can access and whether they have opportunities to progress. The research undertaken by Conserve in collaboration with Utrecht University between 2020 and 2025 examined the social implications of circular strategies in the apparel value chain across India, Spain and the Netherlands. It brought together questions of job quality, sustainable livelihoods and gender equality, recognising that environmental improvements alone do not establish whether a circular transition is socially beneficial. The research also highlighted the importance of examining material flows alongside employment conditions, livelihood assets and power relationships between value-chain actors.

Data collection should combine quantitative indicators with qualitative research, including worker interviews, focus group discussions and participatory assessments. This is particularly important for reaching workers who may not appear in formal databases or employment records. We recommend that gender-responsive circular economy monitoring include at least the following indicators:

Workforce participation and employment conditions: Gender-disaggregated information on formal and informal employment, nature of work, wages, income regularity, working hours and access to social protection.

Economic agency and ownership: Women's control over earnings, ownership or co-ownership of enterprises, access to finance, productive assets and direct market relationships.

Skills and progression: Participation in technical and digital training, recognition of prior learning, access to new occupations and progression into skilled, supervisory and entrepreneurial roles.

Workplace safety and wellbeing: Access to safe infrastructure, sanitation, occupational health and safety measures, grievance redressal and protection from discrimination and harassment.

Voice and leadership: Women's representation in producer groups, enterprise management, cluster institutions, industry associations and policy discussions.

Care and mobility: Time spent on unpaid care work, access to childcare and other support services, mobility constraints and their influence on participation and progression.

06 Women-led SMEs, entrepreneurship and finance

Women-led circular enterprises can play an important role in local resource recovery, circular design, sustainable production, repair, reuse, upcycling and traditional crafts. However, moving from livelihood activity to a viable enterprise requires more than technical skills or access to training. Women entrepreneurs often face interconnected barriers related to working capital, formal registration, business networks, market information, digital access and the ability to negotiate with buyers.

In many cases, women remain involved in production while intermediaries or other actors control market relationships and capture a larger share of the value. This limits the ability of women to influence pricing, build independent businesses and retain the economic benefits of their work.

To strengthen women-led circular enterprises, governments and financial institutions should consider accessible working-capital mechanisms, flexible credit products, procurement opportunities, business mentoring and market-linkage support. Public and private procurement systems should also make it easier for small women-led enterprises to participate, without imposing compliance requirements that are disproportionate to their scale.

INDIA
Conserve

Conserve's approach is to connect livelihood development with enterprise readiness and market participation. This includes strengthening technical and business capabilities, supporting access to appropriate finance, building market linkages and enabling women to engage more directly with customers and buyers. Formalisation should also be approached as a gradual pathway, with attention to the costs, documentation and institutional requirements that may prevent small enterprises from participating.

Brazil
PromEC

PromEC has specific goals regarding women's leadership in the circular economy in Brazil. The first goal is to identify women leaders in circular business models and then connect them with financing opportunities for circularity. We also know that a significant number of entrepreneurs operate within micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs), which is why the project has SEBRAE as an implementing partner. The approach to promoting circularity involves providing consultancy services and training across different levels and sectors throughout the country. We have identified several local and regional initiatives, such as State Industry Federations and the Northeast Circular Economy Forum (Fórum Nordeste de Economia Circular), which offer mentoring and acceleration programmes. Our aim is to scale up these initiatives to the national level.

Brazil
PromEC

Case Study 03: Brazilian Sustainable Taxonomy and its circular economy objective, Brazil

Another initiative supported by PromEC is the Brazilian Sustainable Taxonomy (TSB), led by the Ministry of Finance. The TSB is the first in the world to explicitly include racial equality—alongside gender and regional equity—as technical criteria for classifying sustainable investments and economic activities. Moreover, the second edition focuses on the transition to a circular economy. It also serves as an enabler for directing investments and incentives towards circularity, considering international interoperability among taxonomies. The TSB development process involves multiple stakeholders, including government institutions and civil society organizations. Additionally, the participatory processes engage different groups of workers across the circular value chain in public policymaking, aiming to broaden their representation.

INDIA
Conserve

Case Study 04: Strengthening women's economic agency through artisan enterprises, India

Conserve's work with women artisans and traditional craft communities demonstrates why enterprise development must address both production and market access. Women may have the skills to produce high-quality craft products but remain dependent on intermediaries for orders, pricing and access to buyers. Through livelihood and enterprise-development interventions, Conserve has supported women in strengthening their production capabilities and exploring pathways into more independent economic activity.

Earlier livelihood programmes have also helped women access roles in quality control, finishing and product packaging, while some have established their own stitching and fabrication units. The broader lesson is that training becomes more meaningful when it is connected to employment, enterprise ownership and market opportunities. Future interventions must also assess whether women gain greater control over income, pricing and business decisions, rather than measuring success only through the number of women trained or enterprises established.

07 Voice, representation and decision-making

Representation is an important starting point, but meaningful participation requires more than the presence of women in meetings, consultations or public events. Women need opportunities to influence the decisions that shape their workplaces, enterprises, value chains and local economies.

In circular economy programmes, this means involving women workers, artisans and entrepreneurs in the design of interventions, selection of technologies, development of training programmes and decisions about market linkages and infrastructure. Their experiences can reveal barriers that may not be visible to technical experts, businesses or policymakers.

INDIA

Conserve

Conserve's experience has shown the importance of building trust and creating spaces where women can express their concerns and aspirations. Community engagement, self-help groups, leadership development and collective platforms can strengthen women's ability to negotiate, raise grievances and participate in local decision-making.

At the institutional level, gender must also become part of how cluster development, industry partnerships and policy frameworks are designed. Women's representation should extend to the bodies that determine investment priorities, workplace standards, technology adoption, skills development and market access.

The WCEF2026 panel itself was a valuable opportunity to bring women's perspectives into an international circular economy discussion. However, the larger ambition should be to ensure that gender is not confined to a dedicated session. It should inform the wider conversations on circular business models, innovation, finance, workforce development and policy.

08 Care work, time poverty and decent work

Women's participation in circular livelihoods cannot be understood without recognising the unequal distribution of unpaid care and domestic responsibilities. These responsibilities influence the time women can devote to paid work, their ability to travel, participate in training, access markets and take up leadership roles.

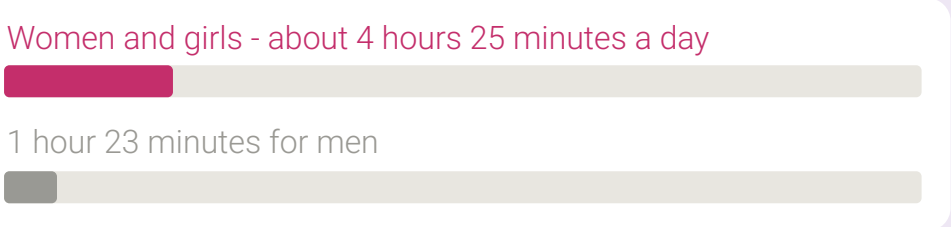
An opportunity may appear economically attractive on paper but remain inaccessible if it requires long working hours, travel away from home, digital access that women do not control or participation in training without childcare arrangements. These constraints are often treated as individual or household matters when they are in fact structural barriers to women's economic participation.

A gender-responsive circular economy must therefore consider care as part of the economic infrastructure that enables participation. Practical measures can include flexible training schedules, childcare support, safe and accessible workplaces, sanitation facilities, transport arrangements where needed, and work organisation that takes account of women's realities. These measures should not reinforce the expectation that women alone are responsible for care; they should also encourage shared responsibility within households, workplaces and institutions.

16 billion hours

of unpaid care every day

Women and girls carry roughly three-quarters of the world's unpaid care and domestic work, about 4 hours 25 minutes a day, against 1 hour 23 minutes for men (GACERE, 2026). That adds up to 16 billion hours of unpaid care every day, work that keeps families and economies running but stays largely invisible. Survey respondents in the sector reported that balancing unpaid care with paid work was an additional challenge (Kumar & Thawaney, 2025), and women entrepreneurs in waste management report the same juggling, along with difficulties getting loans (GACERE, 2026).



Safe workplaces, public spaces and transport are therefore part of decent work, not an extra.

Circular jobs are often in remote places, such as landfills, sorting plants and recycling units, and getting there safely is not a given. Women report problems with transport, harassment in male-dominated spaces and the logistics of childcare (GACERE, 2026).

Inside the workplace, a lack of adequate sanitation facilities and protective equipment that fits add to the risk. Safe workplaces, public spaces and transport are therefore part of decent work, not an extra.

Training offered late at night or at fixed hours excludes people with care duties, while flexible scheduling makes a significant difference (GACERE, 2026). Informal workers, mostly women, often have no childcare, social protection or paid leave to rely on.

a circular job can become a dead end

Even when jobs are available, women's progression is held back by wage gaps and by their under-representation in technical and leadership positions (Yilan et al., 2026). Without fair pay and clear career paths, a circular job can become a dead end.

Brazil PromEC

55.5%

of workers in waste picker cooperatives and associations in Brazil are women

Brazil is working towards closing open dumpsites and strengthening municipal solid waste management.

One of the key pathways is to expand selective waste collection and recycling while creating opportunities for waste picker organisations to increase their incomes and access decent work.Women play a central role in this transition, representing 55.5% of workers in waste picker cooperatives and associations in Brazil, according to the 2025 Recycling Yearbook (iCs, 2025).

Brazil's National Solid Waste Policy (PNRS) prioritises the inclusion of waste picker organisations, recognising their important role as environmental agents.In this context, PromEC supports the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change (MMA) in advancing reverse logistics initiatives, as well as conducting technical and economic feasibility assessments for the closure of open dumpsites in collaboration with the Ministry of Finance (MF).

Case Study 05: Designing circular livelihoods around women's realities, India

INDIA

Conserve

For Conserve, creating green livelihoods is not enough if workers continue to face unsafe conditions, irregular incomes, excessive working hours or limited opportunities for progression. Occupational health and safety, fair compensation, grievance mechanisms, social protection and worker voice must be considered integral to circular economy design.

Conserve's gender journey has evolved from recognising women's immediate livelihood needs to addressing the wider conditions that influence their participation and agency. Its community-based work has included strengthening access to livelihood opportunities while recognising the importance of safe spaces, healthcare, education, government services, childcare support, workplace wellbeing and community engagement. These experiences point to an important design lesson: livelihood interventions are more likely to be accessible and sustainable when they respond to the wider realities of women's lives. Flexible training, accessible workplaces, appropriate support services and safe mechanisms for raising concerns should be considered at the planning stage, rather than introduced only after participation barriers emerge. Specific outcomes relating to care support and time use should be documented more systematically in future programmes.

Panel group photo, WCEF2026, Gandhinagar



Part 3

Closing

09. Cross-cutting lessons from the Global South
10. Recommendations and pathway to WCEF2027



09 Cross-cutting lessons from the Global South

Conserve and PromEC suggest five lessons that may be relevant across circular economy transitions in the Global South.

First, women are already part of circular economies. Their contributions to reuse, repair, recovery, craft and production need to be recognised, valued and included in formal and informal circular economy planning.

Second, participation must translate into agency. The number of women trained, employed or included in a programme is not sufficient to establish empowerment. We must also examine whether women have greater control over income, productive assets, markets and decisions.

Third, circular transitions must protect and upgrade existing livelihoods. Formalisation and technological change should not displace informal workers or undermine community-based systems. Existing knowledge and capabilities should be recognised, and workers should have realistic pathways to better-quality work.

Fourth, skills must be connected to economic opportunity. Training should be linked to viable markets, finance, enterprise development, employment and opportunities for progression. Otherwise, the responsibility for adapting to a changing economy falls disproportionately on individual workers.

Fifth, gender equality requires systems change. Workplaces, markets, financial institutions, policies and local governance structures must become more responsive to women's realities. Gender cannot remain a separate social component of circular economy programmes; it must influence their overall design.

These lessons are not necessarily identical across countries. The nature of informality, social norms, institutional arrangements and market structures differs between India, Brazil and South Africa. However, a shared concern is the need to ensure that the people who contribute to circular systems also have a fair opportunity to shape and benefit from them.

10 Recommendations and pathway to WCEF2027

Drawing on our discussions at WCEF2026, we propose the following actions for governments, businesses, financial institutions, research organisations and civil society.

1 **Make gender a core design principle in circular economy policies and programmes:** Gender assessments should be incorporated into circular economy strategies, project design, infrastructure planning, technology adoption and value-chain development. These assessments should identify who currently participates, who controls resources and value, and who may be excluded through the transition.

Suggested indicator: Proportion of circular economy programmes and policies that include gender analysis, gender-responsive targets and mechanisms for participation.

2 **Recognise and improve the conditions of informal workers:** Circular economy policies should recognise informal workers as contributors to resource recovery and material circularity. Formalisation pathways should be gradual, non-disruptive and designed around existing livelihoods. Workers should have access to identity and recognition, skills development, occupational safety, social protection and opportunities for progression.

Suggested indicator: Number of informal workers accessing improved working conditions, social protection, skills recognition and better-quality livelihood opportunities.

3 **Connect women's skills to markets, finance and enterprise ownership:** Women-led circular enterprises require more than training. They need access to affordable finance, procurement opportunities, digital infrastructure, market information, mentoring and business networks. Financial products and enterprise support mechanisms should reflect the realities of small and informal businesses.

Suggested indicator: Women's access to finance, enterprise ownership, direct buyer relationships and increased control over business income.

4 **Promote decent work and care-responsive workplaces:** Workplace improvements should include occupational health and safety, sanitation, safe working environments, grievance redressal, fair compensation and social protection. Training and employment models should also consider mobility, childcare and unpaid care responsibilities.

Suggested indicator: Percentage of participating workplaces meeting defined standards for worker safety, dignity and gender-responsive facilities.

5 **Build gender-disaggregated data and accountability systems:** Circular economy measurement frameworks should go beyond material recovery, waste diversion and resource efficiency. They should capture employment quality, informal work, income, ownership, leadership, access to finance, skills progression and care-related constraints.

Suggested indicator: Availability and regular publication of gender-disaggregated social and economic indicators across circular value chains.

6 **Strengthen women's voice in circular economy governance:** Women workers, artisans, entrepreneurs and community representatives should have meaningful roles in local governance structures, industry platforms, policy consultations and international circular economy forums. Their participation should extend to agenda-setting and decision-making, rather than being limited to consultation.

Suggested indicator: Women's representation and decision-making roles in circular economy institutions, industry platforms and policy processes.

A collective pathway to WCEF2027: The discussions at WCEF2026 should be carried forward through a continuing platform for exchange among women practitioners, researchers, policymakers, entrepreneurs and community organisations. Ahead of WCEF2027, the contributors could collectively develop a small set of shared principles and practical recommendations, supported by country-level examples and evidence from implementation.

A useful next step would be to document how gender-responsive circular economy approaches are being applied across different contexts, identify common gaps in policy and practice, and bring the voices of informal workers, women entrepreneurs and artisans into the next round of discussions.

The objective should not simply be to increase women's visibility in circular economy discussions, but to strengthen their influence in shaping the systems being built.

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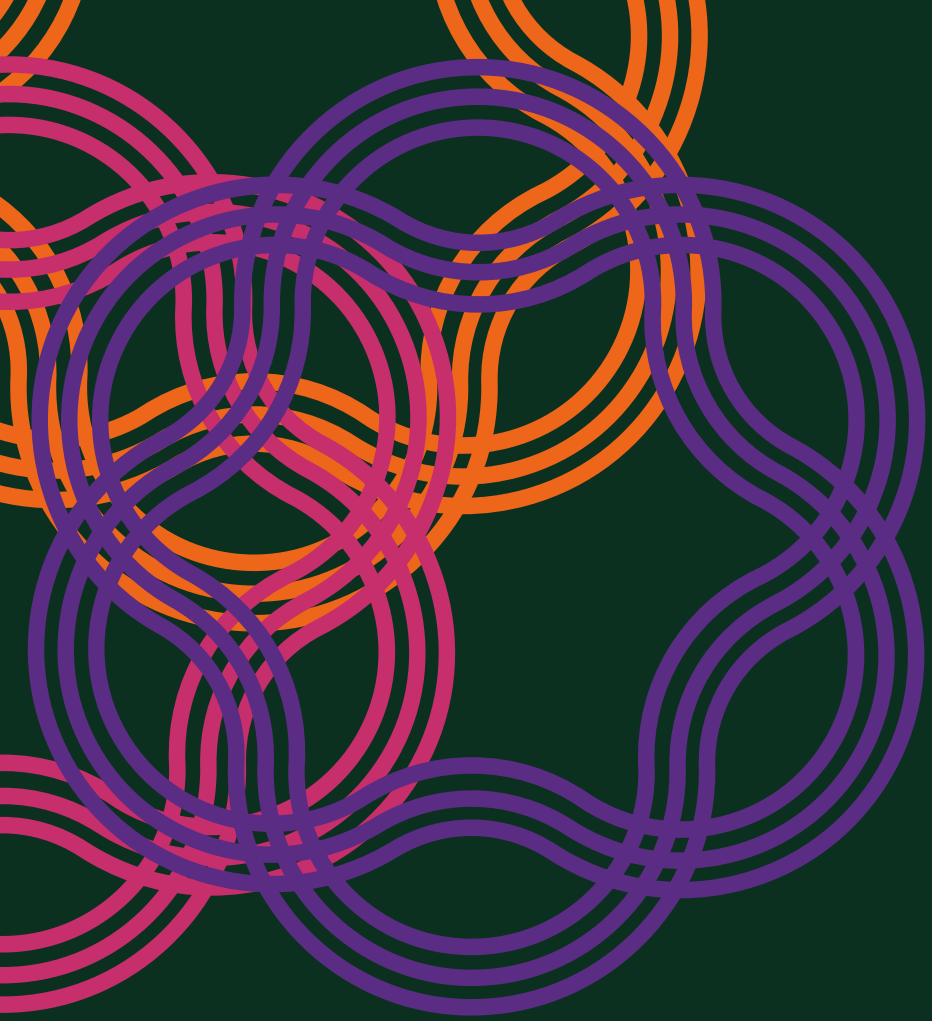

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