

# Is the Circular Economy Prejudiced?



**Women and the Circular Economy**

## Summary

*Over the last decade, the circular economy has been a huge success story*

The UK circular economy is thriving. Between 2014 and 2019 it grew by around 20%, increasing value added to the economy, creating jobs and reducing environmental impacts by extending the life of products and materials through repair, remanufacturing, reuse, sharing and recycling, and helping millions of people access more affordable goods. WRAP believe the sector has the potential to double in size by 2030. So, what is the problem?

In the wider UK economy, around half of jobs are held by males and half are held by women. This has been the case since the 1990s (ONS 2023a<sup>1</sup>). However, just 1 in 4 jobs in the circular economy are held by women. The only part of the circular economy which employs more women than men is in the lowest paid part of the circular economy (sale of second hand items).

**How has this happened and what can we do about it?**

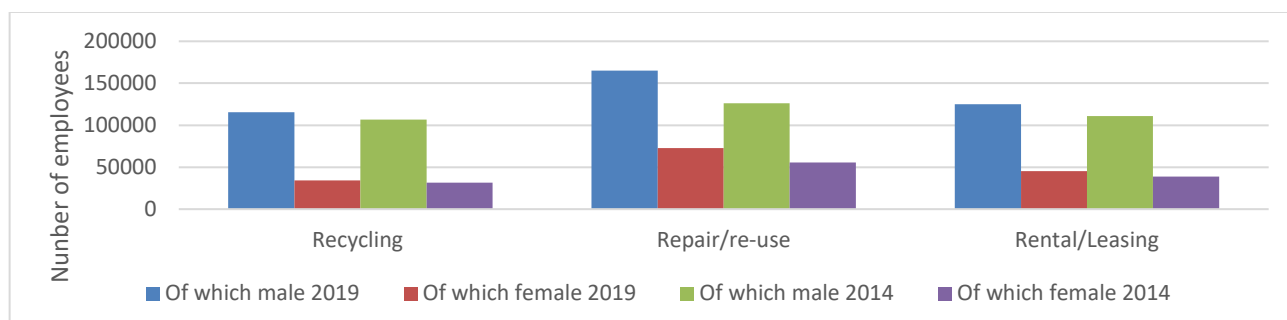
## Key Facts

- While roughly equal numbers of jobs are held by men and women across the UK, just a quarter of jobs in the circular economy are held by women.
- This understates and undervalues the role of women in the circular economy who undertake unpaid activities (e.g. volunteering).
- Data is not available to explore other important issues of inclusivity in the sector, such as age, disability and race.
- WRAP is calling for discussion and action.

## What is the issue?

WRAP recognise that gender is more than male / female: gender includes non-binary, gender-fluid, gender non conforming, and other groups<sup>2</sup>. This report focusses on male / female as this is the grouping for which data is available, and figure 1 suggests there is a disparity which requires addressing across all aspects of the circular economy. No data was available for protected characteristics other than sex.

Figure 1: Employment in the circular economy by gender, 2019 and 2014 (WRAP analysis of ONS 2023a)



<sup>1</sup> ONS (2023a) [JOBS03: Employee jobs by industry - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](https://ons.gov.uk/jobs03)

<sup>2</sup> ONS (2023b) [Gender identity, England and Wales - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](https://ons.gov.uk/gender)

## Missing Opportunity

If the number of women in the circular economy matched the number of men it could create an additional 250,000 jobs, and add £19billion to the UK economy.

## How has this happened?

There are a number of possible reasons why women may be underrepresented in the circular economy. Without action, we do not believe that anything will change.

### Lack of awareness

Powering Up Britain<sup>3</sup> identifies key “green” sectors to develop, and recognises that diversity and inclusion is an issue, but doesn’t address the circular economy or commit to action. CIWM have recognised this as an issue in the waste sector<sup>4</sup>. To date, no-one has covered the wider circular economy.

### Unconscious bias

WRAPs previous research highlighted that one of the reasons a circular economy could lead to net reductions in unemployment was because there was a correlation between mid-level skills (e.g. skilled trades, manufacturing) being lost in other parts of the economy and those required for the circular economy. These skills are likely to have predominantly been acquired by men in manufacturing industries. In recruiting people with the skills required there has therefore potentially been an unconscious bias.

### Underlying issues

The gender disparity in the UK circular economy is broadly similar to the gender disparity in UK STEM.<sup>5</sup> We believe that this is more than a coincidence. As many of the skills

required in the circular economy are at the mid-skilled level, covering science, technology, engineering and maths. If more men are perceived to hold these skills, they are more likely to gain employment in the circular economy.

### Perception

There may be a misconception about the types of jobs available, the skills required and the career opportunities.

### Intersectional issues

There may be intersectional issues around circular economy roles which affect women more than men (e.g. childcare) or which affect men and women with different characteristics (e.g. women of colour).

### Valuing our contributions

Whilst WRAP has looked at paid employment, the circular economy also creates volunteering opportunities, in re-use in particular. Women may be taking more of these unpaid roles than men.

## What can be done?

**The challenge is not unique to the circular economy: it starts in society, from school onwards. However, this doesn’t mean leaving others to take responsibility.**

**Employers** need to recognise the missing potential and act.

**Individuals** entering the sector need to have the opportunity to contribute fully.

**We can all** help ensure that boys and girls from a young age see a future in the circular economy, and that young women are taking

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<sup>4</sup> CIWM (2022) [EDI Strategy \(ciwm.co.uk\)](https://www.ciwm.co.uk/edi-strategy)

<sup>5</sup> [Historical comparison of gender inequality in scientific careers across countries and disciplines \(pnas.org\)](https://www.pnas.org/content/118/12/20197)

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STEM subjects and seeing the future that the green economy can hold for them. That is why WRAP is part of Let's Go Zero to help all our schools become zero carbon.

Many of the required actions are not unique to the circular economy, nor are they constrained to gender. Whilst we have focussed on gender, creating a diverse and inclusive workforce requires a wider discussion. It is not enough to be passive and assume that things will change without concerted action. The first step is for those of us in the sector to look at ourselves and ask what more can we do to address the current imbalance?

## WRAP is calling for:

A **conversation** on how the circular economy can be more inclusive. We invite you all to join us in this.

Better **understanding** – we should not wait for perfect data, but publication of more data by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) would help reveal possible issues. In particular:

- Publication of gender disaggregated data at four digit SIC Codes.

- Reinstating EMP04: Employment by occupation and reporting on type of role by sex and other protected characteristics. This would reveal not just to the overall employment mix, but any potential issues in the types of job which people are employed in.

**Inspiration** – the circular economy can deal with climate anxiety and a host of social and environmental issues – we should tell our story to inspire participation. We should all aim to reach a diverse audience.

**Conversely, be wary** of onus on women as caretakers for the planet. Don't put excess pressure on women to take on nurturing roles.

**Engagement** with our current workforce, considering the make-up of the workforce and the roles that employees are in: is our workforce diverse/ inclusive?

**Creation of opportunities:** consider recruitment, skills development and training opportunities to ensure all prospective applicants are able to engage in the sector.

**Openness** Employers should consider publishing information on gender pay gap even if they are not legally required to do.

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