

## RESEARCH ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

# Women's Role in Promoting Sustainable Development Through Stakeholder Engagement and Environmental Policy: African Perspectives On the Circular Economy

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**Received:** 2 September 2024 | **Revised:** 11 November 2024 | **Accepted:** 16 November 2024

**Funding:** The authors received no specific funding for this work.

**Keywords:** African perspectives | circular economy | environmental policy | stakeholder engagement | sustainable development | Women's role

## ABSTRACT

As African countries increasingly adopt circular economy strategies, the implications for sustainable development remain underexplored, particularly regarding gender dynamics. This study investigates the critical role that women play in promoting sustainable development through stakeholder engagement and environmental policy within the context of the circular economy in Africa. Drawing on sustainability theories, the research employs exploratory and quantitative methods to analyse a longitudinal dataset from the World Development Indicators (WDI), Gender Statistics (GS), and Adjusted Net Savings (ANS) databases, covering 11 African countries from 2016 to 2023. The pooled ordinary least squares (OLS) and system generalized method of moments (GMM) analyses reveal that women's involvement in the circular economy not only enhances sustainability but also contributes to job creation and overall economic growth. Moreover, women's engagement significantly moderates the relationship between circular economy practices and sustainability outcomes in the region. These findings offer new insights into the intersection of gender, policy, sustainability, and stakeholder engagement. They advance scholarly understanding of how women's participation in the circular economy can drive broader sustainable development goals in Africa.

## 1 | Introduction

The intersection of gender, sustainability (SS), stakeholder engagement, and the circular economy (CE) presents a promising avenue for fostering inclusive development and addressing some of the most pressing environmental challenges of our time. Women have long been recognized as critical drivers of change in various sectors, yet their role in shaping CE strategies and sustainable development (SD) remains underexplored, particularly in the African context (Schröder, Lemille, and Desmond 2020; Morais, Souza, and Santos 2022). As global discussions increasingly centre on the need for more sustainable, circular models of production and consumption, the inclusion

of women in these processes has the potential to both catalyse positive environmental outcomes and empower women socially and economically. This study aims to provide a comprehensive empirical analysis of women's role in promoting sustainable development through stakeholder engagement and environmental policy, focusing on the African context.

The CE is conceptualized as a regenerative system in which resource inputs and waste outputs are minimized through strategies like reuse, repair, remanufacturing, and recycling (Geissdoerfer et al. 2017). It encourages a shift away from the traditional linear model of “take, make, dispose,” and towards a more sustainable and efficient use of resources

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(Corvellec 2022). As Africa faces the dual challenge of rapid population growth and unsustainable resource consumption, transitioning to a CE becomes vital for addressing both economic development needs and environmental SS (Koech, Masinde, and Onyari 2023). In this context, women's involvement (WI) is particularly crucial, as they often play key roles in informal sectors related to waste management, resource conservation, and local community resilience (Pérez-Peña et al. 2023). Moreover, involving women in these efforts not only advances SDG 5 (gender equality) and SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth) but also promotes broader goals of social inclusion and economic empowerment (Koech, Masinde, and Onyari 2023).

Despite their significant contributions, women's representation in leadership roles and decision-making processes related to environmental management and CE policies remains limited (Kabeer 2021; Carli 2020). Research suggests that gender inequality continues to be a significant barrier to women's full participation in the design and implementation of sustainable practices (Alon, Higgins, and Li 2020). However, a growing body of work recognizes the unique perspectives women bring to environmental and economic challenges, underscoring their potential as innovative agents of change in the CE (Alon, Higgins, and Li 2020). WI not only enriches the design of circular practices but also enhances the effectiveness and SS of those initiatives by promoting inclusive growth. This aligns with stakeholder engagement literature, which emphasizes the importance of inclusive participation in achieving sustainable outcomes (Salvioni and Almicci 2020; Gutberlet et al. 2017; Van Langen et al. 2021; Schröder, Lemille, and Desmond 2020).

The purpose of this study is twofold: first, it seeks to critically examine the involvement of women in driving SS through the adoption of CE practices in Africa; second, it aims to explore how this involvement contributes to their economic empowerment and social inclusion. By analyzing data from 11 African countries over the period from 2016 to 2023, the study aims to assess the extent to which women's participation in CE initiatives leads to sustainable outcomes and contributes to gender equity and economic resilience in the region.

This study makes a novel contribution to the literature by offering empirical insights into the role of women in advancing CE practices, with a particular focus on the African context. While much of the existing literature on CE and SS has been centred on developed countries (Schröder et al. 2019; Geissdoerfer et al. 2017), this study brings attention to the unique challenges and opportunities faced by African nations in transitioning to circular models of development. By focusing on women's participation in these transitions, the research emphasizes the critical role of stakeholder engagement in fostering a more inclusive and resilient CE in Africa (Salvioni and Almicci 2020; Kukovič and Radevič 2024; Van Langen et al. 2021).

Utilizing panel regression techniques and longitudinal data from the World Development Indicators (WDI), gender statistics (GS), and adjusted net savings (ANS) databases, this study applies pooled ordinary least squares (OLS) and system generalized method of moments (GMM) methods to analyse the

relationship between WI in the CE and key SS indicators in Africa.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: the context of the study is discussed first, followed by a review of the relevant literature on CE, gender, and SS. The methodology section follows, outlining the data and analytical methods used. This is followed by a presentation of the results and discussion of the study's findings. The paper concludes with recommendations, a summary of the study's contributions, and suggestions for future research.

## 2 | Literature Review

The concepts of circularity and SS have increasingly gained significance in contemporary global discourse, particularly as concerns about environmental degradation, resource depletion, and climate change mount (Koech, Masinde, and Onyari 2023). While circular economy (CE) has been heralded as a crucial strategy for achieving SS, the empirical research on CE in Africa is still nascent compared to its more robust examination in the Global North (Mhlanga, Albrecht, and Kobelo 2022). This gap is particularly concerning given that the traditional linear economy model—characterized by a “take-make-dispose” paradigm—has been widely criticized for its unsustainable practices, necessitating a shift toward alternative, more sustainable economic models (Nijman-Ross, O'Brien, and Tansley 2023; Muchangos 2022). This transition is especially urgent in Africa, where rapid urbanization and rising resource consumption are placing increasing pressure on the continent's environmental and social systems.

### 2.1 | CE in Africa: Current State and Challenges

Africa, the fastest urbanizing continent, faces unique challenges that make the transition from a linear to a CE particularly critical. By 2060, the continent's population is projected to reach approximately 2.8 billion people, intensifying consumption patterns, waste generation, and environmental pressures (Norouzi, Tofighi, and Yazdani 2021). A growing body of research suggests that the implementation of CE practices could mitigate some of these challenges by reducing waste, conserving resources, and improving overall ecological SS. However, despite the increasing recognition of CE as a model of development, much of the existing research and policy focus has been centered on developed nations, with African countries remaining underrepresented in the global CE discourse (Akhimien, Omotayo, and Ekenedo 2021).

Recent studies indicate that, since 2016, there has been some progress in African CE research, particularly within the construction sector, which now accounts for about 21% of global research output (Norouzi, Tofighi, and Yazdani 2021). Nevertheless, a systematic review by Rahla, Mateus, and Bragança (2021) reveals that Africa contributes only around 2% to the global body of CE publications. Bilal, Figueiredo, and Adamu (2020) argue that this lack of academic output reflects the limited awareness of CE concepts across many

African nations. This is exacerbated by a general underestimation of the role of informal sectors, where many CE practices—such as waste recycling, reusing materials, and product repair—are already taking place.

## 2.2 | Women's Role in the CE

A significant gap in the literature concerns WI in the CE, particularly within African contexts. Women, especially in rural areas and urban informal sectors, often play a key role in recycling, waste management, and resource conservation. Yet, their contributions are largely invisible in formal economic analyses. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO 2020), over 60% of the global workforce is engaged in the informal economy, with women constituting the majority in many African nations. This informal sector, which is largely driven by women, plays a crucial role in the CE by repairing, reusing, and recycling products at the community level. However, the vulnerabilities and unique contributions of women in these sectors are not well understood or systematically documented (Desmond and Asamba 2019; Rweyendela and Kombe 2021).

In examining women's potential to drive SS through CE, gendered perspectives become essential. WI in CE could contribute significantly to broader sustainable development goals (SDGs), including poverty reduction, improved health and education, and greater social inclusion. Gender equality, in particular, is often a cornerstone of sustainable development. This is evident in studies such as those by Achuo, Ngomsi, and Yombo (2022), which demonstrate that women's socioeconomic empowerment is linked to better environmental outcomes in Africa. The research suggests that empowering women not only enhances their participation in economic activities but also contributes positively to environmental SS.

However, despite this potential, women's empowerment and their involvement in CE practices in Africa remain understudied. Much of the existing research on CE focuses primarily on material flows, business models, and industrial practices, with limited attention to the social dimensions, particularly gender (Schöggl, Stumpf, and Baumgartner 2020; Awan and Sroufe 2022). This gap calls for deeper investigations into how women's roles in CE can be better integrated into national and regional SS policies.

## 2.3 | SS and Circularity: A Path Forward

The nexus between CE and SS is well-established in the global literature, with many studies emphasizing the role of circularity in mitigating environmental problems such as biodiversity loss, pollution, and climate change (Su et al. 2013; Oduniyi 2022). In Africa, several initiatives are already underway to promote CE practices. Notably, the African circular economy Alliance (ACEA) is working to foster CE among African countries, while Rwanda hosted the World circular economy Forum (WCEF) in 2022, signalling the growing importance of circularity in the region (WCEF 2022). Despite these positive steps, however, African countries still lag

behind in terms of adopting comprehensive policies and research agendas related to CE.

The intersection of CE practices with environmental policies offers new opportunities for driving sustainable development. For example, countries like Rwanda have begun integrating CE principles into national development strategies, yet much more needs to be done to mainstream these principles across all sectors of the economy. The existing literature suggests that material selection and life cycle analysis are central to achieving SS goals through CE (Awan and Sroufe 2022; Schöggl, Stumpf, and Baumgartner 2020). However, much of this research has yet to be adapted to the African context, where local resource management practices and informal economy structures are pivotal.

## 2.4 | The Role of Women in the CE: New Empirical Directions

The integration of gender perspectives into CE research presents a promising avenue for advancing sustainable development in Africa. Several studies have suggested that women's empowerment in sectors such as waste management, agriculture, and energy can significantly enhance SS outcomes (Khan 2023). For instance, research by Khan (2023) in Pakistan shows that increasing women's participation in the workforce leads to improved environmental SS by reducing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. Similarly, Osundina (2020) found that women with better education and health outcomes are more likely to contribute meaningfully to the labour force, including in roles that support sustainable development and circularity.

However, while these studies highlight the importance of women in driving SS, empirical research focused on African women's roles in CE is sparse. This gap is particularly significant when considering the informal economy, where women are often at the forefront of recycling, waste management, and community-based sustainable practices. Research by Eger, Munar, and Hsu (2022) also emphasizes the importance of including gender in SS analyses, arguing that gendered approaches can offer new insights into how policies can be designed to achieve more inclusive and equitable outcomes.

## 2.5 | Hypotheses Development

Building on the literature reviewed, the following hypotheses were proposed to guide the study on the intersection of circular economy, SS, and women's roles in Africa:

- H1.** *Women's involvement in the circular economy significantly drives sustainability in Africa.*
- H2.** *Women's involvement significantly moderates the relationship between circular economy practices and sustainability outcomes in Africa.*
- H3.** *Women's involvement in circular economy practices significantly moderates the relationship between women empowerment and social inclusion in Africa.*

### 3 | Methods

#### 3.1 | Research Design

This study aims to investigate the role of WI in driving SS through the CE. To achieve this, an exploratory and quantitative research design was adopted. The exploratory design is particularly suitable for uncovering new insights and addressing knowledge gaps in existing literature, as it allows for the investigation of previously underexplored relationships (Brink 1998). In addition, the quantitative approach ensures statistical rigor and facilitates precise measurement, analysis, and interpretation of data. By employing these methods, the study aims to draw robust inferences from the data that can be extrapolated to a broader context, providing empirical evidence on the intersection of gender, SS, and the CE.

#### 3.2 | Sample and Data

The study utilizes a longitudinal dataset sourced from the World Databank Indicators, covering the period from 2016 to 2023 (8 years). This timeframe was chosen to align with the adoption of the United Nations' 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) in September 2015, with full implementation by 2016. Gender equality (SDG 5), which emphasizes WI in various sectors, is a key focus of this study, making the post-SDG adoption period particularly relevant for providing empirical insights into gender-inclusive SS initiatives.

The study's population comprises all 48 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. However, using inclusion and exclusion criteria based on data availability, the final sample consists of 11 countries. Data for these countries were drawn from the following World Bank databases: World Development Indicators (WDI), gender statistics (GS), and adjusted net savings (ANS). This selection ensures a robust, region-specific analysis of women's role in driving SS within the CE in Africa.

#### 3.3 | Measurement of Variables

Building on the work of McGrath, Connelly, and Seitz (2019) and Kpegba, Opong, and Atchulo (2024), this study measures the dependent variable, SS, using adjusted net savings (ANS), also known as genuine savings (% of Gross National Income—GNI). ANS is a comprehensive indicator of a country's economic SS, accounting for the depletion of natural resources and the deterioration of environmental quality. It is a holistic measure that incorporates the long-term impact of economic activities on both human and natural capital. In this study, the natural logarithm of genuine savings is used to standardize the data for statistical analysis.

The independent variable, CE, is proxied using the waste-input–output model proposed by Tisserant, Muench, and Lehtonen (2017). This model suggests that material flow analysis, which accounts for the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of sustainable development at the national and regional levels, can be used to represent the contribution of CE practices. In this study, the natural logarithm of recycled

solid waste accounted for within a year is used as a proxy for CE activity.

To measure WI, the study uses the female labour force participation ratio, which reflects the percentage of women actively engaged in the workforce. This measure serves as an indicator of women's economic participation, which is essential for understanding their role in driving sustainable practices in the CE.

Additionally, the study incorporates several control variables, consistent with the work of Kpegba, Opong, and Atchulo (2024) and Hayat (2019). These control variables include trade openness, foreign direct investment (FDI), and inflation (INF), all of which are known to influence a country's economic SS. By controlling for these factors, the study ensures that the observed relationships between WI, CE practices, and SS are not confounded by broader economic dynamics.

A summary of the variables and their respective measurements is presented in Table 1.

#### 3.4 | Research Model and Analytical Technique

This study employs the Pooled OLS regression model as the primary analytical tool to examine the role of WI in the relationship between the CE and SS. Given the longitudinal nature of the dataset, the panel regression technique is particularly suitable for analyzing the data over time and across countries. However, recognizing the limitations of the \*\*Pooled OLS model—particularly its potential sensitivity to omitted variable bias and other specification errors—the study also uses the system generalized method of Moments (GMM) as a robustness check. This approach enables the assessment of the magnitude and significance of the relationships under different estimation techniques.

The System GMM is particularly advantageous because it provides robust estimates that help correct for potential issues such as endogeneity, second-order autocorrelation, and unobserved heterogeneity. It does so by including lagged values of the dependent variable as instruments, thereby improving the accuracy of the estimates (Arellano and Bond 1991; Arellano and Bover 1995). To ensure the validity of the instruments, the study conducts Hansen tests to check the appropriateness of the instruments, with p-values compared against a critical value of 0.05. Additionally, the AR (2) test is employed to assess the presence of second-order autocorrelation, with p-values compared to 0.05 under the null hypothesis of no autocorrelation.

The baseline regression model used in this study is specified in Equation (1) and Equation (2), which are provided below.

$$SS_{it} = f(CE_{it}, WI_{it}, \text{Control Variables}_{it}, \epsilon_{it}) \quad (1)$$

$$Y_{it} = \beta X_{it} + \gamma Z_{i,t} + v_{i,t} + \epsilon_{i,t} \quad (2)$$

where  $Y_{it}$  = dependent variable of interest,  $X_{it}$  = the independent variables of interest and  $\beta$  captures their coefficients.  $Z_{i,t}$



= control variables adopted by the study and  $\gamma$  are their coefficients. Also,  $\nu$  represents the moderator, and  $\varepsilon_{i,t}$  = the stochastic error term, with an underlying assumption that  $\varepsilon_{i,t}$  are independent for each  $i$  and over all  $t$ .

## 4 | Results and Discussion

### 4.1 | Descriptive Statistics

The summary statistics in Table 2 provide an overview of the key variables in this study. SS in Sub-Saharan Africa shows a moderate level, with an average score of 21.084. This suggests that while there are efforts to achieve SS, significant challenges remain. The distribution is left-skewed ( $-2.584$ ) and exhibits a long peak (12.937), indicating that most observations are clustered towards the lower end of the SS scale.

The circular economy (CE) variable, with an average of  $-2.070$ , suggests that Sub-Saharan Africa's CE efforts are relatively

underdeveloped. The negative values and the moderate standard deviation (0.658) point to insufficient progress in minimizing waste, recycling, and reusing materials for economic gain.

Regarding WI, the low average score of 3.989 indicates that women's participation in the labour force in Sub-Saharan Africa remains limited, with relatively little variation across the countries studied. This aligns with the findings of other studies that suggest persistent gender inequalities in labour market participation.

INF shows a mean of 4.996, indicating moderate inflationary pressures across the region, though with significant variation (standard deviation of 0.248). Trade Openness (TO) and Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) also exhibit moderate averages, with TO showing a mean of 4.179 and FDI having an average of 0.833.

These descriptive statistics provide an important foundation for interpreting the relationships explored in the study and give context to the current state of SS and CE efforts in the region.

**TABLE 1** | Summary of variables.

Variable	Measurement	References
Sustainability (SS)	Natural logarithm of Genuine savings (%GNI)	McGrath, Connelly, and Seitz (2019), Kpegba, Oppong, and Atchulo (2024)
Circular economy (CE)	Natural logarithm of recycled waste	Tisserant, Muench, and Lehtonen (2017)
Women's involvement (WI)	Natural logarithm of female labour force participation	World Databank Indicators
Trade openness (TO)	Natural logarithm of trade openness index	Hayat (2019), Kpegba, Oppong, and Atchulo (2024), Mathibe and Oppong (2024)
Foreign Direct Investment (FDI)	Natural logarithm of FDI inflow (% of GDP)	Hayat (2019), Kpegba, Oppong, and Atchulo (2024), Oppong and Mathibe (2024)
Inflation (INF)	Natural logarithm of consumer price index	Kpegba, Oppong, and Atchulo (2024)

Source: Authors' table (2024).

**TABLE 2** | Summary statistics.

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	Minimum	Maximum	Skewness	Kurtosis
SS	21.084	1.749	12.962	23.149	$-2.584$	12.937
CE	$-2.070$	0.658	$-3.033$	$-0.596$	0.637	2.814
WI	3.989	0.192	3.589	4.311	$-0.396$	2.498
INF	4.996	0.248	4.659	5.807	0.793	3.614
TO	4.179	0.497	3.305	5.463	0.821	3.570
FDI	0.833	0.912	$-1.549$	2.956	$-0.099$	3.089

Abbreviations: CE, Circular economy; FDI, Foreign Direct Investment; INF, Inflation; SS, Sustainability; TO, Trade openness; WI, Women involvement.

**TABLE 3** | Pairwise correlations.

Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
(1) SS	1.000					
(2) CE	0.062	1.000				
(3) WI	0.115	-0.226	1.000			
(4) INF	0.128	-0.134	0.378*	1.000		
(5) TO	-0.329*	0.426*	-0.109	-0.230*	1.000	
(6) FDI	-0.338*	-0.062	-0.152	-0.328*	0.532*	1.000

Note: \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \* $p < 0.1$ .

**TABLE 4** | Baseline regression estimates (Pooled OLS).

Variables	SS (1)	CE (2)
<i>Independent</i>		
CE	29.99 (10.47)***	—
WI	13.57 (6.076)**	0.795 (0.412)*
<i>Moderator</i>		
WI*CE	7.851 (2.725)***	—
<i>Control</i>		
INF	0.921 (0.667)	-0.0741 (0.411)
TO	-2.993 (0.843)***	0.892 (0.183)***
FDI	-0.306 (0.314)	-0.350 (0.104)***
Constant	-21.93 (21.54)	-1.972 (2.267)
R-squared	0.558	0.367

Note: Standard errors in parentheses \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \* $p < 0.1$ .

## 4.2 | Correlation Analysis

The pairwise correlation matrix in Table 3 highlights important relationships between the variables. SS shows weak positive correlations with CE (CE) (0.062), Women Involvement (WI) (0.115), and INF (0.128), suggesting that improvements in CE practices, women's labour force participation, and inflationary controls may contribute to SS. However, the weak magnitudes of these correlations indicate that the relationships are not overly strong, suggesting the need for more in-depth analysis via regression modelling.

Interestingly, CE and WI show a negative correlation of -0.226. This could imply that increasing women's participation in the labour force might be associated with a decline in CE activities, potentially reflecting a lack of integration between women-led initiatives and broader CE strategies. However, this relationship warrants further investigation in the regression analysis to determine its robustness. The negative correlations between FDI, trade openness (TO), and SS are consistent with some previous literature (e.g., Kpegba, Opong, and Atchulo 2024), where external economic variables like FDI and trade openness may exert mixed effects on SS depending on the local context.

## 4.3 | Regression Analysis

The results from the Pooled OLS regression in Table 4 provide significant insights into the dynamics between the CE, WI, and SS in Sub-Saharan Africa.

### 4.3.1 | CE and SS

The regression results confirm that CE has a significant positive impact on SS, with a 29.99 unit increase in SS for each unit increase in CE activities ( $p < 0.01$ ). This result is consistent with prior studies, such as those by Bertassini and Awan and Sroufe (2022), which propose that CE initiatives can enhance SS. This finding underscores the importance of policies aimed at promoting recycling, waste management, and resource efficiency as vital levers for achieving sustainable development in Sub-Saharan Africa.

### 4.3.2 | WI and SS

The study also finds that WI in the labour force significantly improves SS ( $p < 0.05$ ), with a 13.57 unit increase in SS for each unit increase in women's labour force participation. This result corroborates argument that women's engagement in economic activities is crucial for driving sustainable development. Women bring unique perspectives and innovative solutions to environmental challenges, particularly in sectors such as waste management, recycling, and community-driven SS initiatives.

### 4.3.3 | Moderating Role of WI

Another important finding is that WI significantly moderates the relationship between CE and SS ( $p < 0.01$ ). This suggests that women's active participation in the workforce enhances the impact of CE initiatives on SS, highlighting the transformative role that gender-inclusive policies can play in accelerating the transition to a sustainable CE.

### 4.3.4 | Control Variables

In terms of control variables, Trade Openness (TO) is found to significantly influence both SS and CE practices ( $p < 0.01$ ). This finding aligns with, who argue that increased trade openness can provide access to green technologies and foster sustainable

practices. However, Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) is found to have no significant relationship with SS, echoing findings from Kpegba, Oppong, and Atchulo (2024), which suggest that the benefits of FDI on SS are context-dependent. Surprisingly, INF does not have a significant impact on SS or the CE, suggesting that inflationary pressures may not be as crucial in driving sustainable practices in Sub-Saharan Africa.

#### 4.4 | Robustness Check

To validate the Pooled OLS findings, the study employs System GMM as a robustness check, presented in Table 5. The Hansen and Sargan tests confirm that the instruments used in the GMM model are valid, as the p-values for these tests are greater than 0.05. Furthermore, the AR (1) and AR (2) tests confirm the absence of first- and second-order autocorrelation, reinforcing the reliability of the results.

The GMM estimates broadly confirm the baseline findings from the OLS regression, with CE and WI both significantly improving SS. The moderating role of WI in the relationship between CE and SS remains significant, further substantiating the argument that empowering women can play a crucial role in fostering a more sustainable and CE.

#### 4.5 | Discussion in the Context of Recent International Research

These findings are consistent with the growing body of international literature on gender, SS, and the CE. Studies like those by

**TABLE 5** | Robustness check (S-GMM).

Variables	SS (3)	CE (4)
<i>Independent</i>		
Lag (SS)	0.908 (0.351)***	—
Lag (CE)	—	1.095 (0.195)***
CE	9.262 (0.159)***	—
WI	4.788 (0.929)**	0.727 (0.215)**
<i>Moderator</i>		
WI*CE	2.512 (0.996)***	—
<i>Control</i>		
INF	0.481 (0.532)	0.139 (0.144)
TO	−1.258 (0.098)***	−0.975 (0.187)**
FDI	0.388 (0.264)	0.728 (0.0952)**
Constant	−12.80 (11.70)	0.119 (0.453)
<i>Hansen test</i>	0.988	0.118
<i>Sargan test</i>	0.952	0.164
<i>AR (1)</i>	0.085	0.296
<i>AR (2)</i>	0.455	0.35

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \* $p < 0.1$ .

Schröder, Lemille, and Desmond (2020) and Morais, Souza, and Santos (2022) emphasize the need for inclusive approaches to SS, where women play an integral role in shaping environmental and economic policies. The significant moderating role of WI in the relationship between CE and SS echoes the ideas put forth by Alon, Higgins, and Li (2020), who argue that women's perspectives are essential for driving systemic change in environmental governance.

Moreover, the positive relationship between CE and SS is aligned with global trends in CE research, as evidenced by the Ellen MacArthur Foundation (2020), which advocates for the widespread adoption of circular business models to reduce waste, enhance resource efficiency, and drive sustainable economic growth. This study, by providing empirical evidence from Sub-Saharan Africa, contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how CE initiatives can be leveraged for sustainable development in developing regions.

The results emphasize the critical role of women in promoting SS through CE practices and underscore the need for gender-inclusive policies that empower women to contribute fully to SS transitions. These findings provide valuable insights for policymakers and stakeholders aiming to foster inclusive and sustainable development in Sub-Saharan Africa and other developing regions.

#### 5 | Conclusion, Managerial, Theoretical Implications and Direction for Further Studies

This study has provided valuable empirical insights into the role of WI in driving SS through the adoption of a CE in Sub-Saharan Africa. Using an exploratory and quantitative approach, the study addresses a significant gap in the literature by performing regression analysis based on the frameworks proposed by previous research. By leveraging panel data sourced from the World Bank's World Development Indicators (WDI), Gender Statistics (GS), and Adjusted Net Savings (ANS) databases, the study investigates the relationship between CE and SS, with a specific focus on the moderating role of WI in the post-SDG adoption period (2016–2023). The study's findings confirm all three hypotheses:

1. CE significantly improves SS in Africa.
2. WI significantly enhances CE efforts.
3. WI significantly moderates the relationship between CE and SS.

These findings suggest that increasing women's participation in the workforce, especially within CE initiatives, could be a pivotal factor in driving SS in Sub-Saharan Africa.

The study offers several important managerial implications, especially for policymakers, business leaders, and development organizations in Sub-Saharan Africa as spelt out below:

1. Support for Women in the CE: Policymakers and business leaders must actively support and promote WI in the CE. This can be achieved through targeted interventions that

encourage women's entrepreneurial activities in waste management, recycling, and sustainable production practices.

2. **Funding and Financial Resources:** Government and private sector funding should be made available to support women-led businesses operating within the CE. Grants, loans, and venture capital programs tailored to women entrepreneurs can help reduce barriers to entry and foster innovation in sustainable practices.
3. **Policy Frameworks:** Governments should review and update existing policy frameworks to create a more conducive environment for women participating in the CE. Policies should ensure equal access to opportunities, resources, and support for women in these sectors, while also addressing any structural or cultural barriers to women's economic participation.
4. **Gender Equality as a Strategic Goal:** Incorporating gender equality into national SS agendas is crucial. Women are uniquely positioned to drive innovation in sustainable practices. Empowering women not only fosters inclusivity but also significantly contributes to achieving broader SS goals.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the growing body of research on SS, CE, and gender studies by providing empirical evidence of the interplay between these concepts in the context of Sub-Saharan Africa. The study expands on existing frameworks by offering a nuanced understanding of how WI can drive both CE adoption and SS outcomes. In particular, it makes a notable contribution by: **Expanding Existing Frameworks:** While previous research has established the individual importance of CE and WI in sustainable development, this study goes further by demonstrating the combined impact of these variables in Sub-Saharan Africa. **Contextualizing Women's Role in Africa:** The study adds empirical evidence to the ongoing discussion about the importance of gender equality in the development of sustainable economies, particularly in developing regions like Sub-Saharan Africa. It demonstrates that women are not merely beneficiaries of SS initiatives, but active drivers of economic, social, and environmental change.

**Moderating Role of WI:** The study contributes to the literature by demonstrating the significant moderating role of WI in the relationship between CE and SS. This adds a new layer of insight into how gender can influence economic and environmental outcomes, calling for further exploration into how gender-inclusive policies can accelerate the adoption of CE models.

While this study provides important insights, it has several limitations that open avenues for future research:

1. **Limited Scope of Countries:** This study focused on 11 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa due to data availability constraints. Future research could expand the scope by including more countries across the region or even other developing regions to compare the role of women in driving SS through the CE.
2. **Temporal Scope:** The study focuses on the post-SDG adoption period (2016–2023). Future studies could examine both the pre- and post-SDG periods to conduct a comparative

analysis, which would allow for a deeper understanding of how the adoption of the SDGs has influenced the role of women in the CE.

3. **Sectoral Analysis:** Further research could explore how different sectors (e.g., agriculture, manufacturing, waste management) are impacted by WI in the circular economy, as well as the specific barriers and opportunities that exist for women in each sector.
4. **Qualitative Research:** While this study provides quantitative evidence, future studies could employ qualitative methods (e.g., interviews, case studies) to gain a richer understanding of the lived experiences of women involved in the CE and how their innovative solutions contribute to SS.
5. **Longitudinal Studies:** Future studies could conduct longitudinal analyses to track the long-term impact of WI in the CE on SS outcomes across Sub-Saharan Africa, providing a clearer picture of the causal relationships between these variables over time.

In conclusion, this study highlights the crucial role of WI in driving SS through CE practices in Sub-Saharan Africa. By confirming that women's participation not only boosts SS outcomes but also enhances the effectiveness of CE initiatives, this research provides a compelling argument for gender-inclusive policies that empower women to lead the way in fostering sustainable development. The findings underscore the importance of gender equality in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the broader global agenda for SS. Therefore, as Sub-Saharan African countries look to build a more sustainable and resilient future, fostering gender equality and CE practices should be central to their development strategies.

#### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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