Women of Waste

CONNECT • INSPIRE • EMPOWER

A DECADE OF LEADERSHIP, RESEARCH AND COLLECTIVE ACTION

2016 – 2026



Foreword | A decade of making women visible

In 2016, we came together with a shared conviction: women play an essential role at every level of waste management, yet their contributions, expertise and leadership are too often overlooked. Women of Waste was born from our determination to change that. We wanted to connect women across countries and professional backgrounds, make their experiences and achievements more visible, and create opportunities for their voices to be heard.

Ten years later, it is inspiring to look back at how that initial idea has developed. What began as a small initiative has grown into an international network of committed professionals, bringing people together through research, dialogue, knowledge exchange, advocacy and practical capacity-building. Along the way, we have helped bring greater attention to the challenges women face, the opportunities they deserve and the important contributions they make to the waste management sector.

None of this would have been possible without the dedication of the many colleagues, advisers, partners and supporters who have contributed their knowledge, time and enthusiasm over the years. Women of Waste has always been a collective effort, built on collaboration, shared experiences and a common belief in the importance of gender equality.

As we celebrate ten years of Women of Waste, I feel proud of what we have achieved together and grateful to everyone who has been part of this journey. This publication is an opportunity to recognise those contributions, reflect on the progress made and celebrate the connections and partnerships that have shaped our work.

There is still much to be done to ensure that women have equal opportunities to participate, advance and lead in the waste management sector. I hope that the experience and achievements of Women of Waste will continue to inspire collaboration and action towards a more inclusive, equitable and sustainable future.



Maria Chr.Tsakona
Women of Waste Co-founder and Leader, 2016–2026

Women of Waste

Ten Years AT A GLANCE

Since its beginnings in 2016, Women of Waste has contributed to advancing gender equality, strengthening women's professional networks and bringing greater attention to women's roles and experiences across the global waste management sector.

2016
The idea is born

Conceived during the ISWA World Congress in Novi Sad, Serbia, by Gali Feldboy-Klinger, Maria Tsakona and Georgina Nitzsche.



2017
Official launch

Women of Waste is introduced at the ISWA World Congress in Baltimore, United States.



2018
First Global Survey

626 women from 73 countries share their professional experiences, providing a first international evidence base.



2019
Growing the dialogue

WoW sessions at the ISWA World Congress in Kuala Lumpur highlight the need for visibility, resources and professional support.



2020
Recognition

Women of Waste is recognised as an ISWA Ad Hoc Task Force.



2021
New partnerships and research

Letter of intent signed with USAID. Second Global Survey launched in December 2021.



2022
Global engagement

Co-organised a semi-formal event for women in the informal recycling sector during INC-1. International Women's Day webinar and regional activities, including South Africa Women's Month.



2023
Research and policy

Findings from the second global survey published. Participated in INC-2 in Paris. Contributed to the policy paper *A Seat at the Table*.



2024
Practical tools

Published the Awareness and Capacity-building for Women in the Informal Recycling Sector: Toolkit for Facilitators, in partnership with GRID-Arendal.



2025
Continuing the conversation

WoW's research, networking and advocacy inform international discussions on gender equality in the waste sector.



2026
A decade of impact

Celebrating ten years of Women of Waste — recognising achievements, people and partnerships, and inspiring continued action for a more inclusive and sustainable future.



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1 | The beginnings: from idea to international initiative

Women of Waste (WoW) was conceived during the 2016 ISWA World Congress in Novi Sad, Serbia, when Gali Feldboy-Klinger, Maria Chr. Tsakona and Georgina Nitzsche came together around a shared conviction: despite women's essential contributions to waste management worldwide, their experiences, expertise and leadership were not sufficiently visible or represented in professional and policy discussions.

Frida Jones, Gabriela Garcés and Delila Khaled subsequently joined the early initiative, helping to shape its development. Women of Waste was formally introduced at the 2017 ISWA World Congress in Baltimore, United States, marking the beginning of an international effort to strengthen women's visibility, representation and opportunities across the waste management sector.

From the outset, WoW recognised that advancing gender equality required both greater awareness and practical action. Its work developed around five interconnected priorities: building international professional networks; generating research and sharing knowledge; strengthening skills and capacities; advocating for safe and inclusive workplaces and equal opportunities; and encouraging women's participation and leadership throughout the sector.

What began as a small initiative gradually developed into an international network connecting professionals, researchers, policymakers, practitioners and organisations committed to a more inclusive and sustainable waste management sector.



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2 | Evidence that changed the conversation

One of Women of Waste's earliest priorities was to address the limited availability of international evidence on women's participation and professional experiences in waste management. Through two global surveys, WoW contributed to a better understanding of women's roles, aspirations and barriers to professional advancement.

2018 | The First Global Survey

The first global survey gathered responses from 626 women across 73 countries, offering insights into their professional backgrounds, roles and experiences across different areas of waste management.

Although the survey was not designed to provide a statistically representative picture of all women working in the sector, it represented an important step towards documenting their participation and bringing their perspectives into international discussions.

It also helped establish a foundation for further research and dialogue on women's professional opportunities, representation and advancement.

2021–2023 | The Second Global Survey

Building on the experience of the first survey, Women of Waste launched its second global survey on 9 December 2021.

The research explored women's workplace experiences, professional ambitions and the challenges they encounter in developing their careers and accessing leadership opportunities.

The findings, published in 2023, contributed to a more detailed understanding of the factors influencing women's participation and professional advancement in waste management.

The report was authored by Linda Godfrey, Maria Tsakona, Georgina Nitzsche, Delila Khaled and Gabriela Garcés-Sánchez, with technical review and endorsement through ISWA processes.

3 | Bringing gender into international waste-sector dialogue

Throughout the past decade, Women of Waste has helped bring gender equality into international waste management discussions through conferences, technical sessions, webinars, partnerships and professional networking activities.These platforms have provided opportunities to share research, exchange experiences, strengthen professional connections and encourage greater recognition of women's contributions and leadership

Selected milestones

2017 | Baltimore, United States

The formal introduction of Women of Waste at the ISWA World Congress provided an opportunity to present the initiative's vision and highlight the need for international research on women's experiences in waste management.

2018–2019 | Kuala Lumpur and Bilbao

Dedicated Women of Waste sessions at the ISWA World Congresses helped strengthen international dialogue on women's professional experiences, visibility and opportunities for networking and career development.

2021 | Women and the Green Economic Recovery

A dedicated ISWA World Congress session explored women's role in the post-COVID green economic recovery, including opportunities for empowerment, investment and more inclusive approaches to sustainable waste management.

2022 | International Women's Day

WoW contributed to an international webinar highlighting ongoing initiatives, research and the second global survey, while strengthening engagement with ISWA national members and professional networks.

2022 | South Africa Women's Month

Participation in activities organised by the Institute of Waste Management of Southern Africa (IWMSA) provided further opportunities to exchange experiences and promote women's participation and leadership.

2023 | Jaipur, India

Together with GRID-Arendal and the Institute of Chartered Waste Managers (ICWM), WoW contributed to a panel discussion and workshop exploring gender-responsive approaches to a just transition, with particular attention to women working in the informal recycling sector.

2024 | IFAT, Munich

WoW contributed to discussions on equal opportunities in the waste management sector, alongside the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) and other international partners.

2025 | Advancing Gender Equality

WoW's research, networking and advocacy activities continued to inform broader discussions on gender equality in the waste sector, including those associated with ISWA's Gender Equality Plan.

2026 | Celebrating a Decade of Collective Action

The tenth anniversary of Women of Waste provides an opportunity to recognise the initiative's achievements, celebrate the contributions of its members and partners, and reflect on the importance of continued action towards gender equality.

Across these activities, Women of Waste has helped connect research with professional experiences and policy discussions, encouraging greater recognition of women's contributions and the need for more inclusive waste management systems.

4 | From Research and Advocacy to Practical Action

Over the years, Women of Waste has sought to connect research, advocacy and international dialogue with practical opportunities to support women's participation and empowerment in the waste management sector. This approach has been reflected in initiatives addressing professional visibility, the recognition of informal recyclers and the development of practical capacity-building resources.

Strengthening Visibility and Professional Networks

Professional connections and access to information can play an important role in supporting women's participation and career development.

Recognising this, WoW explored the development of a Women of Waste Business Directory in 2021, envisaged as a resource to increase professional visibility and facilitate access to knowledge, expertise and training opportunities.

The initiative reflected WoW's broader commitment to connecting women across different professional and geographical contexts and encouraging opportunities for collaboration.

A Seat at the Table: Recognising Women in Informal Recycling

An important area of WoW's engagement has been the recognition of women working in the informal recycling sector and the need to ensure their perspectives are considered in discussions on sustainable waste management, plastic pollution and a just transition.

In collaboration with GRID-Arendal, the United States Agency for International Development's (USAID's) Clean Cities, Blue Ocean programme and WIEGO (Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing), WoW contributed to the policy paper *A Seat at the Table: The Role of the Informal Recycling Sector in Plastic Pollution Reduction, and Recommended Policy Changes (GRID-Arendal, 2022)*.

The paper highlighted the importance of recognising the contributions of informal recyclers and strengthening their participation in policy processes and decisions affecting their livelihoods.

WoW also supported dialogue involving women from the informal recycling sector during the first session of the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee on plastic pollution in 2022 and participated in discussions surrounding the second session in Paris in 2023.

These activities helped connect the experiences and perspectives of women in informal recycling with wider international discussions on plastic pollution and more inclusive approaches to the transition towards a circular economy.

Supporting Capacity-building for Women in Informal Recycling

Another important contribution has been WoW's involvement in the development of practical capacity-building resources for women working in the informal recycling sector.

In collaboration with GRID-Arendal, WoW contributed to the development of the *Awareness and Capacity-building for Women in the Informal Recycling Sector: Toolkit for Facilitators (GRID-Arendal, 2026)*.

The toolkit provides a participatory training approach that combines practical knowledge and skills with opportunities for women to strengthen their confidence, communication, collective organisation and leadership.

Its approach recognises that women's empowerment requires more than technical training. It also involves supporting women to better understand their rights, recognise the value of their work, engage with communities and authorities, and strengthen their ability to participate in decisions affecting their livelihoods.

The toolkit was developed with contributions from professionals and organisations working with women in informal recycling, including WoW members.

The development and subsequent updating of the toolkit illustrate the value of connecting international research and advocacy with practical resources that can be adapted to different local contexts.

5 | The People Behind Women of Waste

Behind Women of Waste is a diverse community of people whose dedication, expertise and shared commitment have shaped the initiative and its achievements.

Over the years, WoW has benefited from the commitment of its coordination team, experts and advisers, bringing together knowledge from waste management, environmental engineering, research, policy, international development and social inclusion.

Among those who have played important roles are Maria Chr.Tsakona, Leader; Georgina Nitzsche, Coordinator; and Delila Khaled and Gabriela Garcés-Sánchez, who have contributed as experts and advisers. The initiative has also benefited from the valuable support of its advisory network, including Ruta Aidis, Sonia Dias, Linda Godfrey, Ieva Rucevska and Meri Beth Wojtaszek.

Beyond these individuals, many collaborators, partner organisations, researchers, practitioners and women participating in WoW's surveys, events and activities have contributed to its development and international reach.

Women of Waste has always been a collective effort. Its strength lies not only in the expertise brought together, but also in the connections, partnerships and shared commitment that have helped amplify women's voices and advance gender equality across the global waste management sector.



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6 | Looking Ahead: Building on a Decade of Experience

Ten years of Women of Waste have demonstrated the value of bringing people together around a shared commitment to gender equality and inclusion.

Through research, international dialogue, professional networking, advocacy and practical initiatives, WoW has contributed to greater recognition of women's roles, experiences and leadership in the waste management sector.

While progress has been made, important challenges remain. Ensuring equal opportunities, safe and inclusive workplaces, greater representation in decision-making and meaningful opportunities for professional development continues to be essential for a more sustainable waste management sector.

As we celebrate this ten-year journey, we recognise the people, partnerships and collective efforts that have made it possible, as well as the opportunities to build on the knowledge and connections developed over the past decade.

A truly sustainable waste management sector is one in which women's contributions are recognised, their voices are heard and their leadership is valued and supported.



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Women of Waste



Connecting women

Amplifying voices

Advancing equality

10 YEARS

2016 – 2026

A Decade of Collective Action

Building a more inclusive and sustainable waste management sector.