

WTF!

Women to the front: A feminist design tool for circular transformation

By Cheri Flewell-Smith

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Objectives: Tactile thinking for systemic change

Current circular economy frameworks often fail to integrate women’s perspectives despite recognition of their crucial role in shaping sustainable systems (Kuković & Radević, 2024). Studies consistently show that the absence of a gendered lens within these frameworks undermines the interests of women and their contributions to the economy (Palm et al., 2024). The Ellen MacArthur Foundation’s widely adopted circular model positions itself as beneficial for “business, people and the environment” but it remains focused on technical systems. This approach overlooks critical social dimensions such as power dynamics, gendered labour, and the invisibility of women’s roles, particularly reproductive labour and care work (Pansera et al., 2024; Pla-Julián & Guevara, 2019; Tronto, 2020). The WTF Method directly responds to this gap by offering a conceptual design tool that explicitly integrates feminist perspectives into circular economy design highlighting the unseen and unaccounted for work traditionally performed by women.

2

Approach: The WTF Method

The WTF Method is a conceptual design tool informed by Kabeer's (1999) empowerment framework, which emphasises the agency, interconnectedness of resources, and achievements. In the context of circular economy design, the WTF Method uses this lens to put women at the front of the conversation, draws on feminist ways of knowing and doing (Place, 2023) challenging traditional frameworks enabling practitioners to rethink systems from a feminist perspective that centres women’s leadership, care and regenerative practices.

3

Application process

In a guided workshop participants engage with twelve handcrafted clay tokens based on material engagement theory (Malafouris, 2013). These participatory devices, facilitate co-creation (Sanders & and Stappers, 2008) prompting users to reframe the familiar in new ways (Gibson-Graham et al., 2013) while centring feminist design perspectives (Place, 2022).

During the workshop, participants will:

1. **Select:** Intuitively select tokens from the kit
2. **Reflect:** Reflect on the prompt question
3. **Apply:** Generate context-specific solutions

4

The twelve clay tokens

Grouped into three pillars, each token prompts critical reflection through a specific prompt.

Resource Stewardship

Focusses on valuing lived knowledge, land wisdom and intergenerational insight.

Collective Action

Centres on community governance, care infrastructure and reciprocal relationships.

Inclusive Systems

Challenges traditional success metrics by promoting wellbeing, cultural prosperity and adaptive, equitable systems.

5

Conclusion

The WTF Method offers a conceptual framework for rethinking circular economy design through a feminist lens. As a tool for deep reflection and feminist inspired action, it encourages practitioners to place women at the forefront of regenerative systems. Future research and empirical testing will be crucial to validate and refine the method, but The WTF Method represents an important step in integrating social equity into circular economy frameworks and advancing regenerative design practices.

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