

Plastics | SA

Circular City Labs Textbook

A digital guide to building a sustainable circular economy through reusable plastics, innovation, and inclusive collaboration in South Africa.



Circular City Labs
Testing Reusable Packaging Systems in Cities



Implemented by



Introduction

This digital textbook contains consolidated training materials, based on the Accelerator programme training sessions that formed part of the *Circular City Labs: 'Testing Reusable Packaging Systems'* project.

The purpose of this textbook is to capture and consolidate lessons learned through the project's implementation to reach a wider audience along the circular economy value chain.





Project Background

The *Circular City Labs: ‘Testing Reusable Packaging Systems’* project was commissioned by the *German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ)* and funded through the *BMZ Initiative for Climate and Environmental Protection (IKU)*.

The project aimed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions through waste prevention, test reusable packaging systems, and strengthen women’s participation in local circular economies.

Implemented by *GIZ* in partnership with *Plastics SA*, the project selected *Gcwalisa* as its pilot partner. In addition, three other businesses from the proposal pool were invited to join an accelerator programme designed to build their capacity in circular economy practices, reuse systems, and gender inclusion.



Piloting Partner

Gcwalisa, a grocery outlet in Alexandra township, Johannesburg, operates on a weigh-and-pay model that enables customers to buy only what they need, helping to reduce the ‘poverty tax’ often faced by low-income households unable to buy in bulk.

During the pilot phase, **Gcwalisa** introduced reusable plastic packaging fitted with QR barcodes to track return cycles, replacing single-use packaging and promoting circular economy practices. The initiative also created jobs for 4 women through reuse ambassadors who engaged customers and raised awareness; two of the women were retained after the pilot.

With an average return rate of 35%, the project demonstrated strong community participation and delivered both environmental and socio-economic benefits, successfully meeting its intended objectives.

www.gcwalisa.com



Accelerator Programme

The **ACEN** study on scaling packaging reuse models in South Africa highlighted key challenges faced by reuse initiatives, including limited access to financing, difficulties in adapting supply chains for reuse, and the absence of clear health and safety standards.

Recommended interventions included collaborative learning, innovative funding mechanisms, stronger supply chain partnerships, and the development of operating standards for reuse models.

In response, the accelerator programme, implemented by **GIZ** and **Plastics SA**, was designed to address these barriers by providing targeted training and mentorship to selected businesses such as **Gcwalisa**, **Shix Mineral Ice**, **Reusify**, and **Smartfill**, strengthening their capacity to implement and scale circular packaging solutions across South Africa.

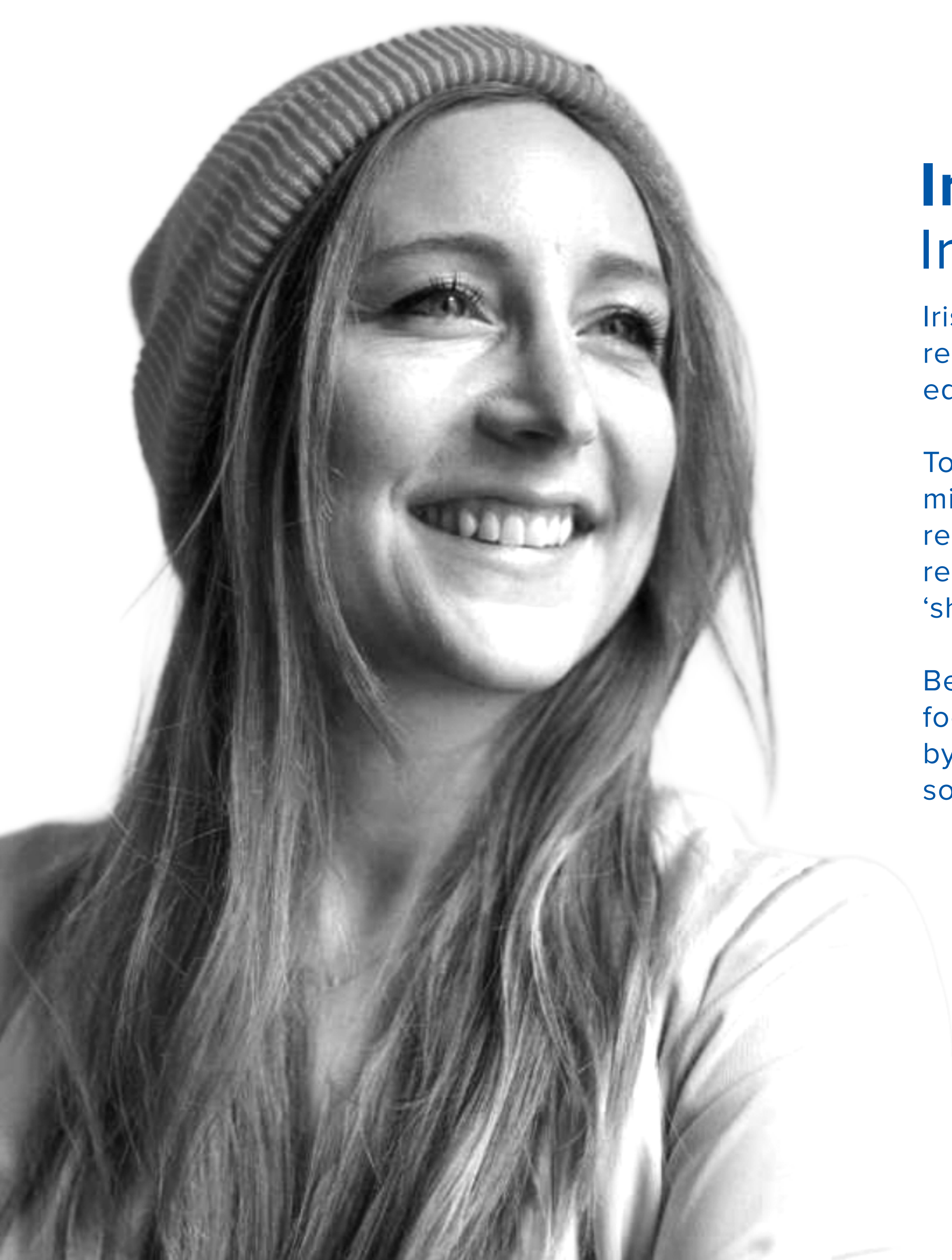
Read more about the [ACEN](#) study.



Reference: Barnes, K. and Gihring, K. (2025). Scaling reuse-refill in South Africa: Learnings from local experience. African Circular Economy Network (ACEN) for Circular City Labs South Africa, GIZ, and Plastics SA.

Chapter 6

Gender inclusive approaches to reuse & circular economy



Introduction

Iris Braun

Iris founded *share* in 2017, the largest purpose brand in DACH region in retail. *share* has a one-for-one principle and donates an equivalent item for every purchase that can be tracked.

To date, *share* has sold (and therefore donated) around 200 million products to over 4 million customers. *share* works with reusable and fully recycled packaging, pioneered the first fully recycled water bottle in Germany and employs around 100 'sharies'.

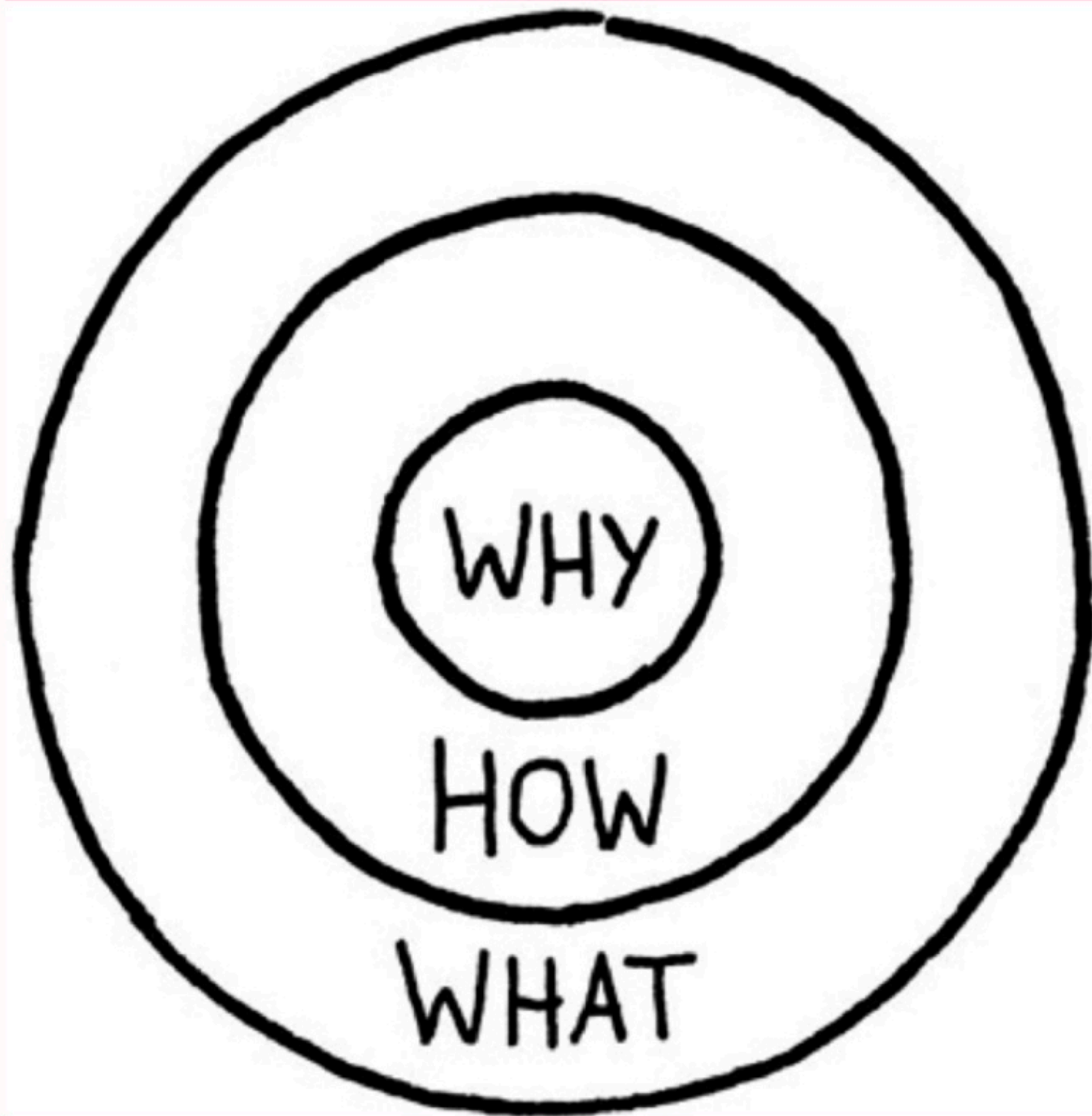
Before *share*, Iris worked in economic research in India with a focus on gender equality and is an economist by trade, curious by nature. Iris lives in Berlin with her partner and 20 month old son.



CCL SOUTH AFRICA

GENDER INCLUSIVE APPROACHES TO REUSE & CIRCULAR ECONOMY

Challenges and opportunities, strategies and initiatives to support business success.



WHY GENDER EQUALITY?

"Start with the why, and the how and what will follow."
- Simon Sinek

Gender equality is essential because it empowers everyone to reach their **full potential**, fostering **innovation** and **collaboration** in all sectors of society.

It makes us more successful.

It makes us more safe.



WHY AM I TALKING TO YOU?

- Founded share (www.share.eu) in 2017, the largest purpose brand in DACH region in retail
 - One-for-one principle: donates an equivalent item for every purchase and can be tracked
 - Sold (and therefore donated) around 200 million products to over 4 million customers
 - Worked with reusable and fully recycled packaging and pioneered first fully recycled water bottle in Germany
 - Around 100 "sharies" (employees) now
- Worked in economic research in India before, also on gender equality
- Economist by trade, curious by nature
- Lives in Berlin with partner and 20 months old son

Who is with me today? Name, position, business :)

AGENDA

- 1 | Definition of gender equality and inclusion
- 2 | Basic concepts to keep in mind
- 3 | Current state of equality in society
- 4 | Equality in business
- 10 min active break —
- 5 | Furthering gender inclusiveness for better business
 - Inside the company and leadership
 - With customers
- 6 | Q&A (20 minutes)

gender

equality

invisible

bias

access

opportunities

visible

individuals

full

participation

responsibilities

core

based

everyone

eliminate

one's

employment

besetting

ensuring

concept

aiming

genders

state

male

rights

problem

potential

education

rooted

non-binary

justice

seeks

discrimination

biases

means

power

equal

forms

determine

female

regardless

areas

political

achieve

barriers

address

decision-making

refers

1. DEFINITION

2014 AMENDMENT TO THE COMMISSION FOR GENDER
EQUALITY ACT (ACT 39 OF 1996):

“**Gender equality** means the **equal enjoyment of rights, responsibilities and opportunities** of women, men and people of all genders. **It does not mean that women and men will become the same** but that their rights, responsibilities and opportunities will not depend on whether they are born male or female.”

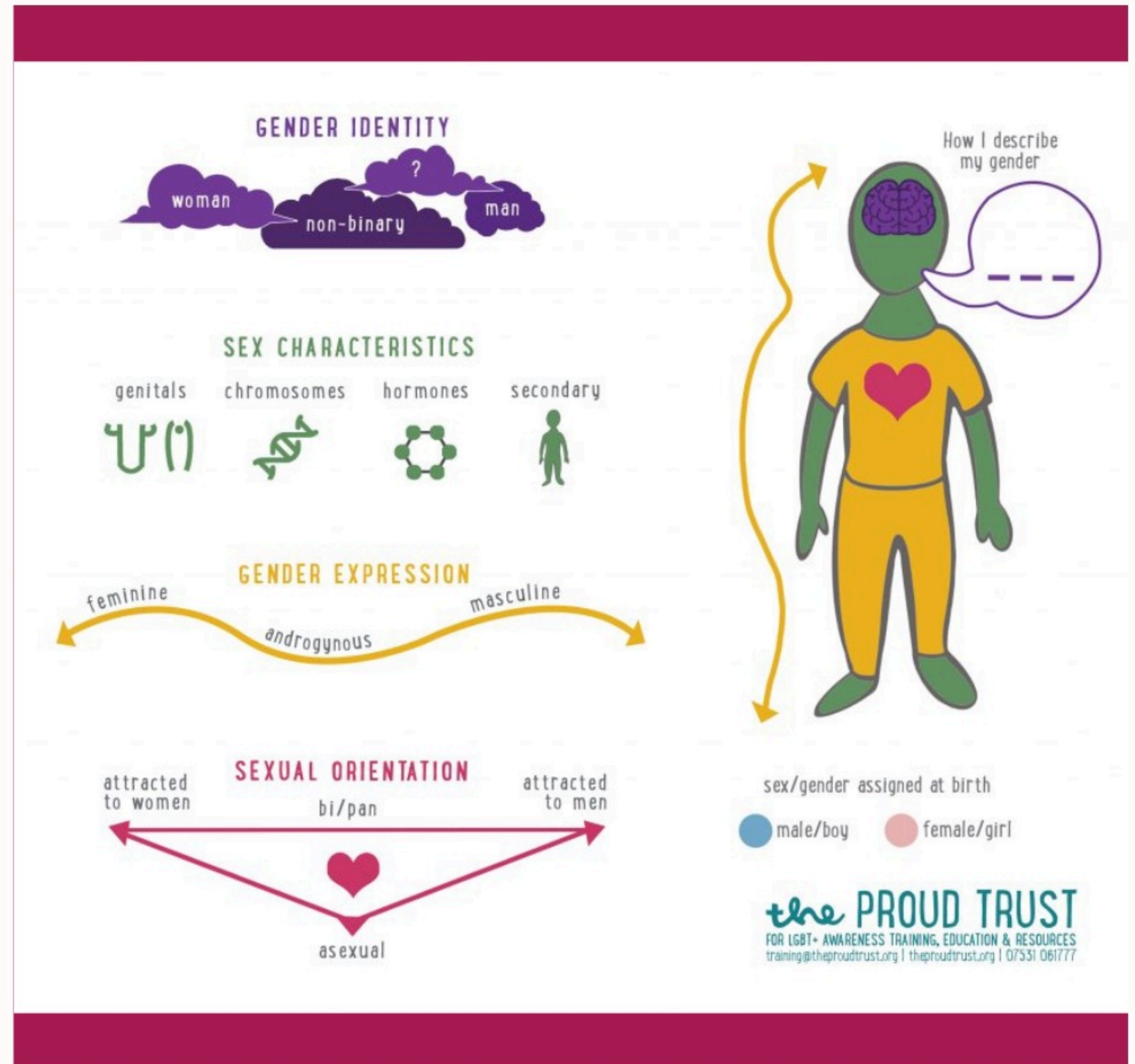
ON GENDER INCLUSION:

“**Gender inclusion** refers to proactive efforts to create an **enabling environment** where people of all gender identities — including women, men, transgender, non-binary and gender-diverse individuals — are welcomed, respected, and **empowered to participate fully and equally** in social, economic, and political life.”



DISCLAIMER: ACKNOWLEDGING THE GENDER SPECTRUM

Gender identity exists on a spectrum, and gender inclusiveness acknowledges this. While this presentation has a certain focus on women due to availability of data, we recognize that there are non-binary, transgender and gender-diverse individuals who play a crucial role in the business landscape.



2. BASIC CONCEPTS TO KEEP IN MIND



Equality vs Equity



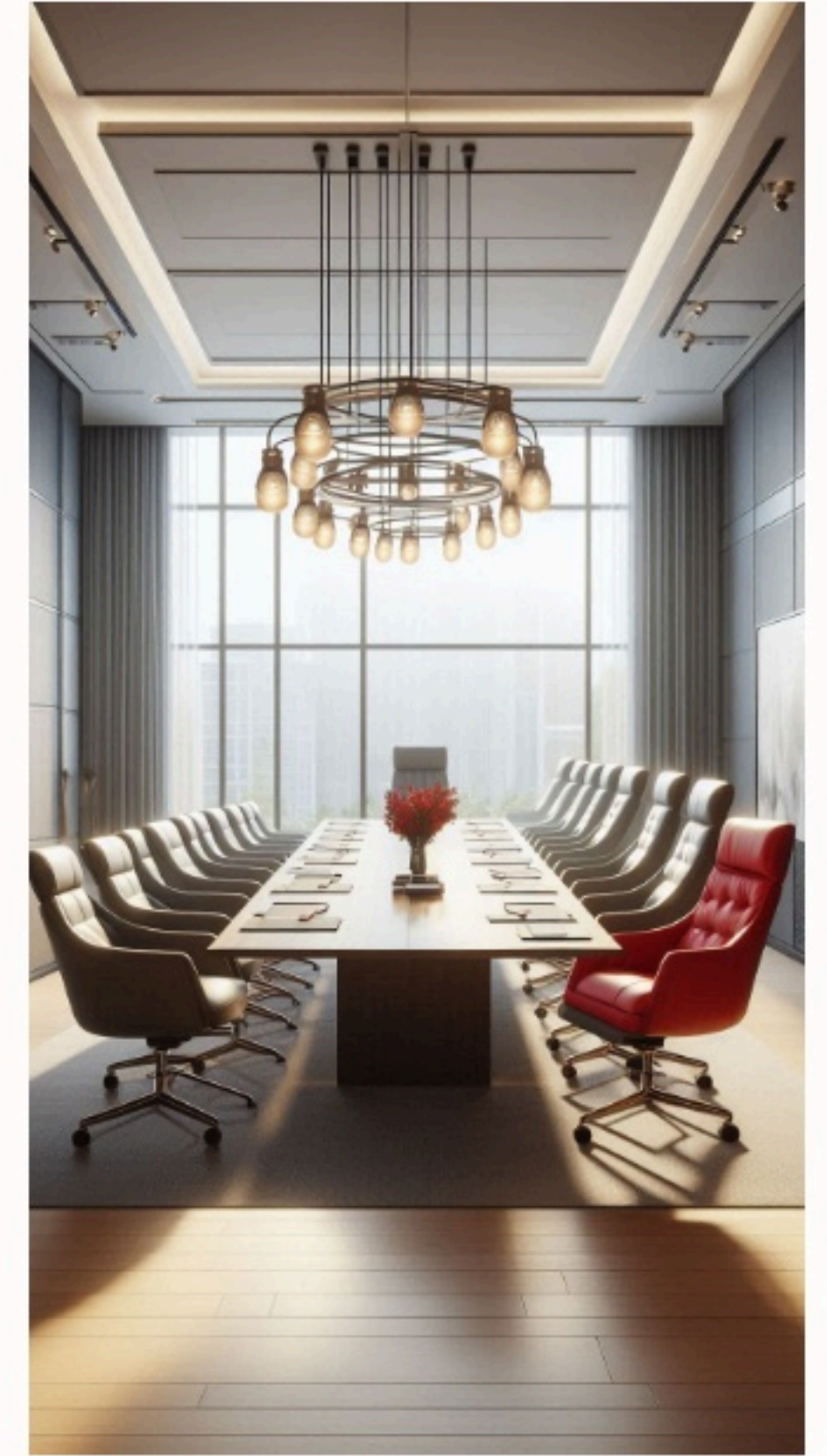
Sex vs Gender



Gender roles vs
Gender lens



Biases vs
Discrimination



Quotas & Preferences



Equality vs Equity

Equality means giving everyone the same resources or opportunities, regardless of their needs or circumstances.

Equity involves distributing resources and opportunities based on individual needs to ensure fairness, acknowledging that people start from different places.

- »» What we really want to achieve is equity, but even equality is often falling short with respect to gender



Sex vs Gender

Sex refers to the biological differences between males and females, such as anatomy and chromosomes.

Gender refers to the social and cultural roles, behaviors, and identities that society associates with being male or female, which can vary and evolve over time.

- » We often make a difference between people by observing their sex, but this might not match their gender identity.



Gender roles vs gender lens

Gender roles are societal expectations and norms about how individuals should behave, based on their gender. These roles often dictate which tasks, responsibilities, or jobs are considered "appropriate" for men or women.

A **gender lens** refers to the practice of analyzing and assessing policies, programs, and initiatives with an awareness of how they impact different genders. It helps ensure that gender inequalities are addressed, and that solutions promote equity and inclusivity across all genders.



Bias vs discrimination

Bias is a preconceived opinion or attitude toward someone or something, often based on stereotypes, that can be unconscious or conscious.

Discrimination is the unfair treatment of individuals or groups based on characteristics like race, gender, or age, often as a result of bias.

- »» Discrimination is mostly intentional, but bias can lead to unfair treatment without the perpetrator noticing at all



Preferences & Quotas

Preferences refer to policies or practices that favor one gender over another, often to correct imbalances or historical disadvantages in certain areas like education or employment.

Quotas are a specific type of preference: they give fixed minimum shares or targets set to ensure a certain level of representation for different genders, often used in hiring or political participation.

- »» These tools are the most common to ensure equal representation in politics and business, but only regulate at specific points

3. CURRENT STATE OF GENDER EQUALITY IN SOCIETY



Economic participation

Globally, women earn about 16% less than men on average. (SA: 22%)



Educational attainment

Girls half a year less schooling than boys, however, in high-income countries gap closed (SA: parity in tertiary degrees!)



Health care & Safety

Clinical studies often do not represent women, e.g. heart disease trials, only 30-40%, leading to misdiagnosis

1 in 3 women experienced physical or sexual violence (SA: 36%, female homicide rate at six times global average)



Political representation

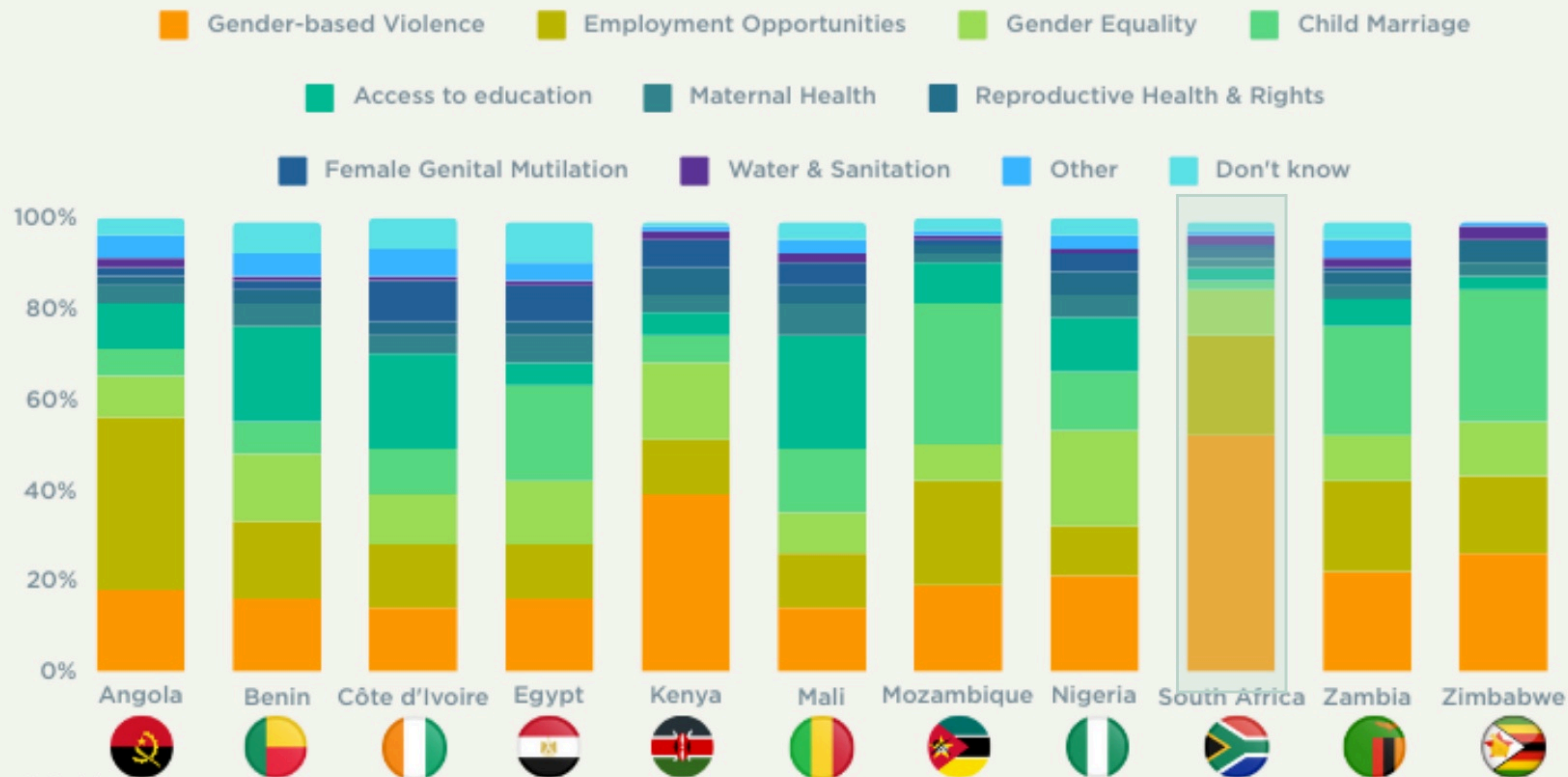
Women hold only 26.1% of parliamentary seats worldwide (SA: 43%)



Social norms

90% of men and women globally holding some form of gender bias (UNDP)

Young African women face different concerns across countries



Methodology

SagaPoll daily questions, the pan-African online panel covering all 54 markets

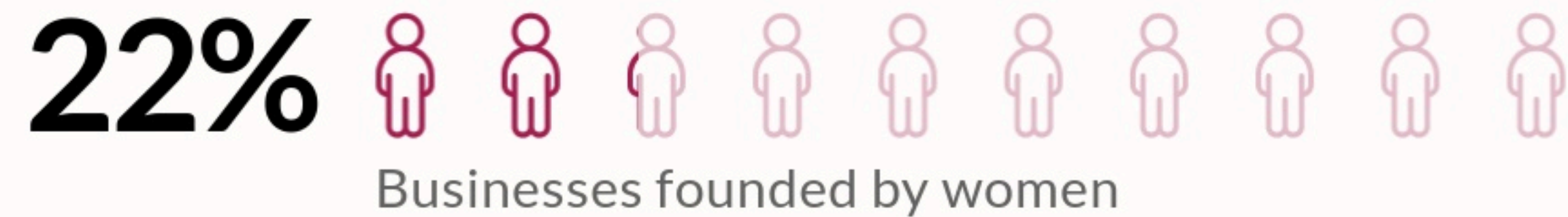
Question: From the following list, which do you think is the greatest issue affecting young women in your country today?

Population: male and female adults above 18 years old. Base: 15,846 respondents across 36 countries. Minimum base to consider country.

Period: 8 March 2024

4. EQUALITY OF WOMEN IN BUSINESS

Women in Business face considerable challenges in South Africa



... BUT FEMALE-LED BUSINESSES HAVE A HIGHER CHANCE OF BECOMING PROFITABLE (78% VS 70%)!

CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMEN IN SA BUSINESSES

● Lack of Access to Capital

Women entrepreneurs often face difficulties in obtaining financing and investments for their businesses.

● Gender Biases in the Workplace

Women professionals encounter biases, discrimination, and unequal treatment in the workplace.

● Work-Life Balance Challenges

Balancing career and family responsibilities is a significant challenge for many women in the SA business environment.

● Limited Networking Opportunities

Women have fewer chances to build professional networks and access influential business circles.

● Lack of Mentorship and Role Models

There is a shortage of successful women entrepreneurs and professionals who can serve as mentors and role models.

YET, GENDER DIVERSITY IN SENIOR POSITIONS ENHANCES PERFORMANCE

“ENVIRONMENT FOR WOMEN IN SENIOR ROLES IMPROVES ONCE ABOUT A THIRD OF LEADERS AT THAT LEVEL ARE FEMALE - AND THESE ALSO PRODUCE THE BEST FINANCIAL RESULTS.”

McKinsey (2007)

“OPERATIONAL AND SHARE PRICE PERFORMANCE SIGNICANTLY HIGHER FOR COMPANIES WITH WOMEN MAKING UP OVER 20% OF BOARD MEMBERS.”

Bhogaita (2011)

“BUSINESSES WITH DIVERSE LEADERSHIP TEAMS ACHIEVE ROUGHLY 35% HIGHER FINANCIAL RETURNS.”

ElectrolQ (2025)

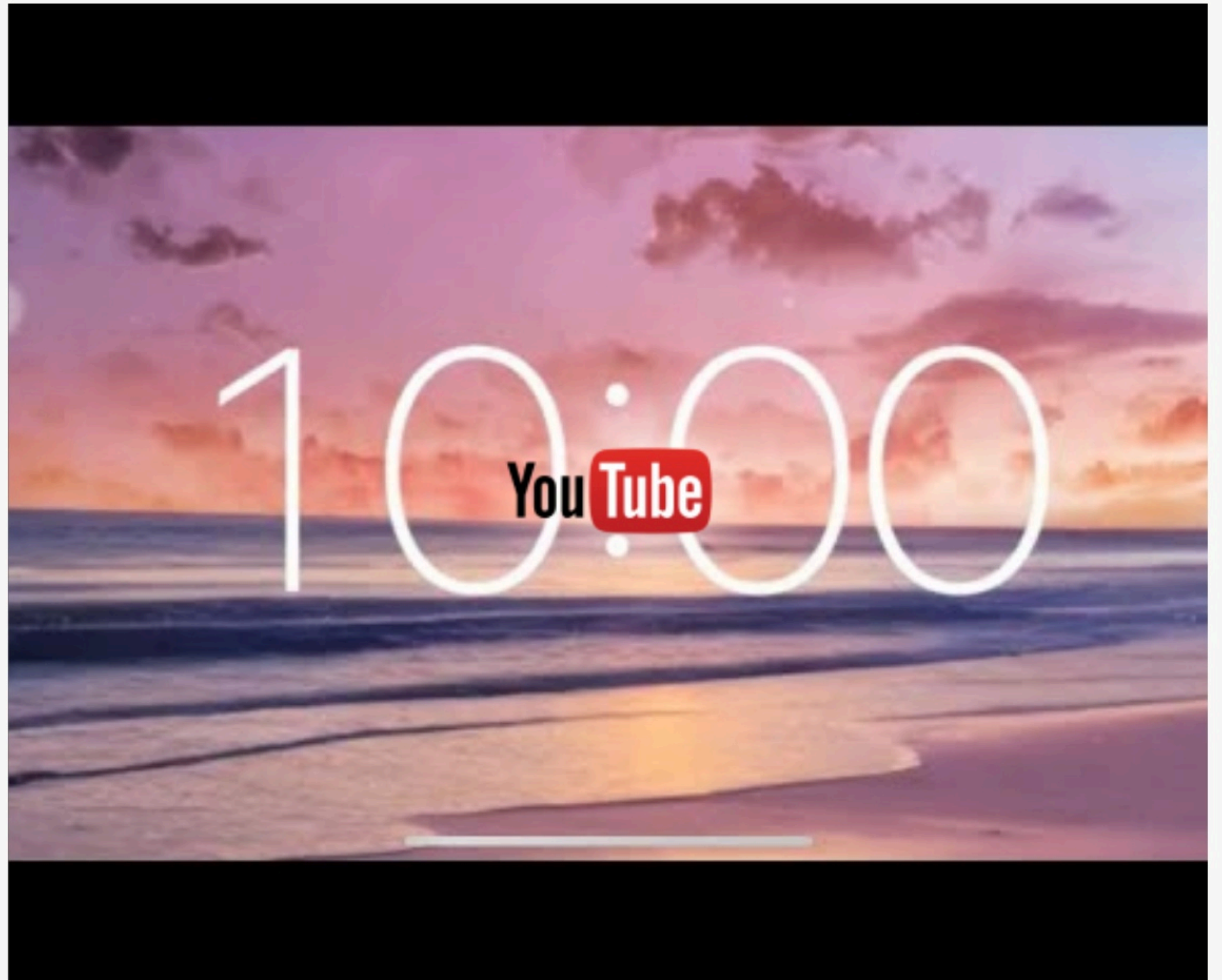
“EVEN JUST 1 FEMALE DIRECTOR ON THE BOARD CUTS COMPANY’S CHANCES OF GOING BUST BY 20% - MORE ARE EVEN BETTER.”

Zelechowski and Bilimoria (2004)

TIME FOR A QUICK BREAK!

When you come back,
type 2 numbers into the chat:

- % of female/diverse employees in your company
- % of female/diverse leadership personnel in your company



WORLD SLEEP MAP: SOUTH AFRICANS GO TO BED LATE... AND RISE THE EARLIEST

NIGHT OWLS OF THE WORLD

Countries that stay up after average bedtime worldwide (12:03 am)



South Africa average bed time 12:20 am

Russia United Arab Emirates Greece Slovakia Turkey Hong Kong Poland Japan Chile Israel Portugal Philippines Saudi Arabia Taiwan Italy Malaysia Brazil China Spain United Kingdom India Thailand Mexico South Africa France Switzerland Ireland Norway South Korea Kuwait Indonesia Netherlands Belgium Qatar

This report includes 941,329 male and female Sleep Cycle alarm clock users, ages 18-55, who voluntarily and anonymously shared their sleep data during the time period of 1 June 2014 - 31 March 2015.

Top 15 Early Risers

#	Country	Average wake-up time
1	South Africa	06:24 am
2	Colombia	06:31 am
3	Costa Rica	06:38 am
4	Indonesia	06:55 am
5	Japan	07:09 am
6	Mexico	07:09 am
7	New Zealand	07:11 am
8	Switzerland	07:13 am
9	Australia	07:13 am
10	Czech Republic	07:15 am
11	Slovakia	07:18 am
12	Denmark	07:19 am
13	Austria	07:20 am
14	United States	07:20 am



5. FURTHERING GENDER INCLUSIVENESS



"The most courageous act is still to think for yourself. Aloud." - Coco Chanel

GETTING AND KEEPING DIVERSITY IN LEADERSHIP POSITIONS

1 Get diverse co-founders

2 Write inclusive job descriptions

3 Structured interviews to minimize unconscious bias

4 Build clear promotion paths and formal feedback loops



Get to the
"magic 1/3"

SECURE FINANCING

- **Raise capital early**

Raise capital when you can, not when you need it.

The best time to secure funding is when you're in a position of strength, not desperation.

- **Bill your own time**

You are not a free resource

Value in shares + salary needs to match market rate (eventually)

The best athletes are those who are best at resting

- **Be serious about expanding**

Clear and ambitious plans are needed not just to superscale - but to survive.

"Aim for the moon, you might just reach the stars"



IMPLEMENT SKILLS TRAINING

- **Promote Mentorship Programs**

Establish formal mentorship programs that pair experienced (women/diverse) leaders with up-and-coming professionals to provide guidance, support, and career development opportunities.

- **Implement Unconscious Bias Training**

Provide comprehensive unconscious bias training for all employees to raise awareness and mitigate the impact of biases in hiring, promotion, and decision-making processes.

- **Enhance Leadership Development Initiatives**

Develop targeted leadership development programs that focus on building the skills, confidence, and visibility of women in the organization, preparing them for senior-level roles.

- **Offer hard skills training**

Minorities often do not ask for help early enough or think that it is too expensive to invest in training
If formal training too expensive, try peer learning

"CULTURE EATS STRATEGY FOR BREAKFAST." — PETER DRUCKER

Inclusive Hiring Practices

Ensure that job postings, recruitment, and selection processes are free from gender bias and actively encourage women to apply for positions at all levels.

Flexible Work Arrangements

Wherever possible, offer flexible work hours, remote options, and generous parental leave policies to support women in balancing their professional and personal responsibilities.

Rituals and informal exchange

Take socials seriously
Develop rituals if possible to strengthen "the tribe"

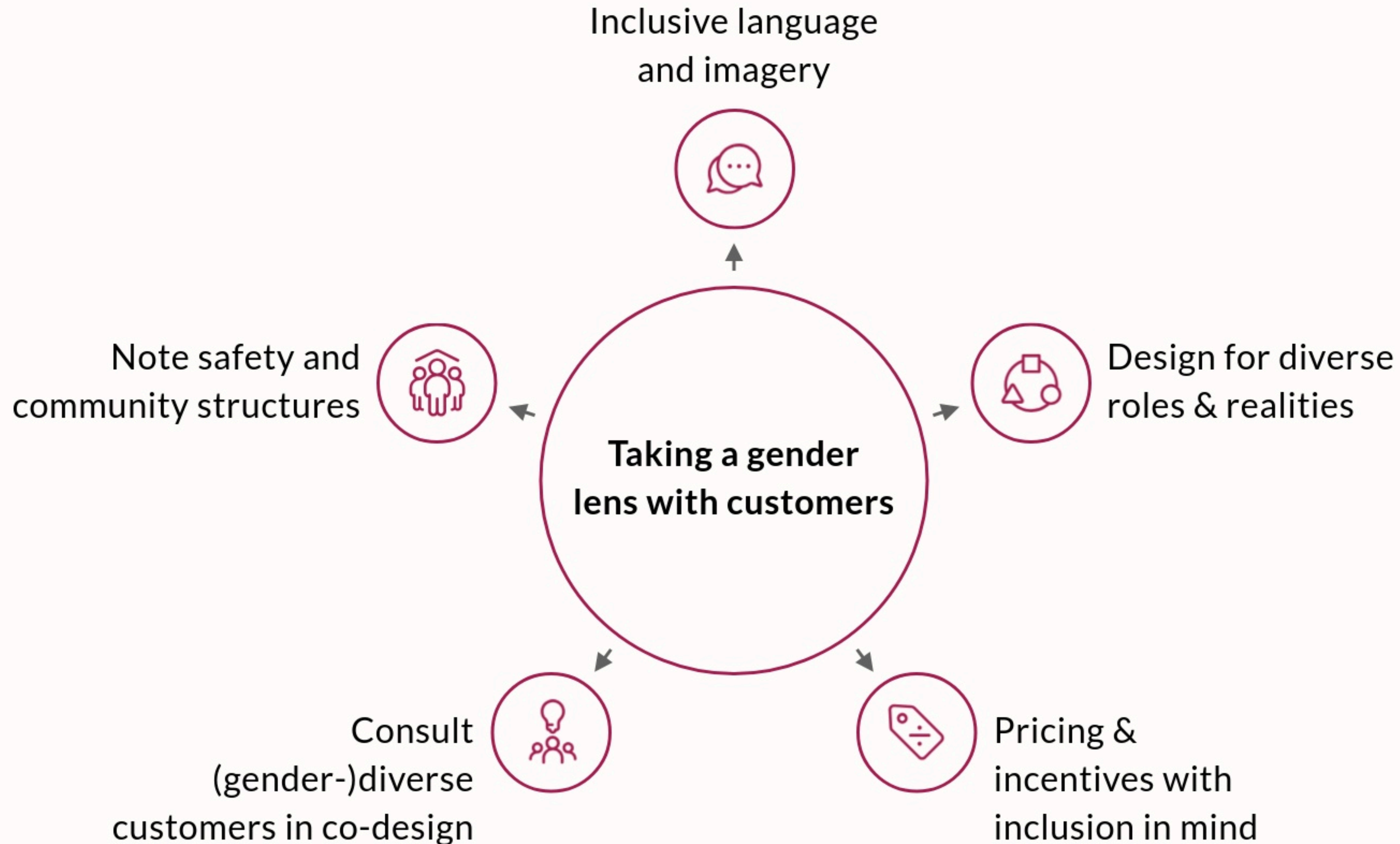
Workplace Policies and Practices

Establish clear policies against discrimination, harassment, and bias, and foster a work environment that values diversity, respects individual differences, and supports women's career advancement.

Pay Equity and Advancement Opportunities

Regularly review and address any gender-based pay gaps, and ensure that minorities have equal access to promotions, training, and other opportunities for professional growth.

SEE YOUR CUSTOMERS MORE CLEARLY BY TAKING GENDER INTO ACCOUNT



Inclusive language and imagery

Aim: making sure that all potential customers feel addressed!



- Avoid marketing that reinforces gender stereotypes (e.g., women as cooks , men as builders).
- Use **neutral terms** (“user”, “customer”, “partner”) and **images of diverse genders**.
- Use **local languages** to reflect regional diversity and **avoid gendered assumptions** (e.g., isiZulu often uses gender-neutral nouns).

✓ Example: A refill station in Soweto advertises with both men and women carrying containers and participating in sustainability messaging - not just men or women



Your example?

Design for diverse roles & realities

Aim: create a relevant product for different subgroups of customers



- Recognize that **women**, especially in low-income or rural settings, are often primary household decision-makers but may lack mobility, digital access, or time.
- Offer **mobile collection/drop-off points**, flexible hours, and **offline access** for bookings or rewards.

✓ Example: Design reuse programs with informal traders or domestic workers in mind — offering SMS-based info and neighborhood pick-up.



Your example?

Pricing & incentives with inclusion in mind

Aim: address the hurdles that different customers have to buy and use your products



- Offer **tiered pricing** or loyalty benefits that don't penalize those with irregular incomes (often women or non-binary workers in informal sectors).
- Use **community-based incentives** (like "bring a friend" reuse drives) to lower cost barriers and boost participation.

✓ Example: Offer childcare at repair workshops or host them at community centers where women already gather.



Your example?

Consult (gender-)diverse customers in co-design

Aim: create products that meet the needs of different groups of customers



- Involve women and gender-diverse individuals in **co-creating products or services**, especially if they're the ones using/maintaining them.
- Conduct focus groups across gender lines to test assumptions and gather insight.

✓ Example: If designing reuse kits (tools, containers, repair guides), also test them with youth groups or women's cooperatives



Your example?

Note safety and community structures

Aim: Make customers feel safe and use existing structures for this, too



- Public collection points and recycling stations should feel safe for **all genders**, especially in urban or informal areas.
- Ensure **lighting, privacy, staff training, and grievance mechanisms** are in place.
- Partner with **local NGOs, churches, women's forums, and youth groups** to build trust and reach a broader, more inclusive customer base.

✓ Example: Collaborate with **Stokvels or savings groups**, which are often female-led, to introduce reuse benefits linked to economic resilience.



Your example?

REMEMBER WHY

“DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION ARE NOT JUST MORAL IMPERATIVES – THEY DRIVE PERFORMANCE.

INCLUSIVE TEAMS ARE BETTER EQUIPPED TO UNDERSTAND THE FULL SPECTRUM OF OUR CUSTOMERS AND DELIVER INNOVATION THAT STICKS.”

Adrian Gore, CEO Discovery SA

... and they deliver 25-35% higher profits!

A row of colorful wooden beach huts on a sandy beach under a blue sky. The huts are in various colors including green, yellow, blue, and red, and are arranged in a line along the shore. The sky is a clear, bright blue.

**KE A
LEBOGA**

ENKOSI

DANKIE

THANK YOU

SIYABONGA

**KEA
LEBOHA**



{GET IN TOUCH}



www.share.eu



irisbbraun@gmail.com



<https://www.linkedin.com/in/ibraun/>

Plastics | SA

www.plasticsinfo.co.za