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## **Waste Picking as Social Provisioning Constructing a Socially Regenerative Circular Economy**

**Melanie Dominick Valencia Velasco**

**María Fernanda Solíz Torres**

**Milena Alía Yépez Fuentes**

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# WASTE PICKING AS SOCIAL PROVISIONING: CONSTRUCTING A SOCIALLY REGENERATIVE CIRCULAR ECONOMY

MELANIE VALENCIA

Faculty of Business Economics

KU Leuven, Brussels.

Faculty of Collective Health

Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar, Quito

FERNANDA SOLIZ

Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar, Quito

MILENA YEPEZ

Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar, Quito

## ABSTRACT

Implementing a circular economy in Latin America can be an opportunity to include recyclers and other informal workers in the economy. The sensemaking of becoming female waste picker leaders is explored through in-depth interviews with ten women from Colombia and Ecuador. The modifying effect of leading an association is rooted in social provisioning communities formed to exchange material, training and create social safety nets. A framework that combines the 9Rs of the circular economy with the demands for recyclers' dignity, care-work counting, and environmental justice is presented to promote a socially restorative and regenerative circular economy.

## INTRODUCTION

There has been a growing critique of the growth-dependent economic system from both ecological and feminist economics (Daly, 1991, 2019; Nelson & Power, 2018; Perkins, 2007; Waring, 1988). One of the alternative models proposed is the transition to a circular economy (CE) that intends to maintain the value of materials in closed-loop systems to replace the current linear economy of take-make-dispose (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2013; Lieder & Rashid, 2016; Murray, Skene, & Haynes, 2017).

Kirchherr's 9R hierarchy for the circular economy provides the physical or material basis applied in this model. The 9Rs are: 0) refuse 1) rethink 2) reduce 3) reuse 4) repair 5) refurbish 6) remanufacture 7) repurpose 8) recycle and 9) recover (Kirchherr et al., 2018). The Ellen MacArthur Foundation, using the concept of cradle to cradle, proposed that in the circular economy, closing loops in the biological portion constitutes a regenerative process, while doing the same in the technical cycles constitutes a restorative process (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2013). In this article, we perform an empirical exploration of how social provisioning defined as 'the work of securing resources and providing the necessities of life to those for whom one has relationships of responsibility' (Power, 2004) can transform the circular economy into a socially restorative and regenerative circular economy. In this case, the restorative portion intends to account for the linear economy's historical and geospatial faults, providing integral reparation. Complementarily, the regenerative portion aims to recognize and redistribute care of people and

the planet by strengthening employment in circular jobs. For this proposal we build the complementary 9Rs for a socially restorative and regenerative CE represented in Table 1 through dignity, care work and environmental justice for female waste pickers or recyclers, as they are commonly recognized in the region.

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Insert Table 1 about here

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## METHODOLOGY

The interviews selected for this analysis were conducted with ten women recycler leaders in their respective cities in Colombia (Bogotá) and Ecuador (Quito, Portoviejo, Cuenca, Coca and Lago Agrio). These ten interviews are a subsection of 42 recyclers interviewed for the book ‘Recycling without recyclers is trash: The return of the witches’; in this analysis, only those that held leadership positions at the time of interview were included. The book is publicly available, including the names and photographs of the recyclers who agreed to have their information published<sup>1</sup>.

In this follow-up, a substantive post-structural critical lens is taken (Agger, 1991) to assess recyclers' embeddedness in their associations, cities, and country in relation to government, citizens, and industry. Based on the open conversations recorded and transcribed, this study entails a phenomenological analysis (Cresswell, 2013) of women's sensemaking of becoming recyclers and answering the question: How do women recyclers make sense of their involvement in recycling and their roles as leaders? The process features their individual sensemaking as embedded in their organizations (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). The numbers in parenthesis represent the number of mentions in the interviews; when using the denominator 10, it represents how many recyclers referred to this topic; other denominators refer to the theme's total mentions. Despite using sentences as the coding units, in the text presented in results, many phrases were presented in paragraph form to encompass the full ideas in context and to portray the framework's co-creation with recyclers.

## RESULTS

The results of the analysis are condensed in Figure 1. The sensemaking of recycling comprises the reuse of material, care for children and the territorial and generational weight of waste picking. These three themes, combined with the fourth theme of overcoming oppression, summarize the role of women recyclers in care. In terms of the sensemaking of their leadership roles, the examples of leadership comprise the care for children, fighting territory, overcoming oppression and demanding dignity through their associations. These same variables represent environmental justice, further into intergenerational justice. Combining these codes enables the argumentation for a socially restorative and regenerative circular economy from a lens of provisioning.

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Insert Figure 1 about here

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In different cities, the achievements regarding the 3Rs of dignity for recyclers have varied widely. Table 2 summarized them by city based on the interviews with recyclers and triangulated with each city's activities.

Insert Table 2 about here

### **Associations as social provisioning communities**

The role of associations has extended beyond the demands for dignity. In Colombia and Ecuador, from all cities and leaders (10/10), there is evidence of the role of forming these bonds among women through larger networks of recyclers, a sorority that not only worked towards external recognition but first helped in awakening the sense of dignity of each recycler.

Moreover, they use these networks to further train themselves to avoid violence at home, within the organization, and others that would deem their work dirty. 'Dirty work' is recognized in the literature as physically, socially or morally tainted (Ashforth, Kreiner, Clark, & Fugate, 2007). To overcome this discrimination, recycler leaders build self-esteem and identity, create social buffers, confront the public and create defense mechanisms, practices that have also been identified in other occupations deemed as dirty (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Ashforth et al., 2007).

Nonetheless, this identity and social buffers or cliques within recyclers organizations are not used to insulate themselves, as described previously by Ashford et al. in other dirty occupations (2007), but rather to create a united front that allows them to gain recognition and material protections. As a result, this social provisioning moves beyond social bonds to generate material conditions for waste pickers' families and their livelihoods. Identifying whom to trust while avoiding exploitation has been a key problem in organizing. Just as identified in the United States, there has been an advancement in recognition politics but that generally lack redistribution (Fraser, 2019). The exploitation of recyclers takes on several forms, the most commonly mentioned are intermediaries' pricing and candidates' or governments' publicity campaigns. Continued conditions of marginalization and exploitation (for personal, governmental gain) created distrust, and many still do not respond well to approaches from larger organizations.

As a result, there have been many situations in which recyclers have felt continuously powerless when facing government officials, mainly due to unfulfilled promises. On multiple occasions, NGOs' involvement solidifies the credibility of associations that have had negative experiences previously. The association's training and the intervention from NGOs were cited as critical in getting processes started (10/10) and allowing recyclers to recognize their dignity in order to be able to lead and demand recognition from and for others. The larger network effect is a multiplier. This support moves recyclers from a focus on basic capacities to enhanced capacities to lead and create social change. This social change begins through a gruesome process of sensemaking of their work perceived as dirty, even as this perception differs from city to city and deciding to change the conditions for themselves and all reclaimers.

The social provisioning communities formed by these leaders go beyond a dignity of self-worth but deepening into the three connections identified by Donna Hicks, dignity as the 1) connection with self-worth, 2) connection with the inherent worth of others and 3) connection to a larger purpose and lead (Hicks, 2011, 2019). Following those connections, many recycler leaders expand their societal involvement. For example, when recyclers can get more income for their associations, they involve more people as a community rather than keeping it among the few. This

inclusivity is vital in a social provisioning community. In the interviews, women recycling leaders discussed the programs they have created to care for children, the homeless and the elderly. Social provisioning is part of how associations get formed and how they stay together. Through organizing, they can help the elder members that due to informality, have not been able to access social support services such as social security. The emergent properties of having an association is that they can together agree to help those who need it. In this manner, recyclers extend their own children's care-work and association members to others that they recognize as disregarded by the social safety nets available.

“They make me feel that I am not working alone, and that has been my strength to keep working, the seniors. They are my engine in the organization; I have fought to start a center with the municipality to see them working with them inside and not in the field. They remind me of my grandpa.”  
 Laura Guanoluisa, Quito

This inclusion also makes the work of recyclers visible. The association is influential in its numbers and its capacity to call for meetings to demand for recyclers' rights. Therefore, the boundaries foreseen by the territory defined in a commons scenario, are extended beyond dumpsite areas due to the need for recognition for the labor of recycling in the streets. Yet, it is not only recognition that recyclers have been demanding, but also a quest for redistribution of their load to be able to recycle.

Recycling and reuse of what is considered as waste constitute a portion of the material provisioning that waste pickers perform. Nonetheless, when not remunerated, this task constitutes another type of exploitation: care work that is not recognized. Reintroducing materials for production from the collection of material that has already been deemed waste has not been recognized for its service but rather only for the waste's market value. This is particularly troublesome as, in the process of recognizing the materials as recyclable for source separation, the role of reuse is being dismissed. Some recyclers care deeply about the environment and see their involvement as instrumental in extending landfills' lifespans. In Ecuador, the collection and burial of waste reach \$102 per ton (INEC, 2017). Therefore, the social costs due to NIMBY<sup>2</sup>, the economic costs saved from installing a new landfill, and the environmental burden, fall on recyclers. Alongside all these arguments, most of waste pickers recognize that recycling can only make a dent into caring for the planet, calling directly for extended producer responsibility systems as the main role of producers while recognizing recyclers as key actors in their value chains.

## CONCLUSIONS

The care and provisioning lens that accounts for both the social and material conditions to sustain life showcased the modifying effect of recyclers associations in transforming oppression in the context of a linear economy to a fair inclusion in the circular economy. The long battle of recyclers to gain recognition, redistribution and remuneration for their labor is also an opportunity to obtain environmental justice and consider care-work within the work they perform through their organizations, as summarized in the 9Rs. This role of women as leaders is particularly pertinent as they already make sense of their work in recycling and, as leaders in the form of care for their children, care for other recyclers and care for the environment while securing dignifying conditions and all future recyclers. A socially restorative and regenerative circular economy can be an

opportunity to right the historical wrongs of the linear economy that disregarded the social provisioning role of care-work in organizations and the environmental injustices perceived by vulnerable communities while investing in the future of circular jobs that can lift people out of poverty and provide a renewed sense in the value of care and repair work.

### ENDNOTES

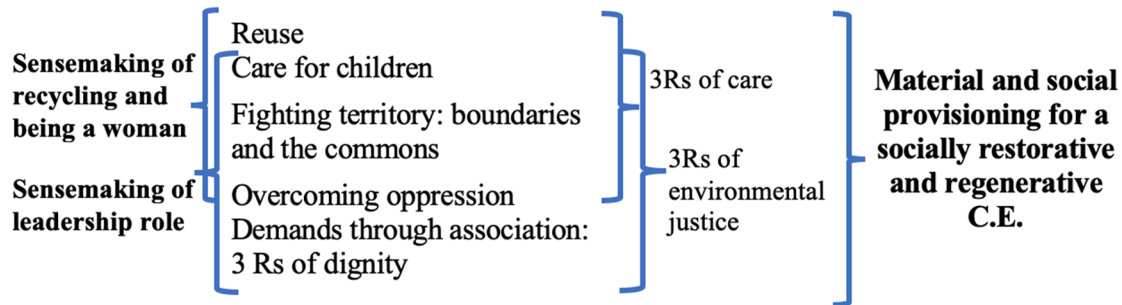
1. Soliz et al. (2019) Reciclaje sin recicladorAs es basura. <https://www.no-burn.org/libro-reciclaje-sin-recicladoras-es-basura-el-retorno-de-las-brujas/>
2. Not In My Backyard. Popular term denoting the resistance by neighbors to installations such as wind turbines and landfills in their neighborhoods.
3. In Ecuador, the Regulation for Environmental Organic Code (2019), Article 593 explicitly calls for the prioritization of recyclers for collecting and separating recyclable material. In Colombia, since 2003, the protection action T-724 judicially demanded that municipalities take affirmative action to include recyclers in their waste management model.

### REFERENCES AVAILABLE FROM THE AUTHOR(S)

**Table 1. The new 9Rs that combine recyclers' dignity, caring economics and environmental justice. A previous version of this table was presented in (Valencia, Soliz, & Soliz, 2019)**

Recycler's dignity (EIU 2016)	Feminism in caring economics (Elson 2017)	Environmental Justice, derived from (Rawls, 1999, Nussbaum, 2003, Fraser 2013)
Recognition of the work of recyclers	Recognition of the work of care providers	Recognition of the social and environmental damage of waste generation and disposal
Redistribution in the labor of recycling. Guarantee of access to waste and material conditions	Reduction of the caring burden	Redistribution of the detrimental effects of waste generation, restorative action.
Remuneration of the work considering social and environmental justice, accounting for externalities and the historical burden	Redistribution of the care work	Representation in political and organizational settings

**Figure 1: Summary of thematic results from coding process**



**Table 2: Achievement of demands per city. Green constitutes full coverage, yellow, partial coverage and red, no coverage.**

Demands		Bogotá	Quito	Cuenca	Lago Agrio	Coca	Portoviejo
<b>Recognition</b>		Through national regulation and abiding municipalities <sup>3</sup>					
<b>Redistri- bution</b>	Guaranteed access to waste	Constitutionally recognized			Recycling traceability through recyclers	Through direct contract	
	Source separation		Pilot program			Some private entities	Pilot program
	Storage facilities	Some privately owned	Privately owned				
<b>Remuneration</b>		Payment per ton				Direct Contract	