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Abbreviations and glossary of terms

ASP	Associated Strategic Partner
CE	Circular Economy
KPI	Key Performance Indicators
RAP	Regional Action Plan
S3	Smart Specialisation Strategy
WE	Women Entrepreneurs

1 Introduction

The Regional Action Plan (RAP) for Serbia is developed within the WE.Circular project with the overarching goal of strengthening the role of women entrepreneurs in the country's circular and digital transition. It serves as a medium-term framework that translates the project's analytical survey-based findings, desk research, policy framework analysis, and stakeholder insights into practical and context-specific measures. The RAP is designed to ensure that Serbia fully benefits from the project's knowledge base and that identified needs of women-led SMEs, are addressed through structured, feasible, and impactful actions.

Through the analytical work conducted and consultations with national stakeholders, the RAP positions Serbia within the broader regional approach of WE.Circular, while recognizing country-specific gaps and opportunities. It follows a bottom-up logic similar to other partner countries, ensuring that recommendations are rooted in evidence, aligned with the Serbian policy landscape, and capable of supporting long-term systemic change in women's entrepreneurship.

Specifically, the RAP for Serbia draws on the following key project inputs:

- **Activity 1.1 – Skills Gap Analysis:** Identified strong motivation among Serbian women entrepreneurs to integrate digital tools and circular economy practices, while also revealing substantial gaps in ICT competencies, digital marketing, CE knowledge, and sector-specific application of circular models. Barriers such as high investment costs, shortage of expertise, and limited staff capacities were confirmed as major obstacles to adopting advanced digital and eco-innovative solutions.
- **Activity 3.2 – Policy & Legislative Framework Analysis:** Showed that Serbia's strategic framework for circular transition is broadly aligned with EU policies; however, the measures do not specifically target women entrepreneurs. Stakeholders highlighted limited awareness of existing instruments, gaps in practical implementation, lack of gender-disaggregated data, and the need for clearer access to funding and support tailored to women-led SMEs.
- **National Stakeholder consultations:** Brought additional insights into challenges faced by women entrepreneurs and business support actors, stressing the importance of targeted capacity building, improved access to information, and a stronger link between national CE priorities and the realities of women-led businesses.

Building on these foundations, the RAP elevates national findings into a forward-looking framework for action. It mirrors the approach used across the Danube Region through

integrating analytical results, good practices, and stakeholders' insights, but adapts them to Serbia's institutional, economic, and entrepreneurial landscape. In doing so, the RAP aims to support the modernization of women-led SMEs, improve their capacity to adopt circular and digital business practices, strengthen their visibility within policy processes, and increase their access to financial and advisory support.

Ultimately, the Regional Action Plan provides a structured pathway for empowering Serbian women entrepreneurs to actively participate in, and benefit from, the country's transition toward a more competitive, sustainable, and innovation-driven economy.

2 Contextual Foundations and Strategic Inputs

Shaping the Regional Action Plan

The development of the Serbian Regional Action Plan (RAP) builds upon the evidence base and consultations conducted within the WE.Circular project. It integrates findings from the **National Skills Gaps and Needs Analysis (A1.1)**, the **Policy and Legislative Framework Review (A3.2)**, feedback from the **National Stakeholder Group (NSHG)**, and insights collected during **Transnational Learning Events** that showcased relevant European good practices. Together, these components form the analytical and strategic backbone of the RAP, ensuring alignment with Serbia's socio-economic context and the needs of women entrepreneurs.

Serbia is a small upper-middle-income economy in Southeast Europe, with a population of 6.65 million (2022), marked by long-term demographic decline and an ageing population. Women represent 51.4% of the population, with significant changes in age structure over the past two decades: women are overrepresented in older age cohorts, reflecting broader demographic trends. Educational attainment among women has increased substantially - women constitute more than 60% of university graduates - and they show strong participation in both formal and non-formal learning, especially in the 18–24 demographic. However, participation in lifelong learning remains modest among adults, with gendered barriers such as time constraints and the dual burden of work and family responsibilities.

The National Skills Gaps and Needs Analysis confirms that the female entrepreneurial landscape in Serbia is shaped by pronounced sectoral segregation and uneven access to opportunities. Women-led enterprises tend to cluster in trade, services, education, health, and personal services, while men dominate in manufacturing, construction, ICT, and engineering sectors. Although recent trends show an encouraging increase in women entering ICT, real estate, and knowledge-based industries, women remain underrepresented in Smart Specialization Strategy (S3) priority sectors such as ICT and Future Machines & Manufacturing Systems - which limits their participation in high-growth areas linked to circular and digital transformation.

Moreover, the ecosystem review demonstrates that women's entrepreneurship in Serbia has evolved significantly over the past decade. The share of women-owned MSMEs (based on the updated UN Women definition) reached 31.2% in 2021, yet younger women are entering entrepreneurship at lower rates than before, highlighting structural barriers including insufficient maternity and parental protections for entrepreneurs. The motivational shift from necessity-driven to opportunity-driven entrepreneurship is evident, but persistent obstacles remain: limited access to finance, information gaps on funding instruments, lack of tailored training, and insufficient networking or mentoring structures, especially in technology-intensive sectors.

The Policy and Legislative Framework Review (A3.2) shows Serbia's policy framework supports sustainable development, circular economy (CE), and digitalization through strategies such as the Smart Specialization Strategy (S3), Waste Management Programme 2022–2031, Program for Development of Circular Economy 2022–2024, Low-Carbon Development Strategy 2023–2030, and National Strategy for Sustainable Development.

While aligned with EU directives, these policies remain largely **gender-neutral**, lacking targeted measures for women entrepreneurs (WEs). Key implementing institutions include the Ministry of Economy, Ministry of Environmental Protection, Development Agency of Serbia, and women-entrepreneur associations, though coordination gaps limit impact.

Key Policy Instruments

- **Program for Development of Circular Economy 2022–2024:** Introduces CE principles, promotes business efficiency, resource reuse, renewable energy, digital solutions, and stakeholder engagement. Future iterations (from 2025) will extend the program to six years.

- **Waste Management Programme 2022–2031:** Aligns Serbia with EU standards, focusing on waste collection, recycling, hazardous waste management, and sustainable financing.
- **Low-Carbon Development Strategy 2023–2030:** Supports GHG reduction (33.3% by 2030) and links low-carbon transition to digital and industrial modernization.
- **National Strategy for Sustainable Development:** Integrates economic, social, and environmental pillars, fostering cleaner production and sustainable resource management.
- **Gender Equality Strategy 2021–2030:** Identifies gaps in gender-responsive entrepreneurship policies; absence of systematic data limits targeted support for women-led SMEs.

Policy-related stakeholder Insights and Reflections

- Women-led micro-enterprises (<5 employees) face barriers in funding, digital adoption, CE knowledge, and project participation.
- Tailored training, mentoring, and interactive workshops are needed for practical CE adoption.
- Awareness of the Smart Specialization Strategy is low; more outreach is necessary.
- Stakeholders highlight coordination gaps between institutions, academia, and industry, limiting effective support for WEs.

National Stakeholder Group Insights

Consultations with the National Stakeholder Group validated several persistent constraints affecting women-led enterprises:

- Limited access to specialized training in circular business models, CE compliance, digital skills, and advanced ICT tools;
- Low awareness of existing support schemes, legal obligations, and financing instruments;
- Insufficient mentoring, peer learning, and networking opportunities, especially for rural women entrepreneurs;
- Structural obstacles related to work–life balance, time poverty, and administrative complexity;

- Underdeveloped cooperation between ministries, local governments, academia, and women-entrepreneurship networks;
- Slow adoption of digital tools among SMEs, with gender differences pronounced in sectors outside services.

Insights from the WE.Circular Transnational Learning Events reinforced the need for more coherent support models and provided inspiration for Serbia's RAP. Presented GP's modularity, tailored trainings, and community-based models offer transferable components relevant for adapting Serbia's ecosystem to the needs of women entrepreneurs pursuing circular and digital growth.

By synthesizing the analytical evidence, policy review, and stakeholder insights, this RAP establishes a structured, context-responsive basis for interventions supporting women-led SMEs in Serbia's circular and digital transition. The strategic inputs gathered through project activities ensure that the measures proposed in the RAP are both grounded in real needs and aligned with emerging national priorities in sustainability, innovation, and inclusive economic development.

2.1 Priority Challenges to be Addressed Based on Previous Contextual Project Findings

Serbia is undergoing demographic shifts and an uneven regional development path, while its private sector slowly embraces digitalisation and circular economy principles. Women represent 51.4% of the population but only ~31.2% of entrepreneurs within the overall entrepreneurial community in Serbia — a share that has been rising but remains under-represented compared with women's educational attainment and presence in knowledge sectors. Recent trends show encouraging movement of women entrepreneurs into ICT, knowledge-based and professional services, yet systemic obstacles persist which limit their ability to scale circular and digital business models. Findings from the National Skills Gaps and Needs Analysis and stakeholder consultations point to four main, interlinked strategic challenges that must be addressed to enable women-led businesses to participate meaningfully in the green and digital transition.

Challenge 1 — Gaps in practical knowledge, digital & circular skills, and weak networking

While awareness of circular economy principles is increasing, skills remain fragmented and predominantly theoretical. Survey responses show strong demand for training topics such as access to finance and sector-specific application of CE (≈68%), and sizeable demand for "How to use digital technologies for circular transition" (≈59%).

ICT training priorities reported by entrepreneurs include digital marketing (60%), resource optimisation (50%), and cyber-security (40%). Yet barriers to adopting advanced digital tech are pronounced: high investment costs (70%), lack of skills/knowledge (70%), lack of public support (50%) and insufficient planning (40%). Ecosystem actors (education, business support, policy) are poorly coordinated — many women were not engaged in the Entrepreneurial Discovery Process or S3, so knowledge and opportunity channels are weak. In smaller communities entrepreneurs rely on informal contacts; formal networks, mentoring and hands-on upskilling are limited. This reduces the transfer of practical know-how required for circular/digital innovations.

Challenge 2 — Limited and ill-tailored access to finance and high costs of transition

Adopting digital/circular solutions typically requires up-front investment (equipment, software, certification, market entry costs). Survey and stakeholder input highlight that existing financial instruments are not adapted to the scale and risk profile of women-led SMEs. Banks demand guarantees many small firms cannot provide; public programmes are limited in scope and hard to access. This financing gap, combined with high certification/market access costs for exporting to demanding markets (e.g., EU standards, CBAM-related requirements), leaves many ideas untested and prevents scaling.

Challenge 3 — Insufficient enabling infrastructure and low market demand for circular products

Although Serbia's regulatory framework for CE is comparatively adequate, physical and service infrastructure needed for circular flows remains underdeveloped: recycling systems, local repair and reuse facilities, shared labs or makerspaces are often missing. Market behaviour—price competition and fast product turnover—means consumers undervalue longevity and circular benefits. Low consumer awareness and weak local

infrastructure raise operating costs for circular businesses and limit viable market opportunities.

Challenge 4 — Institutional fragmentation, regional disparities and gendered sectoral barriers

Regional population decline outside Belgrade, uneven regional implementation of strategic tools (S3), and the limited inclusion of firms in policy processes constrain coherent support. Women remain concentrated in some sectors (health, arts, services) and under-represented in engineering, manufacturing and ICT — although the trend is improving. Stakeholders pointed to insufficient sectoral approaches tailored to Agriculture, Construction and Energy where managerial and technical skills gaps are acute. The combination of fragmented policy implementation, weak stakeholder coordination and gendered occupational segmentation reduces the effectiveness of broad, one-size-fits-all support.

3 Regional Action Plan Measures

Although Serbia has developed solid strategic documents and policy instruments for circular and digital transition, their practical uptake remains limited, especially among women-led SMEs. Many measures stay at the level of frameworks without clear operational guidance, coordinated implementation or accessible entry points for small businesses. Low visibility of instruments and the absence of gender-disaggregated monitoring further reduce their impact.

The Regional Action Plan directly addresses these gaps: its activities on awareness raising, targeted capacity building, improved access to information, peer mentoring and cooperation with key institutions help translate existing policies into practice. By acting as an intermediary, ABW brings policy instruments closer to women entrepreneurs, ensuring that national frameworks become more accessible, understandable and usable in real business contexts.

On the other hand, as more women entrepreneurs become aware of available instruments and opportunities linked to circular and digital transition, this could, hopefully, stimulate broader uptake and stronger visibility of WE.Circular themes across Serbia, which could, in turn, encourage concrete measures needed for more systematic support from all interested stakeholders.

Measure 1: Strengthening digital and circular skills and peer-to-peer networks for women entrepreneurs

Pillars:

- ☑ Circular economy transition
- ☑ Digital transition
- ☑ Smart Specialization

Challenges, barriers and gaps:

- Women entrepreneurs in Serbia often lack practical knowledge of circular economy principles and digital tools, especially Industry 4.0 applications.
- Existing trainings are mostly theoretical and not tailored to specific sectors or practical needs.
- Networking between women entrepreneurs, mentors, and institutions is limited, leaving many isolated, particularly in smaller towns.
- Awareness of Smart Specialization Strategy (S3) is low, so potential sectoral opportunities remain untapped.

Policy alignment of the Measure:

- Program for Development of Circular Economy in the Republic of Serbia – supports education, innovation, and green transition.
- National Strategy for Sustainable Development – encourages sustainable business practices and resource efficiency.
- Waste Management Programme (2022–2031) – emphasizes circular economy adoption.
- Gender Equality Strategy (2021–2030) – highlights the need for gender-responsive entrepreneurship policies.

Actions for implementation of Measure 1:

1. **Women in Circular Economy and Digital Transformation discussion circles within existing Women Business Club meetings** – share experiences, tools, and sector-specific insights related to CE and Digital mechanisms and tools.
2. **Masterclasses organised with the support and advise of ASP (Chamber of Commerce; Center for Circular economy), on CE and digital-related programs and actions** – AI, sustainability, circular and green thematic sessions organised by ABW to raise awareness and pave the way for its membership base to focus on improving their CE and digital capacities and apply to existing programs.
3. **Peer mentoring program** – link experienced women entrepreneurs with newcomers to exchange practical advice. Mentorship can also be informal.
4. **Sector-specific examples of good practices – sharing experiences** – shed the light onto the examples of good practices in CE and digital transition, by posting them on ABW channels.

Action	Lead stakeholder	Support stakeholders	Time-frame	Impact indicators (KPI)
1. Women in Circular Economy and Digital Transformation discussion circles	ABW	Women Business Club participants – SMEs (members and potential members);	2026	2 discussion circles, at least 15 participants each (30 total)
2. Seminar/webinar on CE and digital programs, including AI tools	ABW	Chamber of Commerce of Republic of Serbia, Center for Circular Economy	2026	2 seminars, at least 15 participants each (30 total)
3. Peer mentoring program within ABW gatherings	ABW	Experienced women entrepreneurs	2026	5 mentees matched with mentors
4. Sector-specific examples of good practices	ABW	Local SMEs, online channels	2026	5 case studies shared online

Implementation timeline: Year 2026

- Launch of discussion circles within existing ABW Women Business Club meetings (2 circles, 15 participants each).
- Preparation and planning of seminar/webinar with Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Serbia (Center for Circular Economy).
- Identification of eligible WEs for peer mentoring program.
- Collection of sector-specific examples of good practices.
- Conduct seminar/webinar (1 session, 15 participants).
- Start peer mentoring matches (5 mentees paired).
- Publication of sector-specific good practice examples online (5 case studies).
- Follow-up on discussion circles to evaluate feedback and engagement.

Expected impact:

- Women entrepreneurs gain practical knowledge of circular economy principles and digital tools.
- New peer-to-peer networks are established, reducing isolation for women interested in CE principles.

- ABW strengthens its role as a hub for knowledge exchange, laying the foundation for long-term capacity building in CE and digital transition.

Measure 2: Improving awareness of financing options and low-cost support for digitalization and circular economy adoption

Pillars:

- ☒ Circular economy transition
- ☒ Digital transition
- ☒ Policy improvement

Challenges, barriers and gaps:

- Access to funding remains a top barrier for women entrepreneurs, especially for digitalization and CE initiatives.
- Most WEs are unaware of relevant public grants, EU programs, or incentives for green/digital business.
- Tailored financial advice for women-led micro-enterprises is limited, and bureaucratic hurdles are discouraging.

Policy alignment of the Measure:

- Gender Equality Strategy (2021–2030) – calls for gender-specific support mechanisms.
- Program for Development of Circular Economy (2022–2024) – includes support for SMEs in resource efficiency and CE adoption.
- Waste Management Programme (2022–2031) – encourages innovative CE solutions and adoption by businesses.

Actions for implementation of Measure 2:

1. **Funding Opportunities seminars** – featuring brief presentations from ASP advisors on grants entrepreneurship support opportunities.
2. **Keeping ABW membership base updated on current public grants and support programs, including the ones related to CE and digital transformation** – regular circular emails targeting different segments of ABW membership, intended to inform women entrepreneurs about current support measures and potential chances for funding;
3. **Micro-support network via Chamber of Commerce consultations** – organize small group online Q&A session(s), leveraging the Chamber's advisory expertise.

Action	Lead stakeholder	Support stakeholders	Time-frame	Impact indicators (KPI)
1. Funding Opportunities seminar	ABW	Chamber of Commerce of Republic of Serbia (Center for Circular Economy), Ministry of Environmental protection	2026	1 seminar, at least 15 participants
2. Circular emails updating WEs on grants/support programs	ABW	ABW Membership base	2026	1-4 emails sent in line with the dynamics of available grant calls and programmes
3. Micro-support network via Chamber consultations	ABW	Chamber of Commerce	2026	1 online Q&A session, at least 15 participants

Implementation timeline: Year 2026

- Organize first Funding Opportunities seminar/webinar (1 seminar, 15 participants).
- Send first circular email to ABW members about current grants and programs.
- Prepare micro-support network (plan 1 online Q&A session).
- Conduct micro-support online Q&A session (15 participants).
- Continue sending circular emails (1-4, in line with the dynamics of available grant calls and programmes).
- Evaluate participation and feedback to refine the approach for future programs.

Expected impact:

- Women entrepreneurs become aware of low-cost funding opportunities and support programs.
- ABW facilitates access to tailored financial advice, reducing bureaucratic barriers.
- Increased participation in CE and digital initiatives, supporting broader green transition goals.

Measure 3: Raising visibility and awareness of circular economy practices among women entrepreneurs and consumers

Pillars:

- ☑ Circular economy transition
- ☑ Policy improvement
- ☑ Smart Specialization

Challenges, barriers and gaps:

- Circular economy principles are not widely understood or visible among women entrepreneurs or their clients in Serbia.
- Local SMEs lack exposure to successful circular models, limiting motivation to adopt new practices.
- Limited institutional promotion of CE opportunities and benefits for small women-led businesses.

Policy alignment of the Measure:

- Program for Development of Circular Economy – emphasizes awareness, education, and promotion of CE initiatives.
- Gender Equality Strategy – supports women's economic empowerment.
- National Strategy for Sustainable Development – encourages sustainable consumption and business practices.

Actions for implementation of Measure 3:

1. **Social media campaign** – leverage existing channels to share short stories, practical tips, and examples of women applying CE principles and digital tools in their businesses.
2. **Dissemination events within the Women Business Club meetings** – featuring case studies from women-led businesses that successfully adopted CE/digital practices.
3. **Collaborative online events with ASP** – roundtables or panel discussions with Chamber of Commerce, highlighting CE sector opportunities and benefits for women-led businesses.

Action	Lead stakeholder	Support stakeholders	Time-frame	Impact indicators (KPI)
1. Social media campaign	ABW	Women Entrepreneurs applying CE and digital tools	2026	At least 5 posts/case stories shared
2. Dissemination events within Women Business Club meetings	ABW	Women entrepreneurs / members of ABW applying CE	2026	2 events, at least 15 participants each
3. Collaborative online events with ASP	ABW	ASP (Chamber of Commerce, Center for Circular Economy)	2026	1 online roundtable, at least 15 participants total

Implementation timeline: Year 2026

- Launch social media campaign (at least 5 posts/case stories shared on social media and ABW website).
- Conduct first dissemination event within Women Business Club meetings (2 events, at least 15 participants each).
- Plan collaborative online roundtable with Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Serbia.
- Conduct collaborative online event with ASP (1 roundtable, 15 participants).
- Continue social media campaign with new stories, fun facts and tips.
- Evaluate impact of campaigns and events, adjust content and channels if needed.

Expected impact:

- Circular economy practices become more visible and understood among women entrepreneurs and their clients.
- Successful CE case studies motivate SMEs to adopt circular and digital practices.
- Increased awareness of CE opportunities contributes to the empowerment of women-led businesses.
- ABW strengthens its advocacy role, creating a more informed and connected community of women entrepreneurs.

4 Monitoring of the Regional Action Plan implementation

The monitoring system quietly tracks the flow of activities and outputs, turning routine RAP events into a concise evidence stream for timely steering and transparent reporting.

Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)

Measure 1 – Strengthening Digital and Circular Skills and Peer-to-Peer Networks

- Discussion circles held: 2 (≥ 30 participants in total)
- Masterclasses delivered: 2 (≥ 30 participants in total)
- Mentee-mentor matches recorded: 5
- Good-practice case studies published: 5

Measure 2 – Improving Awareness of Financing Options and Low-Cost Support

- Funding Opportunities seminars: 1 (≥ 15 participants)
- Circular e-mail campaigns sent: 1- 4 (emails sent in line with the dynamics of available grant calls and programmes)
- Micro-support Q&A sessions: 1 (≥ 15 participants)

Measure 3 – Raising Visibility and Awareness of Circular Economy Practices

- Social-media posts / case stories: 5
- Dissemination events inside Women Business Club meetings: 2 (≥ 30 participants in total)

- Collaborative online roundtables: 1 (≥ 15 participants)

Frequency and Tools for Monitoring

Within 7 work days of every activity, the responsible staff member updates the designated folder with:

- attendance lists (signed or digital)
- platform reach analytics (Meta, LinkedIn, website visits)
- final Power-Point presentations or PDFs
- photos showing the sessions
- URL links of published posts and web articles

A KPI table tracker will be updated continuously after each activity; the full evidence package is retained for further use.

5. Recommendations for Enhancing Long-Term Impact

Even after the end of the WE.Circular project, and after the formal implementation period of this Regional Action Plan concludes, the experience gained and the WE.Circular insights will continue to inform future ABW initiatives focused on strengthening business, circular-economy and digital skills.

The methodology, tools and partnerships developed and strengthened will serve as a proven reference framework for designing and executing similar projects, ensuring

continuity in promoting circular business models and innovative digital solutions among women entrepreneurs.

By institutionalizing these practices, ABW will maintain a sustainable pathway for raising awareness, building capacities and encouraging women-led businesses to adopt circular and digital approaches that enhance competitiveness and operational efficiency.

The experience gathered under WE.Circular project and this RAP will outlive its formal calendar. ABW has consolidated a reusable format - short discussion circles, grant flash briefs, peer-mentor matching and low-cost social-media and website showcases—that can be redeployed in any future project addressing circular economy or digital upskilling.

The cooperation routines established with ASP and other relevant stakeholders will stay on call; when the next funding line appears, the same partners/stakeholders can be re-assembled within days instead of months. In practice, every new ABW CE oriented initiative/project will therefore open with a ready-made package: tested topics, speaker shortlist, KPI baseline and visibility tools, ensuring that women-led circular transformation continues without restarting from zero, especially within ABW membership base.