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**PROMOTING GENDER EQUALITY THROUGH GENDER-
RESPONSIVE PUBLIC PROCUREMENT**

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**PROMOTING GENDER EQUALITY THROUGH GENDER-
RESPONSIVE PUBLIC PROCUREMENT**

Doctoral dissertation

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List of Abbreviations

ADB	Asian Development Bank
EBRD	European Bank for Reconstruction and Development
EIGE	European Institute of Gender Equality
EU	European Union
GRP	Gender Responsive Procurement
GRPP	Gender Responsive Public Procurement
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
IGOs	Intergovernmental Organizations
ILO	International Labour Organization
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organizations
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SMEs	Small and Medium Sized Enterprises
SSC	Short Supply Chains
SFSC	Short Food Supply Chains
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UN Women	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
WBENC	Women's Business Enterprise National Council
WBG	World Bank Group
WOB(s)	Women Owned Business(es)
WOSB	Women Owned Small Business

1.Introduction

1.1 Promoting Gender Equality Through Gender Responsive Public Procurement

Sustainability considerations in purchases is not only an ethical purchasing decision but has also become an expectation of the stakeholders from public buyers. However, public buyers struggle to integrate sustainability requirements due to challenges in checking suitability, proportionality, and impact on competition; hence, a proactive approach is needed to embed sustainability in binding legislation for reinforced compliance, preventing commercial determination and regulatory issues (Sanchez-Graells, 2023). In this scenario, public procurement is one of the few strategic tools the government has at its disposal to directly incentivize the private sector to engage in a developmental agenda (OECD, 2019a) by buying from them and to address market imperfections, including economic exclusion, discrimination (Grandia and Meehan, 2017) and sustainability.

The goals of getting value for money for taxpayers and transparency and accountability serve as the guiding principles of public procurement (Walker and Brammer, 2009). Approximately half of government spending and around 20% of a nation's GDP can be attributed to public expenditure (OECD, 2019b), giving the government market-shaping powers. Consequently, gender-inclusive or gender-responsive public procurement (GRPP) involves leveraging the state's purchasing power as a strategic policy instrument to promote gender equality, aligned with the UN Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5) of gender equality (Bissat, 2022) and SDG 10 of reduced inequalities among others. These goals emphasize the significance of fostering women's empowerment to achieve the SDGs: GRPP can extend support to it by promoting gender equality in the supply chain. Furthermore, sourcing from diverse suppliers such as women-owned businesses (WOBs) also constitute a key component of supplier diversity management and risk diversification for purchasers, influencing the market positively.

GRPP is critical because women and WOBs have been disadvantaged and underrepresented in public procurement due to issues like lack of comprehensive training and access to information, less capacity and networking, inadequate support networks, financial and other constraints (Basheka, 2018; Basheka and Auriacombe, 2020; Orser et al., 2021; Martínez-Rodríguez, et al., 2022). Government procurement stands out as a critical source of sales in several industries, including the defense, health and research-related sectors, the construction, energy, and transportation equipment industries (Choi,

2010). GRPP may be the principal means by which WOBs might penetrate these typically male-dominated industries.

Three main methods for incorporating gender into public sector procurement exist: first, through the exclusion of discriminating companies from the selection criteria; second, through the inclusion of gender as a sub-criteria in the contract award criteria when assessing the quality of the offer; and third, through the contract performance conditions, which require the gender perspective to be taken into account when executing the commissioned tasks (Decuyper, n.d. foundin Kithatu-Kiwekete and Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2017).

Evidently, there are substantial gaps between policy and practice in public procurement, highlighting the necessity for additional research to explore its potential and current utilization (Grandia and Meehan, 2017). Overall, enabling government procurement opportunities for WOBs could serve as a pathway to leverage trade as a means of enhancing the benefits of economic development for women while also reducing supply chain risks by diversifying the supply chain (Kirton, 2013) and fostering market competition, which could lead to reduced procurement costs (Popović-Pantić, 2020).

Financed through the EU funded Horizon 2020 project SAPIENS (Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 956696), which focused on sustainability in procurement, this thesis focuses on the gender equality enabling aspects of procurement and investigates how GRPP can be used to reduce the systemic barriers faced by WOBs participating in public procurement and redresses the overall gender inequalities prevalent. Qualitative data has been used to develop various research publications supported as chapters of this thesis. Findings showcase the prevalence of gender inequalities in procurement as recognized by the existing literature, the case of using short-supply chains (i.e. direct buying from female producers/suppliers by reducing non-value adding intermediaries, with the aim of transferring a bigger portion of profit margins to female suppliers rather than them taken by intermediaries, benefiting the producers with better returns and public buyers with more value for money and quality products) as a potential way to promote the participation of WOBs in public procurement, and it also analyses in what ways inter-governmental organizations (as users of public fund, hence falling under the realm of public procurement) support this by implementing gender-responsive corporate procurement practices (focus is on their corporate procurement as they do not have to be influenced by the donor's agenda and priorities which they need to for donor-funded

project-related procurement in order to secure the fundings, rather can support gender equality agenda more exclusively in corporate procurement on which they have full spending control) that address gender biases. Further attempts are made to present the perspective of public buyers, women-owned business owners, procurement and gender experts on the barriers and opportunities for WOBs in public procurement, thus providing a holistic overview on the topic as well as contributing to advancing the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 5: Gender Equality. These findings reiterate the existence of gender-based discrimination in the 21st century and demonstrate the crucial role the public sector can play in supporting WOBs, community development and achieving gender equality.

This thesis focuses on women and women-owned businesses (including those who identify as such) within the broader scope of gender-responsive procurement initiatives, which aim to benefit all genders. The emphasis on women is due to their position as the most significant demographic group that is both under-represented and economically disadvantaged in several worldwide socio-economic scenarios, along with the possibility of finding data and statistics on them more readily, supporting the formation of this thesis. By focusing on GRPP in different contexts, this thesis contributes to understanding how public sector enterprises can support WOBs and GRPP in particular and sustainable and equitable growth in general.

This research seeks to advance the development of public procurement and GRPP as a scholarly domain, benefiting academia, policymakers, and WOBs through a synthesis of existing literature and new findings including possible interventions, given the underexplored nature of this field and the presence of significant research gaps.

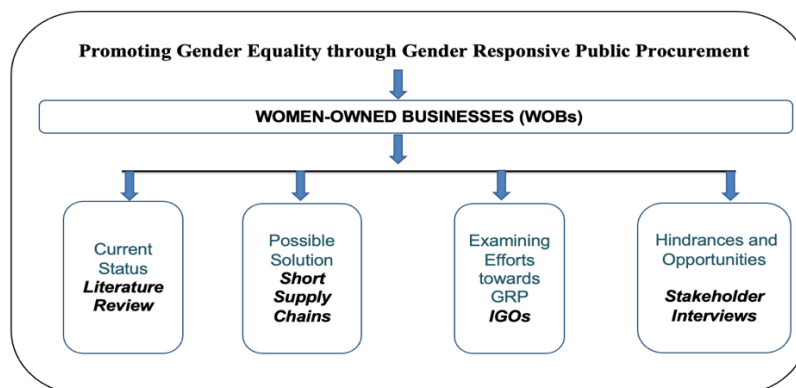


Fig 1: Thesis logic flow

The subsequent chapters of this thesis seek to further the understanding of GRPP by analyzing the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the prevalent gender-related challenges in public procurement recognized by the current literature?

RQ2: Can short supply chains facilitate the involvement of WOBs in public procurement?

RQ3: Are intergovernmental organizations as users of public funds (falling under the domain of public-sector organization) and promoters of gender equality agenda integrating GRPP into their corporate procurement?

RQ4: What are the hinderances faced by WOBs as suppliers and how can we support the participation of WOBs in public procurement?

To support this, the thesis integrates multiple research articles written by the author, which were submitted to peer-reviewed open-access journals divided into chapters. These articles, as well as the authorship, are listed in the below table:

Article Title	Author/s	Defendant's Contribution	Status	Journal Ranking	Citation
Gender related issues in procurement – A Review of Current Themes and Future Research Directions	Dibya Rathi, Gyongyi Vorosmarty and Tunde Tatrai	Introduction, data gathering, processing, analysis, literature review and output, formation of first draft of final article, revision.	Published by <i>Budapest Management Review</i>	Category A by Hungarian Academy of Sciences	Rathi, D., Vörösmarty, G., and Tátrai, T. (2023). Gender issues in procurement: A review of current themes and future research directions. <i>Management Science/Budapest Management Review</i> , 54 (11), 40-51.
Short Supply Chains: Frameworks and Extensions to Public Procurement	Gyöngyi Vörösmarty, Dibya Rathi, and Tunde Tatrai	Intoduction, literature review, partial interviewees scouting, conducting interviews, transcription, processing, analysis and forming first draft of article, revision.	Published by <i>Cleaner Logistics and Supply Chain</i>	Q1 by SCIMAGOJr	Vörösmarty, G., Rathi, D., & Tatrai, T. (2024). Short supply chains: Frameworks and extensions to public procurement. <i>Cleaner Logistics and Supply Chain</i> , 13, 100182.

Does gender equality matter? Gender responsive corporate procurement efforts of inter-governmental organizations	Dibya Rathi		Published by <i>Women's Studies International Forum</i>	Q2 by SCIMAGOJr	Rathi, D. (2024). Does gender equality matter? Gender responsive corporate procurement efforts of inter-governmental organizations. <i>Women's Studies International Forum</i> , 105, 102937.
Supporting the participation of Women-owned businesses in public procurement	Dibya Rathi		Included in this thesis as a chapter, submitted for publication		

Table 1: Summary of Research Articles

The articles are interconnected and serve to offer together a comprehensive overview of GRPP.

The first paper, “Gender Related Issues in Procurement – A Review of Current Themes and Future Research Directions,” is a literature review examining the presence of gender-related issues in procurement literature and the evolution of research themes throughout recent times. While several prior studies have tried to encapsulate the policies and governmental measures aimed at achieving gender balance, they were constrained either by concentrating on a particular nation or by addressing a certain facet influencing gender issues. None of the studies concentrated solely on the gender concerns highlighted by the peer-reviewed literature concerning procurement. Consequently, this article used semi-structured literature review style (Snyder, 2019) for summarizing and categorizing gender concerns reported in 45 research publications, providing an overview of the research area and presenting the current state of knowledge into themes to highlight challenges encountered by women in procurement due to their gender, emphasizing the significance of the study topic and delineating avenues for further exploration. Here, due to lack of sufficient articles identified related only to public procurement (n = 17) the research was extended to include private procurement (n= 28) to extend the sample base, ease the statistical comparison and eventually make the published article interesting for a broader academic audience.

Secondly, while the concept of Short Supply Chains (SSC) is predominantly linked to the agricultural sector (Paciarotti and Torregiani, 2021), its principles hold relevance beyond this domain. Despite the globalization of food production, prioritizing local producers—many of whom are WOBs — offers significant environmental and social benefits. This raises the question of whether the SSC model can be adapted to support WOBs in public procurement, particularly when public funds are allocated to meet demand while addressing associated social and environmental impacts. Public procurement has the potential to advance various social objectives, such as enabling SMEs to participate as primary bidders rather than subcontractors and prioritizing WOBs as both principal bidders and subcontractors. Building on the identification of gender-related challenges in procurement that disproportionately affect women and WOBs, the second article, *“Short Supply Chains: Frameworks and Extensions to Public Procurement,”* explores along with several other related research questions how shortening supply chains and directly sourcing from small producers—many of whom are WOBs—could enhance their participation in public procurement. The feasibility of this approach is evaluated by gathering insights from procurement officials, women sellers, and NGOs that advocate for WOBs' inclusion in public procurement processes.

Similarly, while research on gender-responsive public procurement has predominantly focused on the government sector (Knight et al., 2012; Lloyd and McCue, 2004; Orser et al., 2021; Williams, 2024), intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) have been largely overlooked, despite their critical role as an extension of the public sector. IGOs rely on public funding, engage diverse stakeholders—including governments—and pursue targeted social development objectives that could significantly advance gender-responsive procurement. Historically, gender mainstreaming efforts have been driven by global coalitions of non-governmental organizations, such as women’s rights INGOs and the United Nations (True and Mintrom, 2001), which remain the primary focus of existing literature, including studies by Kreft (2017), Nivedita and Deshpande (2019), and Magar et al. (2019). However, the pursuit of gender equality through corporate procurement within IGOs—where greater control over organizational expenditures and the possibility to support social causes is exercised compared to project procurement due to the absence of external stakeholder influence—remains underexplored. Addressing this gap, the third research article, *“Does Gender Equality Matter? Gender-Responsive Corporate Procurement Efforts of Intergovernmental Organizations,”* was conducted as part of this thesis, offering a novel contribution to the field. IGOs such as the World Bank

Group (WBG), Asian Development Bank (ADB), International Labour Organization (ILO), and European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) wield substantial purchasing power, serve as trendsetters, and play a pivotal role in promoting development and sustainability through their grants and funding. By focusing on their corporate procurement, this study examined how these organizations integrate gender equity objectives into their procurement processes to advance gender equality, revealing innovative approaches and challenges in implementing GRPP principles. The findings provide valuable insights into an underexplored dimension of GRPP, highlighting the potential of IGOs to align their practices with their stated commitments and contribute to a more nuanced implementation of gender-responsive procurement (GRP).

Finally, as highlighted by Vyas-Doorgaprasad and Kinoti (2015), examining the underdeveloped and under-researched intersection between gender and public procurement practices is critical for advancing sustainable economic development. A comprehension of gender equality and public tendering processes necessitates an awareness of public administration procedures and the factors that support and obstruct the inclusion of gender equality in public procurement (Sarter, 2020). To address this gap, a fourth study titled “Supporting the participation of Women-owned businesses in public procurement” was conducted, involving 22 semi-structured interviews with WOBs, public buyers, and experts across 16 countries. A thematic analysis-based qualitative research approach was employed to identify the primary barriers hindering WOBs' participation in public procurement and to explore strategies to support their inclusion. Additionally, the study examined the impact of certification, e-procurement, supplier diversity, and other factors. It also investigates whether dividing larger contracts into smaller lots is beneficial and if goal-based or quota-based preferential treatments are more effective. The research revealed several compelling themes, including the paradox of dividing contracts into lots, the choice between public and private buyers for WOBs, and the emergence of a few dominant WOB players. These findings are further enriched by a case study illustrating practical approaches to fostering WOB participation in public procurement. These novel themes, which have not been explored in existing research, contribute to the originality of the study and provide a more nuanced understanding of the thesis topic.

1.2 Overall Research Methodology

Given the limited existing knowledge on the topic of GRPP, an exploratory strategy is employed consistently throughout this thesis, making use of qualitative research methods to gain a deeper understanding of the subject (Akinyode and Khan, 2018). Qualitative methods enable an in-depth, unrestricted and richer understanding of the research field through open-ended data collection, providing room for improvisation of understanding by going deeper into the topic as deemed necessary (Creswell and Clark, 2011; Lapan et al., 2012; Miles et al., 2014). It has often been observed that introductions to qualitative papers often lack thorough reviews of key literature related to their topics (Gephart, 2004); hence, this PhD thesis endeavor starts with an overview of important concepts related to gender-responsive procurement and WOBs along with a brief summary of findings from relevant literature that help understand state of the art.

Qualitative researchers aim to elucidate observations by offering substantiated insights into the functioning of overarching concepts within particular instances, prioritizing the description and comprehension of authentic human interactions, significances, and processes in organizational contexts—insights that quantitative research frequently fails to encapsulate (Gephart, 2004). Qualitative data are collected using one or more research approaches, including case studies, interviews, observations, grounded theory, and textual analysis to form an interpretive analysis (Gephart, 2004, p. 458). Interviews are situated, face-to-face interactions in which researchers typically pose questions that respondents answer to learn unique perspectives from participants and can be semi-structured where the researcher combines pre-defined questions with the ability to delve further into issues tailoring the conversation to the participant's replies, resulting in a more natural flow with the ability to dive into unique experiences and viewpoints (Gephart, 2004; Azungah, 2018). While case studies describe in-depth a single unit of analysis and secondary observational methods such as textual analysis offer examination of related publications and policies (Gephart, 2004) substituting for activities and observations the researcher could not observe directly (Stake, 1995) yet complementing the overall findings.

All of these qualitative methodologies are consistently used throughout the research articles supporting this thesis to get the most comprehensive results from the research endeavors. This research, throughout the chapters, akin to Azungah (2018), utilized both deductive and inductive approaches for data analysis, with the deductive approach

applying a pre-existing theoretical thematic framework for coding to derive core concepts and testing the alignment of collected data with pre-existing theories and assumptions (Thomas, 2006). This approach was particularly used in the first article, which reviews the literature on gender-responsive procurement through a semi-structured systematic search of academic databases and relevant literature, using content analysis to provide a framework of the research topic based on available peer-reviewed literature (Snyder, 2019).

Conversely, the inductive approach focuses on raw participant data to identify exact themes and key concepts, this method, is used in the second and third articles of the thesis and the fourth chapter by conducting semi-structured interviews through snowball sampling to find relevant participants, expanding on existing ideas and facilitated by the development of new theories (Azungah, 2018).

Additionally, in the third research article, investigating gender-responsive procurement across IGOs, along with key-informant interviews and interpretive document analysis, cross-case analysis methods were also employed, utilizing tables to compare and contrast data by themes across cases (Azungah, 2018), thereby offering a summarized overview of the various approaches to GRPP used by IGOs. An ethnographic design was considered less suitable for the study, as the focus was not on the behavior of a specific cultural group (Lapan et al., 2012) but rather to understand the behavior of the larger population. The IGO study enhances Combaz's (2018) research, which indicated that only a limited number of development-oriented organizations used gender-responsive procurement procedures, by documenting the gender-responsive corporate procurement initiatives of four IGOs.

The fourth research work, identified barriers through an investigative approach to understand the length and depth of the problem and then moved on to find potential solutions and reformative actions to ensure these are adequate, informed and contribute to the problem resolution. For this, thematic analysis using qualitative semi-structured interviews were the preferred approach as they allowed the researcher to steer the conversation on the said topic while allowing the interviewee to lay down their understanding of the topic, their frustrations as well as admiration providing a more detailed view compared to quantitative approaches such as surveys.

All the interviews conducted for this research were preceded by a debriefing to ensure that only relevant participants were included. These interviews were recorded and transcribed using MS Teams but were deleted for privacy concerns after extracting key data to perform thematic analysis by clustering data into several themes to find key patterns as well as extracting other relevant information (Nowell et al., 2017).

Drawing on previous studies on gender-responsive public procurement (Orser et al., 2021) and the lack of adequate statistics on other gender identities, this thesis also assumed gender as a dichotomous attribute, limiting it to a male-female distinction. Qualifying a women-owned business, assumed women to be the person who identifies themselves as such to fall under the prevalent definitions of women-owned businesses with 51% ownership and control. Furthermore, the focus on only WOBs in this thesis is justified as women are the biggest minority non-male genders underrepresented in public procurement, along with the lack of adequate gender-disaggregated data available for non-males/females or sufficient pertinent literature to build upon. Unfolding ways to foster WOBs will help uncover the problems faced by other minority genders as well and hopefully the identified solutions are replicable to the businesses owned by persons beyond male/female identities, contributing to gender equality in procurement. However, if possible further extensions to this research should consider a more inclusive definition in defining the faucets of GRPP.

1.3 Elaborations to some concepts forming the basis of this thesis

In this section, some of the key concepts that build the basis of this thesis and how they impact/enhance the problem of lesser representation of women-owned businesses are introduced.

1.3.1 Gender (in)equality

According to UN Women, gender equality is defined as “the equal rights, responsibilities, and opportunities of women and men and girls and boys” (UN Women, n.d.). This ensures that everyone can participate and excel in any endeavor, regardless of gender. Conversely, gender inequality involves disparate treatment based on gender, manifesting in discrimination across education, employment, healthcare, and higher rates of gender-based violence against women compared to men (Council of Europe, n.d.). Gender bias, whether conscious or unconscious, can lead to unequal access to opportunities.

Women have been marginalized and excluded from developmental opportunities due to discrimination rooted in biological, legal, and cultural differences, as well as unequal caregiving responsibilities (Ruiz, 2020). Despite sectors like home care and primary education being feminized (Bettio et al., 2009), gendered barriers persist in employment, with women over-represented in lower-skilled roles and men dominating high-skilled positions and leadership. For instance, women in manufacturing are often confined to assembly line tasks, limiting their wages and career advancement, which contributes to ongoing pay and growth disparities (Fontana, 2009; Flabbi et al., 2019). Such gender-specific obstacles restrict women's ability to disrupt feminization trends in low-value sectors and promote their involvement in higher-value employment (Bamber and Staritz, 2016). Globally, women's labor force participation rates are 11 percentage points lower than men's (World Economic Forum, 2020), and the term "glass ceiling" describes the invisible barriers hindering women's career advancement, resulting in their underrepresentation in senior executive roles (Bosse and Taylor, 2012).

1.3.2 Public procurement and private procurement

Public procurement refers to the acquisition of goods and services by public-sector organizations (Uyarra and Flanagan, 2010; Vyas-Doorgapersad and Kinoti, 2015) to meet operational needs and facilitate developmental initiatives. It is subject to strict regulations and oversight to ensure fairness, transparency, and accountability. This process is critical due to the substantial allocation of resources—such as time, finances, and personnel—toward purchasing goods, works, and services, making it an attractive market for suppliers (Sarter, 2020). Beyond its primary function, public procurement can also serve as a strategic tool to promote secondary policy objectives (McCrudden, 2004; Edquist and Zabala-Iturriagoitia, 2012; Meehan et al., 2016), such as environmental sustainability, social equity, and economic development. For instance, public purchasers often leverage their significant purchasing power to influence suppliers and advance goals like gender equality (Vyas-Doorgapersad and Kinoti, 2015; Martin Ortega et al., 2015; Nyeck, 2020; Maritz, 2022). A practical example of public procurement is a local government contracting a construction company to build a public hospital, ensuring the process is transparent, competitive, and aligned with broader goals like job creation, serving the society and environmental sustainability.

In contrast, private procurement involves the acquisition of goods, services, or works by private companies or organizations to support their business operations. It is primarily

driven by the goal of maximizing value for the organization, often emphasizing cost efficiency, quality, and supplier relationships (Hawkins et al., 2011). Unlike public procurement, private procurement is characterized by greater flexibility, confidentiality, and internal decision-making, with a strong focus on profitability and competitive advantage (Stentoft and Freytag, 2012). For example, a private manufacturing company sourcing raw materials from suppliers to produce goods would prioritize cost-effectiveness, timely delivery, and quality to maintain its market position and profitability. While private procurement is less constrained by regulatory frameworks, it is also less transparent and accountable to external stakeholders, as its primary accountability lies with internal stakeholders such as shareholders and executives (Vorosmarty and Tatrai, 2019).

To compare, public procurement is governed by strict regulations to ensure fairness, transparency, and accountability in the use of public funds. It prioritizes public service delivery while incorporating social and environmental goals, such as promoting gender equality or sustainable practices, and is subject to transparency and oversight by auditors and the public to ensure compliance with legal frameworks (Hawkins et al., 2011; Grandia et al., 2023). In contrast, private procurement is faster, more profit-oriented, and driven by business needs, with fewer bureaucratic hurdles. It focuses on organizational efficiency, competitive advantage, and maximizing value for the company. While public procurement is slower and more complex due to compliance requirements (Vorosmarty and Tatrai, 2019), it plays a critical role in achieving broader societal benefits, such as building public infrastructure or advancing social equity (Grandia et al., 2023). On the other hand, private procurement supports business growth and profitability. Both processes, though distinct in their objectives and operational dynamics, are essential in their respective domains, contributing to economic and social development in complementary ways (Burnes and Anastasiadis, 2003).

1.3.3 Public procurement and gender equality

Public authorities' consumption choices profoundly affect economic and social outcomes (Sarter, 2020), and strategic public procurement should promote various objectives, including regional growth and equal opportunities (McCrudden, 2007). Consequently, officials hold "critical control" (Wu et al., 2018) over policy execution (Lipsky, 1980; Sabatier and Mazmanian, 1980; Schofield, 2001). Nowadays, using government contracts to achieve social goals, including advancing gender equality, is becoming more

common (McCrudden, 2004), for example, setting quotas for hiring women in male-dominated fields could positively impact labor market gender segregation (Sarter, 2024).

The link between public procurement and gender equality has gained attention in EU policymaking (Sarter, 2020) as well. However, women-owned enterprises receive less than 1% of spending by large corporations and governments (Vazquez and Frankel, 2017), with the percentage of public tenders awarded not reflecting the proportion of women-owned firms (ITC, 2020) while procurement practices have been criticized for reinforcing gender biases instead of mitigating them (Combaz, 2018).

Women-owned SMEs generally grow more slowly than those run by men (Bardasi et al., 2011), and the challenges in public procurement are exacerbated by their disproportionate presence in the micro and small sectors, along with unequal caregiving responsibilities (ITC, 2020). Factors like limited resources, complex contracting processes, and insufficient awareness of opportunities contribute to this disparity (Orser et al., 2021). The resource-based view (RBV) posits that a firm's strategic resources influence its competitive performance, placing WOBs at a disadvantage in public procurement (ibid). Although public procurement is credited with encouraging gender equality (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2018), little is known about the implementation of equality considerations in procurement processes. In developing countries, policies aimed at women and marginalized groups have often failed due to legal ambiguity and bureaucracy (Oluka et al., 2020). Cultural barriers and a lack of female representation in procurement committees add fuel to this issue (Yusran et al., 2018). A lack of appropriate incentives has been identified as a barrier to sustainable public procurement implementation (Preuss, 2009). The theory of representative bureaucracy suggests that greater representation of minorities leads to more contracting opportunities; however, this is not evident for WOBs (Fernandez et al., 2013).

Despite increased attention to gender equality in public procurement, its integration remains limited (Sarter, 2020). Competing objectives, such as sustainability and local support, may not prioritize gender factors, influenced by the political climate (Rathi, 2024). Procurement regulations prioritizing "price" may disadvantage smaller women-owned enterprises, as larger firms can leverage their resources to manage costs and meet performance criteria (Hoekman and Tas, 2022). A sustainable public procurement strategy requires assessing the overall impact of the process while optimizing public resources (Polat and Aydin, 2024). Legal frameworks should define minimum

performance criteria for socially responsible procurement to ensure effective implementation. Moreover, methods that establish minimum prices and enforce workplace standards significantly influence working conditions and set essential benchmarks for other purchasers (Sarter, 2024).

While quotas are a crucial step, WOBs must remain competitive in terms of price and quality to secure contracts, as policy alone cannot ensure competitiveness but a fair competition through superior product and service quality is an enabler of long-term business and reduction in gender gap (Grandia and Meehan, 2017). Finally, there is a limited understanding regarding procurement's ability to empower women and contribute to gender equality as a social objective (Oluka et al., 2020), as well as human competency requirements to put women at a level with men. The equity impact of a public procurement process is contingent upon the integration and execution of several measures within that particular procurement process (Sarter, 2024) but a gender-diverse operations team may result in more socially responsible supplier selection (Ruel and Fritz, 2021).

1.3.4 Defining women-owned business (WOB/s)

The absence of a standardized definition for WOBs creates legal challenges, especially in cross-border supply chains, complicating access to procurement advantages allocated to WOBs. Without clear qualifying criteria, WOBs face difficulties accessing financial resources, causing uncertainty in procurement activities. A standardized definition of WOBs is crucial to guide technical and financial support, assess progress, mitigate fraud risks, and ensure these businesses can fully utilize available benefits (Chin, 2017). It helps policymakers identify target groups, allows businesses to determine their eligibility for support, and provides a common framework to measure and compare performance (ibid).

Currently, there is no globally accepted definition of a WOB (Chin, 2017); this makes it difficult to measure progress across institutions and countries. Definitions often rely on ownership and/or control criteria, which vary across countries (Williams, 2024). For instance, WOBs in Kenya and Tanzania must be 70 percent women-owned and led, while in the U.S., the threshold is 51 percent (ibid). Chin (2017, p. XIII) defines WOB as a business with at least 51 percent unconditional ownership by women, where women exercise control over both long-term decision-making and day-to-day management, and

the business operates independently from non-women-owned firms. This definition is also commonly used by certifying agencies like WEConnect and WBENC, as well as UN Women. However, the International Trade Centre has raised concerns about the 51 percent ownership criterion, as cultural or tax reasons may prompt equal ownership splits, making contextually relevant definitions necessary (Williams, 2024).

One of the biggest challenges faced in implementing and benefiting from public procurement is identifying competent WOBs. Certification helps buyers verify WOBs, ensuring resources go to the intended recipients. It also improves market opportunities for certified businesses, as they appeal to corporations, public agencies, and socially conscious consumers (Chin, 2017). Various certification options are available, including self-certification, third-party certification, government certification, and certification through in-house resources, with third-party certifications emerging as the most promising choice (ibid) as they can ensure impartial and independent third-party verifications reducing the risk of misrepresentation and fronting. Organizations like WBENC and WEConnect International independently certify WOBs and maintain searchable databases that corporations can use to reach out to WOBs (Polat and Aydin, 2024).

1.3.5 Hinderances to WOBs' participation in public procurement

Existing literature has identified numerous factors that hinder the participation of WOBs in public procurement, resulting in their marginalization and perpetuating a vicious cycle that exacerbates the disparity in access to opportunities and equality, ultimately causing social and economic distress. It is essential to recognize that not all hurdles are present in every country, and not all WBOs encounter precisely the same obstacles. However, the most often mentioned impediments in the literature, including works by Chin (2017), ITC (2020), Orser et al. (2021), UN Women (2022), and Williams (2024), are enumerated below:

- **Resource Constraints and Financial Barriers:** WOBs often face constraints in financial and human resources, limiting their ability to handle larger procurement volumes. Gender prejudice further restricts their access to financial capital, creating what is termed a "second glass ceiling" (Bosse and Taylor, 2012) beyond the barriers they already face in career advancement.

- **Payment Uncertainty and Risks:** Ambiguous payment conditions, delays in payments, the need for bid security, and the risk of enforced fines for subpar performance act as significant deterrents for WOBs to participate in public procurement.
- **Competition and Market Position:** WOBs frequently compete with larger, more established companies that can offer lower prices and higher volumes, making it difficult for WOBs to compete effectively in public tenders. Their higher concentration in less profitable sectors, such as retail and services, limits their access to more lucrative industries like manufacturing where demand from public procurement is higher.
- **Inaccessibility to Networks and Socio-Cultural Norms:** WOBs often lack access to formal and informal business and community networks where procurement opportunities are discussed. This issue is worsened by additional caregiving responsibilities and socio-cultural norms that can limit their professional engagement.
- **Insufficient Legislative Support:** In many countries, there is insufficient national legislation or policy support for WOBs. This includes the lack of standardized definitions, preferential policies, or quotas that would otherwise facilitate their participation in public procurement.
- **Complex and Misfit Tender Requirements:** Public procurement tenders often have overly complex designs and excessive requirements, making them difficult for WOBs to meet. Additionally, public purchasers tend to aggregate tenders, which makes it harder for WOBs that can only fulfill a portion of the requirements to compete.
- **Lack of Awareness and Limited Internet Access:** WOBs frequently have limited awareness of available procurement opportunities; restricted access to the internet in some parts of the world further hampers their ability to engage in the procurement process.

1.3.6 Price vs value for money

Public procurement has historically placed a premium on economic efficiency by focusing solely on cost to achieve the best value for money spent. This has forced contracting authorities to obtain the necessary quantity and quality at the lowest possible cost (Cravero, 2017). This approach has been replaced by the evolving concept of *value*

for money, which has transitioned from prioritizing the lowest price to incorporating considerations of both price and quality and has further expanded to include economic, social, and environmental value for society beyond the essential contract requirements to award the most economically advantageous tender (MEAT) that focuses on total cost of ownership and life cycle costing (Kumar, 2022). However, public buyers consistently face the challenge of balancing various MEAT objectives in public procurement to achieve value for money, including quality, timeline, risks, socio-economic goals, gender equality and competition, against cost pressures (Thai, 2009).

1.3.7 Gender responsive public procurement (GRPP)

WOBs face challenges in public procurement due to limited access to financing, training, and knowledge of opportunities (Open Contracting Partnership, 2020). Gender-responsive procurement (GRP) addresses these disparities by prioritizing gender equity and empowering WOBs through strategic selection of services and products (UN Women, 2022). When applied by public sectors, this approach becomes Gender-Responsive Public Procurement (GRPP), part of broader gender mainstreaming efforts that aim to incorporate gender lenses into policies and practices (EIGE, 2021, p.4). This indicates that purchasers and vendors assess the effects of all contractual actions on the wants, interests, and concerns of both women and men and formulate and execute contracts in a manner that mitigates inequities. It does not inherently involve increased expenses but necessitates expertise and capability. It aligns with the EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 and the UN's SDG 5 (Gender Equality). GRPP can be woven into broader procurement strategies, such as socially responsible and supplier-diverse procurement (EIGE, 2022).

It entails executing due diligence procedures to recognize and mitigate threats to gender equality, women's rights, and non-discrimination from the structures, processes, and environment of public policy as a way to tackle inequalities generated by them (UN Women, n.d.; Daly, 2005). Public procurement includes three main stages – pre, during and post – procurement and gender-responsive interventions through improvements in legal, regulatory and policy frameworks are possible across all of them (EIGE, 2022). GRP's strategic entrance points and difficulties are contingent upon four factors: legislative and institutional frameworks, collaborations among stakeholders, data availability, and the competencies of buyers and providers inside a nation (UN Women, 2022).

Female and male business owners experience distinct situations, with women confronting extra challenges that men do not face, rendering this comprehension vital for developing a successful gender-responsive procurement policy (Chin, 2017). However, this does not mean buyers should lower their requirements to incorporate otherwise incompetent businesses; they should instead maintain their standards while concentrating on eliminating obstacles and augmenting the capabilities of women-owned enterprises to compete effectively on equal terms (Chin, 2017). Once the barrier to entry is taken care of, reducing the number of intermediaries in a transaction helps the WOBs to get a better margin of profit (UN Women, 2022).

GRPP can improve efficiency in public expenditure by contributing to achieving a more equitable distribution of economic resources through supply chain diversity (EIGE, 2021). Diverse suppliers of different sizes, capacities, and skills strengthen the supply chain against external shocks by ensuring a steady supply of goods and services, which are critical, at least for time-sensitive demands. Vazquez and Frankel (2017) highlight that while large vendors offer scalability, small or local vendors provide agility, a quality that can also apply to women- or minority-owned businesses, which bring unique insights, expertise, and strengths to enhance offerings.

GRPP facilitates women's economic advancement and competitiveness in public markets, hence reducing gender-based economic and financial disparities (Williams, 2024). To prevent gender-based prejudice, the procurement process should not utilize gender as a criterion for bid allocation normally. However, in the case of GRPP, positive discrimination is proposed, whereby non-WOBs are excluded from procurement opportunities solely designated for WOBs as only when the competitive landscape is made equitable, women-owned enterprises may effectively contend with male-owned firms (Chin, 2017). Also, while European primary and secondary regulations are rooted in the single market's non-discrimination principle among tenderers, they still allow freedom for the strategic incorporation of equality related factors and criteria in public procurement by member states (Sarter, 2020), hence the concept of GRPP is very much realistic.

GRPP approaches significantly impact assessment criteria and contract management, enhancing the competitiveness of WOBs, with pre-contract award interventions, such as streamlining evaluation criteria, having a greater impact than post-award measures (Oluka et al., 2020). Gender-responsive buying necessitates a gender-diverse supply

chain. Achieving this requires a gender-sensitive procurement action plan, which will vary among organizations and rely on acknowledging the severity of the issue and comprehending the potential interventions. Measures must be implemented at the national, procurement entity, and WOBs levels (ITC, 2020). GRPP initiatives must incorporate SMART – Specific, Measurable, Actionable, Realistic, and Time-bound – objectives to enhance the probability of enduring success and utilization across the organization, along with conducting a cost-benefit analysis (Chin, 2017). A precisely articulated definition and eligibility criteria are crucial, as they reduce the risk of tokenism and fraud, which can undermine the goals of inclusive and diverse sourcing (ibid). Also, increased utilization of information and communication technology (ICT), mainly via e-procurement, has the capacity to enhance WOBs' access to procurement by streamlining the associated processes and mitigating corruption. When setting thresholds, procurement agencies should also consider if lower thresholds allow more WOBs to compete in open procedures, where they tend to bid for smaller contracts more frequently; in comparison, higher thresholds may increase their chances of winning in closed tenders (restricting competition) if they are specifically invited to bid (ITC, 2020). Preliminary market consultations assess available products, services, and market capacity for gender-responsive outcomes while refining the contracting authority's objectives and informing operators about upcoming tenders (EIGE, 2022). It should be conducted fairly and transparently so that no party is disadvantaged.

Similarly, on the side of WOBs, ITC (2020, p.4) asserts that WOBs can also take steps such as proactively searching for tender opportunities, requesting a post-award debriefing in the event of non-selection, reaching out to more experienced tenderers to seek collaboration/sub-contracting opportunities, and not being afraid to seek assistance from procuring entities in order to understand the tender requirements better. Here, *subcontracting* refers to an economic relationship in which one entity (the main contractor) engages another independent entity (the subcontractor) to produce parts, components, and sub-assemblies or provide additional services essential for completing the end product (Nwokocha et al., 2019). This could be due to several factors, such as the sub-contractor having access to better technology, manpower and markets, cheaper production costs, efficient and timely delivery of items, risk diversification, etc.

Incorporating additional WOBs into public procurement processes may economically empower women and simultaneously benefit governments by fostering expanded and varied competition, resulting in superior outcomes (ITC, 2020). GRPP can contribute to

closing the gender gap, creating inclusive jobs, and boosting the economy's long-term competitiveness (EIGE, 2021). However, despite employing various strategies, governments encounter the inherent challenge because procurement is regulated by competitive and cost-efficient principles, which frequently restricts the potential for a gender-responsive approach (UN Women, 2022). Supporting women-owned enterprises incurs immediate expenses; nonetheless, the urgency of advancing gender equality and women's empowerment necessitates prompt action, notwithstanding the often-invisible benefits and the extended timeframe required to actualize them (ITC, 2020).

Despite the significance of gender-responsive procurement, its implementation remains suboptimal, and several nations have difficulties in fully integrating WOBs into public sector supply chains (Williams, 2024). The political will, commitment from public institutions, improved technical capabilities of public buyers, involvement of civil society in raising awareness towards gender equality and availability of sex-disaggregated data for impact assessment are necessary to enable GRPP (EIGE, 2021). It is also essential to put particular emphasis on an organization's procurement process together with its overarching organization broad sentiment and culture (UN Women, 2022) for enduring impact.

Reserved contracts/set asides could be a supportive strategy as they limit bidding to businesses meeting specific conditions such as if they are women-owned. In the USA, they use the Women-Owned Small Business (WOSB) Federal Contract Program, which was authorized in 1994; it aims to award 5% of federal contracting spend exclusively to WOSBs in industries in which these businesses are marginally present and economically disadvantaged through set-asides. However, it has only been successful twice until now in FY2015 and FY2019. To better target WOSBs and cater misrepresentation, since 2020, self-certification as WOSB is not possible (CRS Report, 2022).

In the EU, reserved contracts are not directly possible under EU law, however, Directive 2014/24/EU allows reservations for companies promoting the integration of disadvantaged workers, including underrepresented women in sectors with high gender imbalances, and for organizations with a public service mission in social, health, and education services indirectly benefitting women-owned or women-led businesses (EIGE, 2022). EIGE (2022) further elaborates that the 2014 EU procurement directive and the financial regulation (which regulates the procurement by EU institutions under the general budget of EU) support GRPP by allowing preliminary market consultations and

requiring compliance with environmental, social, and labor law obligations, as outlined in Article 166 of the Financial regulation and Article 18(2) of Directive 2014/24/EU. Additionally, both frameworks enable the consideration of social aspects, including gender equality, in award criteria, as permitted by Article 21 of Annex I of the Financial regulation and Article 67 of Directive 2014/24/EU. Furthermore, the EU's Gender Equality Strategy for 2020–2025 aims to achieve gender balance by following a dual approach of gender mainstreaming and targeted actions, with intersectionality as a guiding principle (EIGE, 2022).

Similarly, in India, 3% of the 25% of public procurement contracts reserved for micro and small enterprises are reserved for WOBs (Polat and Aydin, 2024). In Chile, the law was passed in 2015 for direct procurement from WOBs for procurement below a value of 600 USD, and Directive No. 20 recommends that public agencies incorporate gender perspectives in their buying activities. “ChileCompra”, the public entity created in 2003 under the Ministry of Finance, aimed at dealing with public purchases in Chile through one single electronic commerce platform, certifies WOBs with the “Sello Mujer” Seal, which identifies the company as at least 51% women-owned and controlled (ITC, 2020). While in the African sub-continent different countries have different approaches, for example, the Kenyan Public Procurement and Asset Disposal Law indicates reservations of 30 percent procurement value every year to youths, women and person with disability, however it defines a WOB as one with 70 percent ownership as well as led and controlled by majority women; in Tanzania, the 2016 amendment to the Procurement Act statute for a 30 percent allocation for particular groups, including women, youth, senior citizens, and those with disabilities for which WOBs are eligible provided they have at least 70 percent female membership and are entirely led by women; in Uganda, WOBs may engage in procurement under gender-based reservations, as well as the criteria of local content and social inclusion (Williams, 2024); in Dominican Republic, 15% of the government procurement must be allotted to SMEs of which a minimum 20% should be women-owned SMEs while in Senegal, 15% of public procurement contracts are reserved for businesses owned by women and youth (Polat and Aydin, 2024). Although numerous countries have implemented legal measures to enhance the allocation of public contracts to women, the limited scope of implementation of gender-responsive procurement impedes the full incorporation of women-owned enterprises into public sector supply chains, highlighting a missed opportunity (Williams, 2024).

Also, reservations and quotas may not be always necessary. Hoekman and Tas (2020) analyzed European procurement datasets, concluding that governments can boost SME participation in public procurement without explicitly favoring them by enhancing the overall quality of procurement processes. This approach could also benefit WOBs. Similarly, purchase of gender sensitive goods and services that will benefit minority genders as well as purchasing from gender-diverse businesses who employ a substantial number of women could be some alternative strategies for GRPP.

1.3.8 Hinderances to supporting WOBs in public procurement

Some of the factors as found and collected from several studies such as: Chin (2017); IFC (2018); Orser et al. (2021); EIGE (2021); UN Women (2022); Williams (2024); Rath, (2024) etc. are listed below:

- **Lack of accessible and well-supported WOB opportunities:** Public procurement often struggles to locate reliable WOBs in specific industries with demand, partly due to a lack of accessible communication channels and a deficiency of WOBs in those sectors. This creates barriers to entry and limits their participation.
- **Challenges in structuring bids and integrating wobs:** Public buyers frequently fail to break down large bid bundles into smaller lots suitable for smaller WOBs, which requires additional effort and time. Furthermore, the absence of mandatory requirements for incorporating WOBs as subcontractors means that primary suppliers are merely encouraged, rather than required, to include them.
- **Lack of knowledge, skills, and data on GRPP:** Public buyers often lack the awareness of how to cost-effectively integrate WOBs with a focus on value for money, as well as the technical skills needed to assess and implement GRPP effectively. This is compounded by a lack of gender-disaggregated data and statistics, which hampers monitoring and evaluation of WOB participation.
- **Insufficient legal framework and monitoring for GRPP:** The absence of mandatory GRPP stipulations in procurement legislation, coupled with inadequate monitoring and reporting on gender equality, results in a weak GRPP strategy. Without such requirements, there's little accountability for ensuring WOBs are integrated into public procurement.
- **Inadequate training on gender bias:** Public buyers often lack proper training on identifying gender inequality and unconscious bias. This can lead to

unintended prejudice against WOBs, further limiting their involvement in procurement processes.

1.3.9 GRPP's role in supporting WOBs' participation in public procurement

A variety of literary sources have been compiled, including Chin (2017), EIGE (2021), UN Women (2022), Williams (2024), Polat and Aydin (2024) to elucidate the following ways by which GRPP can assist WOBs:

- **Capacity-building and supplier development:** Capacity-building programs are vital for empowering WOBs in public procurement, providing supplier development through outreach, technical assistance, financial aid, and mentorship. Workshops and networking events like "meet the buyer" help WOBs connect with collaborators and explore opportunities. Collaboration with financial institutions and NGOs to offer tailored loans and support bridges the financial gaps, enabling better tender participation. Contracting authorities must also be prepared to implement GRPP through targeted training and assessment of current procurement practices, while predefined checklists ensure gender considerations are consistently applied (Polat and Aydin, 2024).
- **Simplifying procurement processes:** Standardizing tender procedures and simplifying documentation reduce the effort needed for each tender. Dividing complex tenders into smaller lots and using reservations allow WOBs to compete for contracts that would otherwise be out of reach, lowering entry barriers and fostering a more inclusive procurement environment for women-owned SMEs.
- **Fair and transparent evaluation methods:** The Most Economically Advantageous Tender (MEAT) approach prioritizes value over price, benefiting WOBs that provide unique insights and expertise. Clear and inclusive language in procurement documents, coupled with support services like hotlines, helps WOBs navigate procedural challenges. Implementing selection criteria that prioritize GRPP principles ensures that bids promoting gender equality are considered, while non-compliant bids are excluded.
- **Monitoring and feedback mechanisms:** These promote accountability and continuous improvement. Post-award feedback offers WOBs insights to enhance future participation, while prompt payment terms reduce financial strain, addressing a key barrier. Impartial third-party certifications can validate

contractor performance on gender equality goals, and regular monitoring and audits ensure compliance with GRPP standards.

- **Addressing structural and systemic barriers:** Legal frameworks and national policies, like gender equality action plans, can help eliminate obstacles for WOBs. Investments in public services to reduce women's unpaid care work will encourage more female economic participation. Additionally, e-procurement can ensure equal access to opportunities and reduce corruption risks, making public procurement more accessible for WOBs.

1.4 Key Definitions to Clarify Concepts Used in This Thesis

For ease of understanding, the table below summarizes the definitions of several key concepts used throughout this thesis.

Concept	Definition
Women-owned business (WOBs)	A business that is at least 51% owned, managed and controlled by one or more women.
Private/Company Procurement	Process by which private organizations purchase goods, services, or works to support their business operations, driven by the goal of maximizing value for the organization.
Public procurement	Purchases of goods, services or works by public sector organizations using public funds, driven by the goal of maximizing value for the society and citizens.
Socially responsible procurement	The practice of integrating social, ethical, and environmental considerations into the procurement process to ensure that purchasing decisions positively impact society, promote fair labor practices, support marginalized groups, and contribute to sustainable development.
Gender responsive public procurement	The integration of gender considerations into all stages of the procurement process—from planning and tendering to contract management and evaluation—to ensure that public spending contributes to gender equality and empowers women economically, socially, and politically.
Short Supply Chains (SSC)	Supply chain systems that reduce/remove non-value adding intermediaries to have a more direct relationship between buyer and seller.
Value for Money	The optimal balance of factors such as quality, price, and socio-economic-environmental impact, ensuring that the chosen product or service delivers the best possible outcome in terms of long-term benefits and overall value.

Supply chain diversity	The strategic inclusion of businesses from underrepresented groups, such as women-owned, minority-owned, or small and medium enterprises (SMEs), to create a more inclusive, resilient, and competitive supply chain ecosystem.
E-procurement	The use of internet and digital technologies, such as online platforms and software, to automate and streamline the procurement process.
Inter-governmental Organizations (IGOs)	Entities created by treaty or agreement between sovereign states or other international actors and funded by them, with the purpose of facilitating cooperation, addressing global issues, and achieving common goals through collective decision-making and action.

Table 2: Key Definitions

1.5 Research Framework

The concepts described in this thesis can be synthesized with the help of the diagram below for a better understanding of the role of GRPP in gender equality.

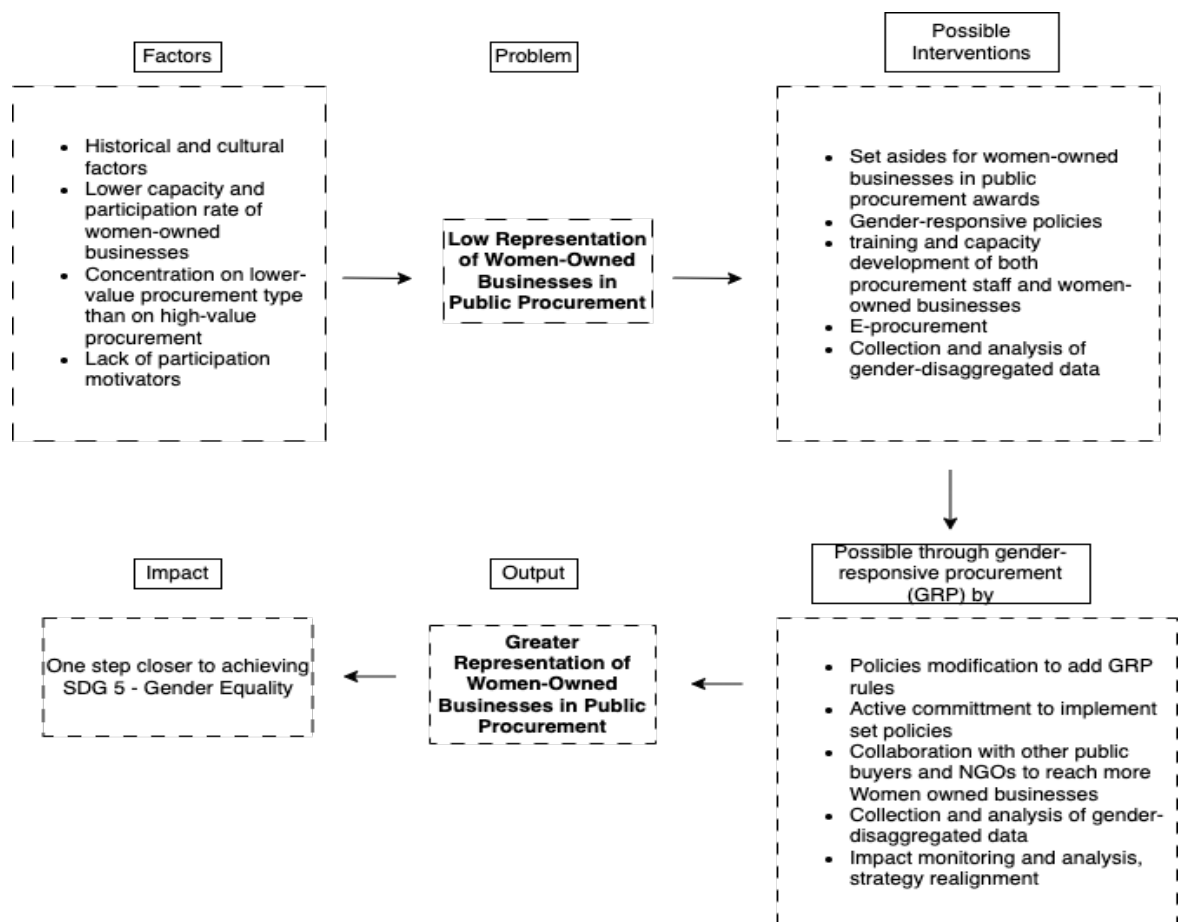


Fig 2: Concept Map (Author's Own Illustrations)

The concept map aka framework illustrates the key factors, challenges, interventions, and outcomes related to promoting gender equality through GRPP. It identifies low representation of women-owned businesses in public procurement as the central problem, stemming from historical and cultural barriers, low participation rates, and limited access to high-value procurement opportunities.

To address this, the diagram proposes possible interventions such as set-asides for women-owned businesses, gender-responsive policies, capacity-building, e-procurement, and gender-disaggregated data collection. These efforts, facilitated through GRP, require policy modifications, active commitment, stakeholder collaboration, and ongoing impact monitoring.

The expected output is a greater representation of women-owned businesses in public procurement, contributing to the broader impact of advancing SDG 5 – Gender Equality.

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2. Gender related issues in procurement – A Review of Current Themes and Future Research Directions

Abstract

This paper provides a comprehensive literature review of gender-related themes in procurement research, tracing their evolution over time. Analysis of 45 peer-reviewed articles focusing on both company and public procurement reveals the trends in publication focus, publishing frequency, top journals, key authors, keywords used, similarities between the public and the private sector, etc. Additionally, the paper highlights four major themes of existing gender-related issues addressed in the literature: the glass ceiling effect, team diversity, supplier diversity and skill sets. The study also suggests potential areas for future research in this field. Importantly, the article emphasizes the social significance of gender-related considerations in procurement research, particularly in light of the growing importance of socially responsible procurement for promoting sustainability objectives.

Keywords

Gender, Public Procurement, Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

Gender issues are increasingly gaining prominence on the public sector agenda, and companies are actively addressing these issues from a human resources perspective and in relation to their suppliers. It is essential to recognize that gender issues are not isolated but rather intricately connected with socially responsible procurement. In practice, these aspects seldom stand alone, and understanding the interplay between gender issues and socially responsible procurement is crucial for a comprehensive analysis of the topic. Therefore, this introduction will contextualize the study within the broader framework of gender-responsive procurement.

International organizations have emphasized the significance of considering gender issues within the broader context of sustainability goals. The World Bank, for example, has drawn attention to the profound impact of unequal treatment, limited opportunities for women in management roles, and the challenges faced by women-owned companies in securing contracts. These factors have significant implications for economic development and poverty eradication (World Bank, 2012).

Recognizing the intrinsic link between gender equality and sustainable development, in 2015, the United Nations established goal 5 in its set of 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) specifically aimed at achieving gender equality and empowering women and girls (United Nations, 2017). With nine targets and 14 indicators, this goal seeks to eliminate gender-based discrimination and ensure equal rights and opportunities for women and girls.

In line with these global efforts, the European Institute of Gender Equality (EIGE, 2021) advocates for a gender-responsive public procurement approach. This approach acknowledges that gender issues are not separate from social procurement but are intertwined with it. It calls for conscious efforts by buyers and suppliers to address and reduce gender inequality actively. Governments, too, are taking steps to address social and environmental problems in supplier management. Examples include the Modern Slavery Act of the UK and the German Supply Chain Due Diligence Act, which emphasize women's need for equal rights and opportunities.

Moreover, beyond its business objectives, procurement plays a critical role in supporting social objectives such as diversity and sustainability in the supply chain (Gelderman et al., 2017; Silva and Ruel, 2022). By recognizing that equal opportunity to work and fair pay are fundamental human rights, procurement can act as a catalyst for facilitating these rights among the suppliers and sub-suppliers (Kirton, 2013). Understanding the gender dynamics within procurement processes is key to achieving targeted outcomes and informed policy-making processes. By integrating gender issues into the broader social and environmental responsibility framework, we can advance sustainable development goals while promoting gender equality.

Although some previous studies attempted to summarize the policies and government actions to create a gender balance, none focused exclusively on the gender issues reviewed in the literature. The earliest attempt was made by McCrudden (2004), who tried to map the existing efforts undertaken by several countries to empower minority ethnicity as well as genders. Post and Byron (2015) limited the focus of their meta-analysis to the relationship between female board members and the financial performance of companies. Two gender-specific reviews were done by Medina-Arnaiz (2010), whose focus was only on Spanish procurement policies and by Sarter (2020), whose focus was on German public procurement facilitation. All these reviews were limited, either because of focus on a specific country or a specific aspect affecting gender issues.

With the current work, we aim to overcome this by compiling the findings of our study conducted to synthesize prior gender-centric research in the realms of purchasing and supply management for procurement activities to help direct further exploration of this topic, which could benefit both the public and the private sector. Comparing the practices of the corporate sector and public procurement is the subject of more research, as the two sectors can learn from each other (e.g., Hawkins et al., 2011; Vörösmarty and Tátrai, 2019). As there is a low number of studies on public procurement and company procurement individually, we decided to extend the literature analysis by including both. By acknowledging the interconnectedness between gender issues and socially responsible procurement, this study aims to comprehensively understand the topic and its implications for sustainable development goals.

The structure of the paper will be as follows: First, the search and data analysis methodology is described. In section 3, some basic statistics of the papers are analyzed. Section 4 summarizes the results of the keyword analysis and the theme model developed, summarizing the topics of identified papers and comparing private and public sector procurement. Section 5 describes the research results according to the four identified themes. Finally, results are summarized, and research gaps are highlighted.

2.2 Methodology

The literature review is an increasingly common analytical tool in business literature (Snyder, 2019). In order to ensure that the results reflect the actual results of scientific research as closely as possible, many studies also use methods that promote reproducibility and objectivity in procurement-related topics. Examples include the PRISMA method (e.g., used by Vejaratnam et al., 2020), Denyer and Transfield's (2009) approach (used by, e.g., Wetzstein et al., 2019) or Durach's (2017) method. These methods have in common that they seek to answer a predefined research question by selecting articles from well-known databases (usually Scopus and Web of Science in the business field) according to given criteria (e.g., keywords, year, language). The search commonly results in a broader literature, so an essential step in each method is to check and validate the relevance of the database results by experts.

2.3 Drafting Research Questions

This research aims to review the gender-related topics in procurement research to find out what issues have been addressed in the literature, how they have changed over the

period under study and what differences and similarities can be identified in research on the public procurement sphere and the business sector. Thus, the following research questions related to public procurement were formulated:

RQ1: What gender-related issues have been addressed in literature?

RQ2: How have they changed over time?

RQ3: What differences and similarities can be identified when comparing public-sector and private-sector procurement?

2.4 Determine the Characteristics Required for the Studies

The current efforts aim to analyze and synthesize research findings related to procurement, including procurement practitioners, their practices and their impact. For this reason, we selected articles from peer-reviewed publications in scientific journals for our database. The database therefore excludes, e.g., publications of public organizations or conference presentations.

2.4.1 Sample of potentially relevant literature

We started by searching the well-known Scopus and Web of Science (WoS) databases for articles published in scientific journals in English published from 2000 to the date of the search (30 July 2022). We searched for the phrases: “gender” or “woman” or “women” and “procurement” or “purchasing” or “sourcing” in the title, abstract and keywords of the documents. The search in the Scopus database without specifying the subject area resulted in 2948 papers. However, among the possible subject areas, only Business, Management and Accounting and Decision Sciences were relevant, resulting in 656 papers. When searching the WoS database, we limited the search to Management, Business and Public administration topics. This gave us 1076 results.

After screening the focus of the papers and their relation to gender issues in procurement as well as accounting for duplicates, we were able to form an initial shortlist of 50 papers for our review.

2.4.2 Identification of relevant literature and coding

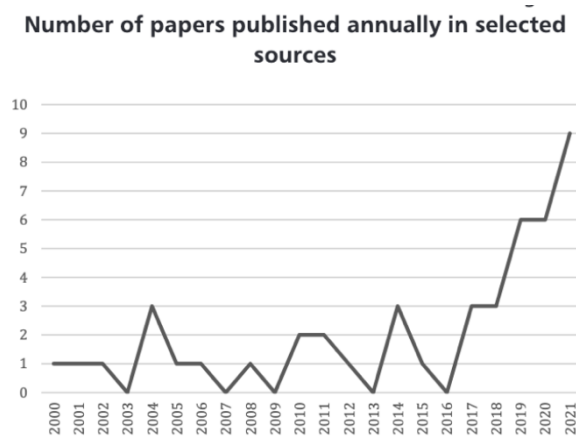
We first narrowed down the database by title and abstract. Most of the articles we excluded dealt with consumer buying-related topics. This was followed by the detailed

reading of the papers. Each was read and evaluated by two researchers. In some cases, to ensure inter-rater reliability, the article was re-read, and the three authors jointly decided to include an article in the database resulting in the final inclusion of 45 papers. The evaluation and coding of each paper followed this. Here again, the principle of double independent assessment and joint decision by the three evaluators in ambiguous cases was applied.

2.4.3 Descriptive analysis of the database

First, the most important demographic characteristics of the sample were analyzed.

There has been a mixed trend in the field, with a growing number of publications in the last decade (Figure 3). While merely one article was published in the year 2000, and no publication in the field was made for five years in between (Years 2003, 2007, 2009, 2013, and 2016), gradual interest in the field has developed with as many as nine articles published in the year 2021, totaling 45 articles between the year 2000 and 2021. This increased interest may be attributed to the growing willingness of organizations to incorporate gender issues in procurement to comply with government regulations and have a better brand image. (See Figure 3 for the yearly data.)



Source: own compilation

Fig 3: Number of papers published annually in selected sources

Most of the major journals dealing with issues of supply chain management and public procurement published several articles representing gender issues in procurement, but the Journal of Purchasing and Supply Management dominated the field by publishing five articles, the Journal of Supply Chain Management published four papers, and the five more journals published two papers each during this period. A further 25 journals

each published only one gender-related article. Table 2 contains the list of journals that had published at least two papers.

Top journals

Name of the journals	No. of papers
Journal of Purchasing and Supply Management	5
Journal of Supply Chain Management	4
International Journal of Gender and Entrepreneurship	2
International Journal of Procurement Management	2
Journal of Business Ethics	2
Journal of Public Procurement	2
Public Money & Management	2

Source: own compilation

Table 3: Top Journals

It is also worth highlighting the most influential authors. In all, 106 authors contributed to the 45 articles. The names of those who co-authored more than one article are listed in Table 3. Two authors (Barbara Orser and Allan R. Riding, who were co-authors) contributed to three articles. The majority of the authors (95 out of 106) appear as authors of only one article.

Top authors

Authors name	No. of papers
Orser, B.	3
Riding, A. L.	3
Aloysius, J. A.	2
Andre, J. M.	2
Husser, J.	2
Lespinet-Najib, V.	2
Newell, S. J.	2
Plank, R. E.	2
Reid, D. A.	2
Riding, A.	2
Sarter, E.K.	2
Wright, T.	2

Source: own compilation

Table 4: Top Authors

In terms of geographical distribution, 20 of the 45 papers are related to the Americas, including two from Canada and one on the comparison between the USA and Europe. A relatively high proportion of papers are in the European context (13 out of 45, including

one article from Russia). Seven papers are from Asia, and only three are from Africa (Zimbabwe, Senegal, and Uganda).

The most common mode of data collection was through surveys (n=23) in person, online, via mail, or telephone, while interviews also supplemented a few of the studies. One of the studies involved negotiation role-playing (Faes et al., 2010), and another used a case study research method (Bomani et al., 2021). 3 articles used existing secondary data sources (Wright and Conley, 2020; Strang, 2021; Ryu and Sueyoshi, 2021). We also included two review articles by McCrudden (2004) and Medina-Arnáiz (2010) to understand the field comprehensively.

2.4.4 Analysis of research topics

The content of the articles was analyzed in three ways. First, we analyzed the keywords of the articles and their changes over time. Then we identified the main topics and examined their frequency of occurrence and compared the results of research on public procurement and corporate procurement.

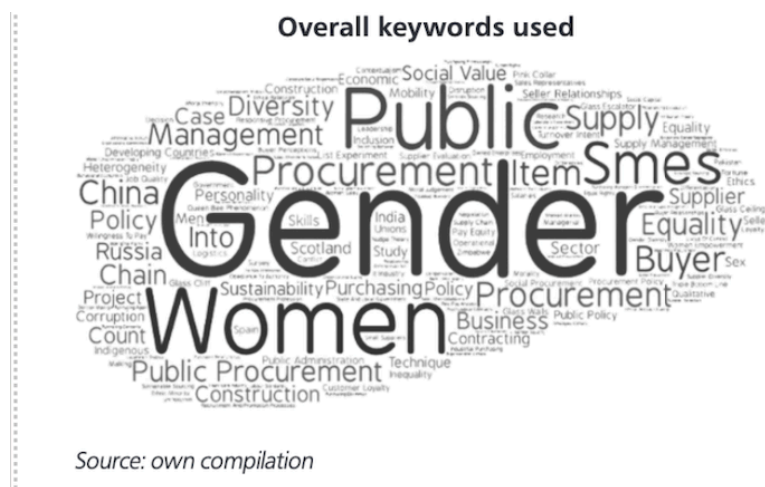


Fig 4: Overall Keywords Used

2.4.5 Analysis of the keywords

We analyzed the keywords since they highlight the most important topics of the articles. Gender, women, SMEs, and public procurement were the most frequently used keywords overall. Figure 2 indicates the most important words in a word cloud.

The use of keywords has also changed over time. Between 2000 and 2011, except for the above keywords, some commonly occurring keywords were ethics, purchasing, supply,

buyer, seller, decision-making, men and morality. After 2010, the common keywords gradually shifted to diversity, equality, and buyer-supplier relationship. This shows that the focus of research also changed during the period under review, while first, the focus was mainly on individuals' attributes, it moved to more general issues.

2.4.6 Analysis of the main topics

When analyzing the data, we coded our results according to four themes.

The first is the glass ceiling phenomenon, which suggests that women face more difficulties in thriving and advancing within an organization.

The second theme is team diversity; procurement personnel often work in diverse teams both within the company and while dealing with suppliers.

The third theme relates to skill sets; the different skills and personality traits of men and women.

The fourth theme relates to Supplier Diversity to see if the diversity of suppliers leads to better outcomes.

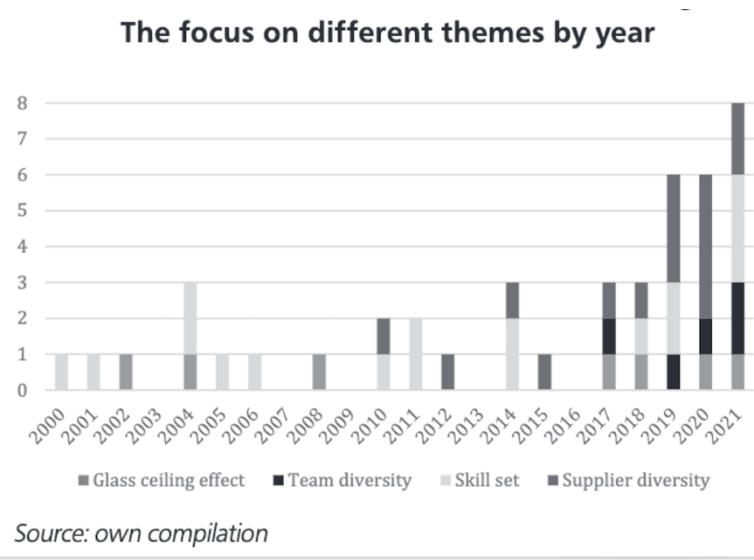


Fig 5: The focus of different themes by year

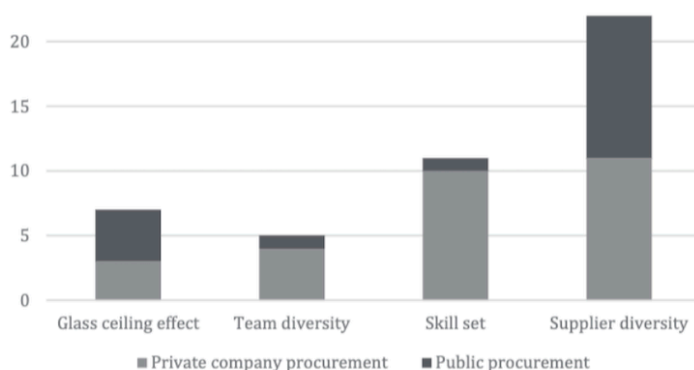
Figure 5 shows that the first theme (glass ceiling) and the theme of skill set are constantly present in the sample over the period. Team diversity and supplier diversity are relatively new topics in gender-related procurement research. The frequency shows a change in the research focus and the vocabulary over the last decades. While before 2010, the focus

was more on negotiations between sellers and buyers of different genders and somewhat on the glass ceiling, in recent years, there has been a slight increase in the number of publications, which tend to focus on the other identified focal points. Both public procurement and purchasing and supply management practices of companies were addressed.

2.4.7 Procurement in the public and the private sector

Public procurement and private sector procurement are often separated in research. However, in the case of research on gender, we felt it was important to compare the topics of the two research strands. From this analysis, we found that the articles clearly chose their sides, dealing with the private sector or public procurement. 18 articles discussed gender issues in public procurement, while 27 of them stuck to the purchasing practice of the private sector. Until 2019, company procurement was the more promising area of research as it had a greater number of issues and consistency in publishing (average of one article per year). An interesting observation was found for the year 2020 when all six articles published on this topic dealt with public procurement, while for 2021, one less article was published in public procurement than in private sector procurement. Overall, there were a growing number of publications in both areas.

The focus of themes by private sector procurement (CP) and public procurement (PP)



Source: own compilation

Fig 6: The focus of themes by CP and PP

Based on Figure 6 the substantial differences between the most researched themes in the private sector and public procurement should be noted. Studies analyzing the private companies' practice address all four focal issues identified, and the largest number of the

studies are clustered in the supplier diversity domain. For public procurement, the focus is also on supplier diversity to a large extent, along with the glass ceiling effect. The four themes are more evenly balanced in the research on private-sector procurement. However, the share of research on ‘skill set’ and ‘team diversity’ themes is significantly higher than for public procurement.

2.5 Overview of the Literature

As indicated earlier, the articles in our database are grouped around four themes. However, the research focus of each of these topics is very diverse and will be reviewed here.

2.5.1 Glass ceiling effect

Overall, the literature on the glass ceiling effect tried to bring to light the disadvantaged positions of women in society. A common theme in gender research is that women are disadvantaged in terms of promotion within an organization, with fewer women in management positions and the difference in pay. Similar research has been done in the area of procurement.

Lawrence et al. (2018) search for the reasons of lower representation of women among senior purchasing managers in the UK. The findings suggested that female advancement within procurement is affected by both generic organizational and procurement-specific impediments, including inadequate work design, male-dominated cultures, negative stereotypes, high levels of travel and an aggressive ethos that characterizes many procurement functions. McCue et al. (2017) also indicate that females still face the glass ceiling while climbing ladders in the public sector and men were more clustered in higher-level management roles of procurement. According to their paper, although men and women were comparable in terms of education, experience, and other qualities, men were still paid better, evidencing the presence of discrimination. Here a glass ceiling is defined as invisible obstacles that hinder feminine progress to top management levels even after being equally competitive as their male associates.

The wage gap is an essential indicator of discrimination. There are several research findings on this, with somewhat contradictory results. Ogden et al. (2002) found no significant influence of gender on compensation when they evaluated factors affecting Chief Purchasing Officers’ salaries. The results showed a difference, although not

significant; however, the percentage of males involved in the assessment was large compared to their female counterparts (indirectly indicating the glass ceiling effect). Larson and Morris (2008) found being a male purchasing and supply professional in Canada meant higher yearly compensation (apart from factors like education and experience). However, these differences were more profound at the middle management level, where women received, on average, \$12000 less than men. At the same time, their career progression also showed that it was difficult for women to reach higher positions.

Gender differences are also found in smaller firms. Oluka et al. (2020) surveyed female-owned businesses and found that they were primarily small and medium-sized, and very often, they were disadvantaged, *inter alia*, due to lack of funds, landing them in disadvantaged positions also as suppliers. Increasingly women-centric, socially responsive procurement policies would help these female entrepreneurs to develop their business performance.

Not only as employees but also as entrepreneurs, women feel discriminated against. Identifying the barriers for small firms to capital access for fulfilling public procurement performance obligations, Rasheed (2004) found that female-owned enterprises had higher perceptions of barriers to accessing financial resources resulting in lower market share. One of the reasons cited for this was unfavorable lending terms of capital lenders towards female owners. They emphasize more remedial support by the procurement agencies to deal with financing issues.

Even after governments acknowledge the need to boost women-owned enterprises and draft favorable policies to include them better in procurement activities, women entrepreneurs still face unprecedented hurdles. Bomani and Derera (2021) conducted in-depth interviews with female business owners to understand they faced hassles like lack of expertise and adequate knowledge, awareness of opportunities and shortage of funds and equipment to fulfil big orders while contracting with the public authorities. Their study shows a positive ray of hope as female entrepreneurs partner with male business owners and even bid for the contract as a group to exploit synergies. However, more provision of training and funding should be looked into by the public sector.

To summarize the results, we can see that women's unequal position is reflected in their advancement within organizations. Also, they have a harder time as entrepreneurs, as many of the conditions and opportunities they need to succeed as suppliers in the market

are less available to them. While the studies within organizations are mainly related to developed countries, studying the difficulties of becoming a supplier is more of a research topic in the context of public procurement.

2.5.2 Team diversity

Team diversity in the context of this review is the dispute between heterogeneity vs homogeneity through representativeness of all genders in business actions in an attempt to draw a positive image of the company while achieving economic, environmental, and social objectives. Broadly, it is about the consequences of ending workforce discrimination and facilitating inclusivity.

Swift and Gruben (2000) attempted to show how different genders vary in decision-making in the USA and realized that women purchasers attached greater importance to several relational attributes like support offered and dependability of vendors than men when selecting suppliers. These attributes can be considered useful when handling critical or complex items purchases. Complementing this, Park and Krishnan (2005) found even with individuals in the same organizational hierarchy, their gender influenced supplier selection behavior: while male managers focused on profitability and capacities of suppliers, female managers were more emotionally involved in decision-making and considered the dependability and trustworthiness of suppliers along with their financial performance. These findings support increasing team diversity by including both genders in decision-making. Messner's (2017) study of IT employees in India found that overall, women were more committed to their work organization than men leading to less switching/retention cost for their companies and higher motivation.

The results of Jermisittiparsert and Srihirun (2019) implied that gender had an impact on the management of the supply chain, and it also moderated its relationship with leadership. Ruel and Fritz (2021) also add to the discussion of gender diversity by focusing on dissimilarity in consideration of sustainability aspects by purchasing managers of different genders because of their variation in softer skills like empathy, listening skills, social aspects, well-being, and attention to risk considerations when adamantly following policies. However, they found no impact of diversity on the environmental aspects of sustainability issues in either cluster. One of the key contributors to the unequal representation of women in all supply chain management

levels was variance in education. Group diversity is encouraged as it has a positive impact on organizational communication and social affiliation.

To foster diversity, Benjamin (2020) focused on how employee union representatives can be used as a medium to voice gender equality concerns, among other issues, when formulating public procurement contracts leading to more diversity-oriented policies, directly benefitting marginalized groups, such as women's career progression. Strang (2021) revealed experience, quality and certifications available were some of the determiners of the successful completion of upscale public procurement projects. However, gender, along with age, education etc., of the project manager had no significant impact, indirectly pointing towards no added value by virtue of the sex of the manager. We keep in mind that the author points out that the sample was significantly male dominated which could have influenced the results, and this also directs us to the understanding that women are underrepresented as project managers.

To summarize the results, the research suggests that differences are also reflected in decision-making in many respects. Although a wide variety of perspectives are explored in the above studies, it is agreed that gender diversity in teams has an impact on the outcome of teamwork.

2.5.3 Skill sets

The research conducted in this sub-category focused primarily on examining whether skills like communication/negotiation abilities are gender dependent. Since these skills are key to successful business operation and profitability for both purchasing and sales professionals, knowing their association could be useful. Furthermore, studies tried to understand whether individual attributes and characteristics impact the relationship between buyers and sellers. Knowing whether gender has an influence can be helpful for both private and public procurers while making team selections.

One of the early studies in Asia was done by Sojka et al. (2001) in Pakistan, aiming to understand the influence of the perception of different genders of buyers on sales representatives in a variety of industries. The research found that gender-related norms for career choices were still prevalent, but there was no preference for a salesperson of the same gender as the purchaser, although differences in characteristic perceptions were found. For example, all the buyer groups considered the willingness to take risks, while assertiveness was higher among men; at the same time, women were held to be more

sincere, understanding and good listeners. Similarly, Plank et al. (2006) found organizational purchasers perceived women to be less active in aggravating conflicts in a buyer-seller relationship compared to men as they had a less confrontational leadership style, adding further to the debate of why women should be included in the buying-selling team.

Ma et al. (2021) suggest employing women in supply chain collaboration is advantageous as they perform better in collaboration exercises on both the retailer and the supplier side. Using multiple gender pairings, the authors demonstrated that women were more collaborative as buyers and sellers, and male and female agents worked better in teams with other women. In terms of ethicality, Husser et al. (2014) probed into the decision-making process of French purchasing professionals and students when confronted with ethical and non-ethical choices to find whether gender orientation had a bearing on ethicality. Among experienced buyers, women excelled on ethicality, while women were generally more ethical than men, which directly affects purchasing-selling decisions. Rottig et al. (2011) also investigated ethical issues and had to control gender as a variable impacting ethical decision-making during their study among university students because of mixed results of its influence in preceding literature.

McCrudden (2004) performed a cross-continent collection of historical developments to shed light on how social outcomes were promoted by different countries like the USA, South Africa, Ireland, etc. Using procurement as an enforcement tool to promote gender-compliant anti-discrimination policies. He illustrates that even if male workers were initially the primary beneficiaries, the use of procurement to attain goals like equal pay and good working conditions, creating employment, awarding contracts, etc., has also benefitted other minorities. Trade union activity has played a particularly important role in raising wages and job benefits for women (and other marginalized populations) to respectable levels.

An interesting outcome resulted when Newell et al. (2019) administered a survey to Chinese business professionals undertaking MBA classes with involvement in purchasing activities for their organizations to scrutinize whether the gender of the buyer-seller impacted the business. One of the highlights of their findings was the *Queen-Bee phenomenon* experienced where the feminine gender had a bias towards their fellow female buyers for aspects like trust perceptions and valued more favorably organizations with male representatives. However, results showed female buyers were significantly

loyal to their organizations. But for the men, this bias was absent altogether while evaluating variables like trust and expertise. On the other hand, Ho and Lin's (2014) study of Chinese purchasing professionals reported no gender differences in terms of moral judgment while purchasing when organizational rules and ethics guided decision-making.

Contrary to the sales literature on gender, Pullins et al. (2004) found no contrast between buyers' attitudes to trust, reliability, customer orientation and conduct based on the diverse gender of salespeople. However, women were generally assumed to be associating themselves with more established companies and were more reliable. Also, the healthcare sector has become increasingly competitive, making strategic alliances the need of the hour. However, Oumlil and Williams (2011) showed that the gender of the purchasing official had no hold on the degree of success of the partnerships formed. This emphasizes that men have no more significant contribution to an alliance's success, so perhaps other genders should be equally participating in such decisions. Ryu and Sueyoshi (2021) analyzed the awardees of research grants for small business innovation by the U.S. Department of Defense and found that, if women-owned businesses succeeded at networking and were given preferential treatment, they could accelerate their performance and outperform their counterparts in the public procurement market.

In terms of decision-making, women were found to be more inclined towards ethical considerations. Husser et al. (2019) reported women buyers fared better than men in recognizing ethical issues and behaving ethically. Complementing this, Croom et al. (2021) compared the personality traits of men and women in the U.K. as they seemingly affected buyer-supplier relations among procurement actors and found that men displayed slightly higher levels of corporate psychopathy, which made them more prone to being self-centered and unethical.

While Detkova et al. (2021) identified differences in insights on corruption among male and female government officials in Russia, where the women were more aware of its harmful effects on procurement, suggesting their higher probability to support anti-corruption practices while the men were unaffected. They also demonstrated that women were less likely to have high positions despite having almost similar expertise. Also, Faes et al. (2010) did a long time-series analysis of data collected over 18 years during negotiation role-plays in buyer-oriented purchasing training sessions to conclude differences in negotiation characteristics of buying professionals. They found that, in a

competitive environment, men were more ambitious in setting targets, while women set more achievable goals and tended to exceed their expectations comparatively. However, women often reach more no deals than men as they tend to use less tactical communication.

To understand factors impacting employment retention, Ali et al. (2018) did an online survey in the USA to identify the underlying characteristics that provoked procurement officers to switch employment. They found if only the gender of a person was considered, men and women were equally likely to leave their jobs, but individually men were more likely to switch if their salaries contributed a small percentage of total household income and for better managerial positions while age, willingness to move, education, etc. motivated women more. The authors concluded that if sufficient growth opportunities are given, women are more loyal to the organization they belong to.

To summarize the results, the picture that the research paints of gender differences is highly complex.

2.5.4 Supplier diversity

Procurement and selling directly influence the economy by creating wealth and supporting social aims like a holistic growth of the population. Hence, in this sub-category, we tried to integrate research that focused on supporting gender diversity via procurement. Public procurement is also a public policy tool to promote social welfare. Thus, support for disadvantaged suppliers is a priority, reflected in the research we have identified.

Medina-Arnaiz (2010) studied the case of Spain to showcase the provisions of the law on public sector contracts which included social clauses on gender equality. Through Act 3 of 2007 (Organic law), Spain desired to promote gender mainstreaming and equality by compelling public authorities to adopt corrective measures benefitting women in all activities, favoring social objectives over financial benefits. She also elaborated on various EU directives that clearly defined what social aspects meant and associated ways to promote inclusion which helped countries to further refine their policies with the possibility to incorporate a gender perspective in the contract award phase.

Similarly, Sarter (2020) did a review of policies in Germany and found trends of equality considerations in public procurement and concluded that policies needed to be

transformed into laws if some concrete response was to be seen as a voluntary adaptation of policies failed to promote greater inclusion, hampering women's opportunity to fit-in in a male-dominated workforce.

Maertens and Swinnen (2012) administered one of the few studies on gender issues in the supply chain in Africa and claimed a direct link between gender equality and supply chain growth, helping to understand how unequal representation issues could be tackled at the supplier level in agrifood logistics. Through their extensive first-hand data collection, the authors describe women's disadvantaged position in gaining contracts for high-value outputs from food industries due to their limited access to resources like land, water, labor and machinery, forcing them to work as daily wage earners rather than owners. Even among laborers, there existed differences, although reduced, in terms of wages paid to men and women. Women were disadvantaged in their employment contract terms and penalized for being less educated, resulting in not being able to get permanent positions leading to occupational segregation.

Wu and Sirgy (2004) conducted a US-based industry-wide study of the attitude of purchasing managers towards suppliers; their findings, although inconclusive, revealed a pattern of gender discrimination where purchasing managers denoted more willingness to purchase from an unknown male-owned supply firm than from an unknown female-owned firm, even when the quality of their products was similar, highlighting the unconscious bias. Thus, they focused on networking for female-owned businesses to improve their chances of getting orders.

Buyer-supplier relations are critical for any successful procuring organization and frequent supplier switching can be costly if done without any explicit reason. However, Mir et al. (2016) found there was no impact of gender on the supplier switching decision of buyers suggesting that women as buyers would lead to no extra cost to the company due to supplier switching. Blount and Li (2021) analyzed survey data of buyers in the U.S. and the U.K. to determine factors influencing procurement decisions. They realized that women tended to have a more optimistic attitude toward supplier diversity, helping to support the social and relational aims via procurement. Furthermore, they found male buyers were anticipated to elevate the buying costs by being stringent with the fulfilment of their procurement metrics.

Women are disadvantaged not only as employees but also as entrepreneurs. Orser et al. (2021)'s study of SME suppliers to the Canadian government revealed that, in many sectors, WOBs were not sufficiently represented due to hindrances like the complexity of the contracting process itself, limited fulfilment capability and experience as well as lack of awareness of the available opportunities. A surprising revelation of the study was that mostly women-owned SME supplier organizations were highly underrepresented in sectors where women-owned firms had the highest concentration. The authors suggested measures like training to women business owners and more clarity on the government's reservation rules.

Although socially conscious policies were drafted to make procurement a driver of change looking beyond profit objectives, only a few studies voiced the opinion of subcontractors who employ the highest percentage of people in the construction sector. Loosemore et al. (2019) study of Australia's construction field is an exception to this where they tried to understand why subcontractors are not very enthusiastic about such policies. The results suggested that if there is no government support and adequate training and education deployment for disadvantaged groups like women, employing them is seen as an expense rather than a positive impact on the organization. Hence, compulsory measures should be taken to ensure more participation rather than relying on the voluntary initiative of suppliers.

To show the constructive impact of gender inclusion policies, Wright (2015) dug into the construction sector of the UK to see if public procurement could be used to mitigate gender issues in a seemingly masculine world and presented the case of Women into Construction Project, which was initiated in 2008 for the development of London Olympic Park. He discusses the capacity of procurement to compel stakeholders to consider social aims like improving women's participation in the construction sector, reducing the gender pay gap, and employing under-represented groups.

Wright and Conley (2020) also refer to the Women into Construction Project of the UK to emphasize the numerous skill enhancement actions taken to improve the supply of female laborers in construction while efforts were also undertaken to provide placements to them once the project ended. Through semi-structured interviews, the authors documented the positive impact of such actions on female career development as well as on the contracting company's reputation. Likewise, Sarter and Thomson (2020) acknowledge the relevance of procurement practices to encourage gender balance in

organizations. However, providing incentives is not enough for participating companies as the majority of the companies surveyed did not adopt the policies in response to procurement guidelines. The authors raised concerns about the power of public procurement itself to foster equality in partner organizations and suggested supplementing it with other actions to enhance equality measures undertaken; however, the benefits of enforcing equality considerations are still found to be positive.

It has been voiced by women's advocate agencies that various certifications of women-owned businesses might improve their chances of winning contracts as the buyers become more aware of the supplier's status. But Orser et al. (2019) found contrary results and concluded that such certifications did not help motivate women-owned businesses to bid more or their chances of getting the bid accepted. Essentially, there was no advantage against male-owned businesses because of the certification.

Atal et al. (2019) emphasize the onus on the IT industry to support the gender diversity of supplier firms by developing a 7-step sourcing process to strategically evaluate the suppliers and give them an edge based on their higher gender diversity. Asking questions related to women participation in the workplace at several stages of sourcing may nudge the suppliers to improve their women-employee ratio.

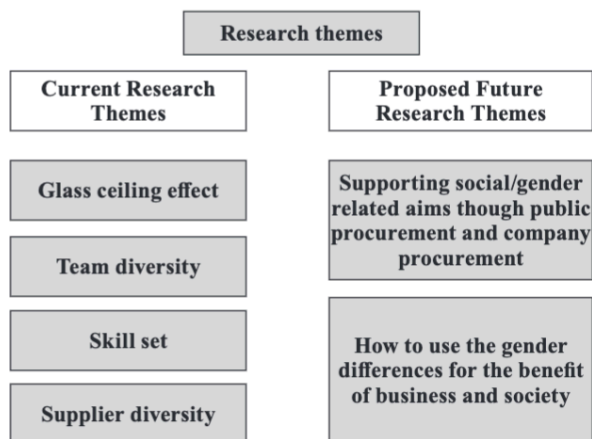
Finally, sustainability is gaining prominence and is an important consideration for all stakeholders in society today. Purchasing managers need to evaluate the actions of their suppliers as it can also have an impact on the buying company. So, Goebel et al. (2018) checked if, among other factors the gender of purchasing managers impacted their willingness to pay more for certified sustainable and environmentally viable options, sustainability as a factor had positive appeal for both male and female purchasers.

2.6 Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to review the existing studies conducted in the field of procurement relating to gender issues. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first such attempt. The paper focused on performing a comprehensive study to identify the current trends and suggest future research paths that upcoming studies can explore. These are summarized in Figure 7.

Figure 5

**Framework of current and future themes on
procurement research addressing gender equality**



Source: own compilation

Fig 7: Framework of current and future themes

Our analysis highlights that gender is an emerging issue in procurement research, and the existing research can be categorized into four themes. Studies on the glass ceiling effect showed gender-specific disadvantages to advance within organizations and procurement-specific impediments. These include inadequate work design, male-dominated cultures, negative stereotypes, high levels of travel, and an aggressive ethos within procurement functions. The glass ceiling effect persists, as men tend to be clustered in higher-level management roles while women struggle to reach higher positions. Furthermore, women entrepreneurs, particularly in smaller firms, face challenges in accessing funds and resources, limiting their market share and performance. Discrimination in lending terms and lack of expertise, knowledge, and awareness of opportunities further hinder women's success as suppliers. Collaborative efforts and supportive policies are required to address these barriers and promote gender equality in procurement activities.

Similarly, the studies on team diversity highlight the influence of gender diversity on decision-making processes, including the increasingly important sustainability and ethical aspects of supplier relationship management. The studies emphasize the need for diversity-oriented policies to support the career progression of all employees, man or woman, and promote inclusive practices that support socially responsible procurement.

While for the studies focusing on skill sets, there are mixed views on the gender-based advantages for procurement, however, several studies showcase the gender differences in decision-making, such as communication and negotiation abilities, in purchasing and

sales professionals. The research indicates that gender can impact perceptions, preferences, ethical considerations, and negotiation characteristics in buyer-seller relationships. Overall, the inclusion of both genders in procurement teams is seen as beneficial, as women perform better in supply chain collaboration exercises and demonstrate higher ethicality. The presence of diverse genders in teams can lead to improved outcomes and a broader range of perspectives.

Finally, the literature focusing on supplier diversity and gender emphasizes how the challenges such as limited access to resources, wage discrepancies, occupational segregation, and complexity of the contracting process hinder women's participation in procurement activities and their representation. Measures like training, clarity on rules, and government support are suggested to address these challenges. Furthermore, cases such as the Women into Construction Project in the UK demonstrated how public procurement could mitigate gender disparities, reduce the gender pay gap, and provide employment opportunities.

Based on our analysis, one of the emerging themes is the promotion of social objectives by promoting supplier diversity, of which gender equality is a critical component, although the theme needs to be explored more by future research. In their approach, many of these papers address not just understanding the nature of inequalities but to gain insight into how to address problematic areas.

This review also revealed that the literature fails to address an additional topic: how procurement as a policy tool can support social/gender-related aims. In this respect, procurement naturally deals with the contracting partners, i.e., the suppliers. However, internal processes and opportunities for internal efficiency gains could also be the subject of research, of which gender is a natural subject. This is particularly true for public procurement, as public procurement research typically focuses on legal and efficiency issues rather than on the human factor or organizational aspects. Also, limited research focused on how companies are addressing these issues. They also have policy tools for internal management (e.g., glass ceiling) and suppliers (e.g., supplier codes of conduct). It could be of importance to see a full picture of these tools and their effectiveness in both sectors. Future research could also be advantageous to show how to use these differences in personality and skills for the advantage of business and society.

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3. Short Supply Chains: Frameworks and Extensions to Public Procurement

Abstract

Recently, policymakers' interest in short supply chains (SSCs), i.e., removing the non-value-adding intermediaries in the supply chain, has increased as these are seen as a means of supporting employment and sustainability goals. This article aims to elaborate on the understanding of SSCs, identify what motivates participants to get involved, examine their replicability in different sectors of the economy other than the food sector and how they can be fostered through public procurement. Policymakers' objectives with public procurement align with those associated with SSCs; therefore, transferability may be possible in the context of public procurement, in addition to sustainability, and access to opportunities for SMEs. Semi-structured exploratory interviews were conducted with SSC stakeholders to examine this and conclude that SSCs can be a valuable means of conducting socially responsible public procurement, with mixed views about their ability to foster gender equality. A case study is also presented with the key message that the application of SSC should consider suppliers' capabilities in addition to the mandatory application of SSC in the tendering process. Achieving positive results will require a shift in traditional procurement logic towards more flexible forms of co-opetition.

Keywords

Public Procurement, Short Supply Chain, Socially Responsible Procurement, Gender Equality, Sustainable Supply Chains

3.1 Introduction

Understanding supply chains and their governance structures attracted substantial scientific attention during the last decades. Three theoretical approaches are considered to be dominant in these studies (Ketokivi and Mahoney, 2020) – 1) Research-based on competency and resource-based theories focuses on the most capable actor performing the production activity 2) Inter-organizational power and resource dependence approaches seek to answer who controls the supply chain 3) Transaction cost theory focuses on efficiency. These models help to understand how supply chains, which are becoming increasingly complex with globalization, can exploit business benefits while providing cost advantages to the large firms involved. In addition to these theories, the ideas of Smith and Ricardo are an essential theoretical basis for understanding the

importance of world trade (Samuelson and Nordhaus, 2009). However, since the 2000s, a growing body of literature has drawn attention to the need to take social considerations in addition to business considerations and direct customer requirements (e.g. appropriate quality, innovation, etc.). The challenges of the past years (trade closures during COVID-19, problems of trade routes such as the Suez Canal, or conflicts due to war impacted transport and logistics) raise the need to rethink globalized supply chains in different ways. These have only intensified the research on back shoring and nearshoring, pointing to their potential economic, social and environmental benefits and preconditions (Stentoft et al., 2016, Ancarani et al., 2022, Pedroletti and Ciabuschi, 2023, Casadei and Iammarino, 2023). The issue of short supply chains (SSCs) is linked to these research activities. The crises of the last few years, especially COVID-19 (Sawyerr and Harrison, 2023; Thilmany et al., 2021), have brought thinking about SSCs to the fore. The focus on SSC is primarily linked to the social benefits of local, disadvantaged or even small businesses and the environmental benefits and run counter to the principles of global and efficient complex supply chains.

In research, the concept of the SSC is closely linked to the agricultural sector (Paciarotti and Torregiani, 2021). Like many other areas, food production has become globalized, but there are several benefits to focusing on local producers, both environmentally and socially. Similarly, such objectives also exist outside the agricultural sector. Therefore, a query may arise regarding where this SSC model can be applied. Public procurement could be a possibility, as when public money is spent, it focuses on fulfilling needs and its additional social and environmental impact. Public procurement can support various social objectives, including promoting direct access to SMEs as bidders (reducing their involvement as subcontractors) and favoring women-owned businesses (WOB) as core bidders and sub-contractors. It is, therefore, essential to understand the interpretations of SSCs in public procurement and the benefits and complexities of prioritizing WOBs therein.

The business case for preferring SSCs to traditional, multi-actor long supply chains is increasingly recognized among public and private buyers (Bayir et al., 2022). Proponents of SSCs credit them with producing benefits in all areas of sustainability: economic, social, and environmental, while also being better able to track and control supply chains. Short supply chains typically reduce the number of actors in a transaction, thereby helping establish direct relationships between buyers and sellers whereby both parties interact and exchange knowledge, establishing social relations (Kiss et al., 2019).

Reducing the number of intermediaries is associated with an immediate pay-off for producers as it leads to more significant profits, while for buyers, quality can be more easily guaranteed because the chain is traceable (Malak-Rawlikowska et al., 2019). When buying food from SSCs, consumers pay particular attention to different aspects such as product quality, direct contact with the producer, health and nutritional value, price-to-quality ratio, confidence in product origin, and impact on the local economy (Solarz et al., 2023). The environmental impact of any economic activity can also be reduced by minimizing waste, emissions, and pollution if planned and executed thoughtfully.

Furthermore, the resilience of SSCs to externalities, such as supply chain shocks from border closures, war, or other interruptions, makes them an ideal solution for building independent economies and reducing dependence. SSCs are also associated with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (Goal 12: Responsible Production and Consumption) (UN, 2030). With the recent coronavirus pandemic disrupting global value chains, shorter supply chains have been preferred to increase supply reliability and robustness through localization and the diversification of suppliers, especially in sectors of strategic significance (Gopalakrishnan et al., 2021).

This paper aims to develop a comprehensive understanding of the SSC approach and highlight its advantages and drawbacks. Our research questions focus on the characteristics and application of SSC on the one hand and its interpretation in public procurement on the other. We focus on the achievability of public policy objectives in procurement through SSC. Additionally, although most of the identified examples are connected to the food sector, this research investigates the transferability of the SSC model to other industries. It highlights SSCs in the public procurement context.

Following the introduction, we first summarize the results of the relevant literature review. After presenting the research questions and methodology, the findings of the interviews are described.

3.2 Literature Review

In this literature review, SSC's approaches to and advantages will first be outlined and then linked to public procurement. Finally, from a social point of view, the relationship between women-owned businesses and public procurement is described, considering the emergence of SSCs in specific sectors.

3.2.1 Short supply chains and their advantages

Even though the concept of short supply chains has been widely studied, no single definition has emerged (Paciarotti and Torregiani, 2021). Although public governance is also increasingly paying attention to SSCs, EU Member States and other institutions still need to adopt a uniform definition (Markuszevska et al., 2012).

The legal definition employed in the European Union is provided by Art. 2.1(m) of Regulation EU No. 1305/2013, which defines a SSC as a buyer-intermediary-seller (producer-processor-consumer) relationship of limited actors within geographical and social proximity characterized by collaboration and local economic development. It needs to concretely define how many actors could be considered limited or what distance is social proximity. According to most authors (Bazzani and Canavari, 2013; Malak-Rawlikowska et al., 2019; Kiss et al., 2019), the primary characteristics of an SSC are the distance involved and the number of intermediaries.

The relationships between stakeholders and the nature of communication are essential starting points for research on SSCs. The frequent, often informal, exchange of information between parties is noted in several studies and has thus become part of the understanding of SSCs. Marsden et al. (2000) emphasized the importance of information-sharing between buyer and producer in the supply chain concerning the number of times a product changes hands and the distance a product travels, defining SSCs based on relationship-building and value creation. Elghannam et al. (2017) highlighted that social networks (online or offline) could contribute to developing SSCs, while Kawecka and Gębarowski (2015) emphasized transparency. SSCs typically minimize the number of links and distance that goods travel without quantifying these parameters (Peters, 2012). By emphasizing direct relations and frequent communication, SSCs develop resiliency (Michel-Villarreal et al., 2021), strengthening the sense of community. SSCs may also help revive local traditions that could be lost due to unfamiliarity and weaker demand outside the territory owing to the generosity of choice associated with longer supply chains.

SSCs are usually associated with local production and sales (Jarzębowski et al., 2020; Pató et al., 2020; Canfora, 2016; Argyropoulou et al., 2019; Gopalakrishnan et al., 2021) since the critical characteristic of locally produced goods is that they are produced and sold close to one another and reach consumers directly or through a single intermediary.

Presently, SSCs are primarily identified in the food and catering sector, leading to the sub-category "short food supply chain" (SFSC). Almost 15% of farms in the EU sell more than 50% of their produce directly to consumers (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2016). The two abbreviations, SSC and SFSC, are often used interchangeably or discussed as interrelated terms (e.g., Thomé et al., 2021; Paciarotti, Torregiani, 2021). Its primary motive is to ensure better quality and fresher food which is more wholesome and traceable (Sellitto et al., 2018; Kirwan, 2004) while providing a fair return to the producers (Jarzębowski et al., 2020; Moore et al., 2022). Local-level economic growth is an outcome of SSCs as local businesses are supported, and jobs may be created (Kneafsey et al., 2013; Falguieres et al., 2015). SFSCs help farmers by providing them with fair earnings and promoting sustainability by reducing food waste and miles; they are also instrumental in promoting social inclusion (Jarzębowski et al., 2020) and ensuring quality. Thomé et al. (2021) see sustainability as a driver of short supply chains. However, there are doubts about whether SFSCs are environmentally preferable due to their significant variability in terms of environmental performance (Loiseau et al., 2020).

Due to the reduction in the number of intermediaries, the smaller quantity of products sold, greater acceptance of non-standardized products, and fewer packaging and refrigeration requirements, SSCs can contribute to sustainability by reducing waste (Kiss et al., 2019) and environmental footprints (Wertheim-Heck et al., 2018) by minimizing transportation costs and CO₂ emissions while supporting biodiversity (Canfora, 2016). It is also environmentally advantageous since it uses less packaging to preserve food (Beitzen-Heineke et al., 2017). SSCs may also help implement circular agendas such as local waste management by reducing transportation costs and motivating users to separate waste (Berruti and Palestino, 2017), benefiting local inhabitants and stakeholders through greater reuse and recycling (Rigillo et al., 2020).

Giampietri et al. (2016) found that sustainability, convenience, typicality, and personal satisfaction were the key sources of motivation for buying from local SFSCs, even at a higher price. Researchers agree that concerns about the quality and freshness of purchases and a sense of reliability are primary sources of motivation for consumers of SSCs (Sage, 2003; Migliore et al., 2015): those who buy from short supply chains typically believe that the products are fresher and of higher quality if purchased first-hand (Bakos, 2017; Watts et al., 2005). In addition, maintaining and communicating product authenticity is easier when the supply chain is shorter, as consumers often play a proactive role in establishing and supporting SSCs in their localities (Markuszcwska,

2012). SSCs also help generate employment, reducing urban migration among young people (Falguieres et al., 2015).

However, the seasonality of goods and limited local demand (Kiss et al., 2019) can hinder the stable flow of income for producers. The associated lack of availability of products may reduce consumers' commitment to SSCs. Price may influence purchasing decisions, as consumers are still price-sensitive (Berg and Preston, 2017). For businesses such as hotels, for which the quality of products and delivery time are critical, SSCs may be preferred; however, the high prices of related products and the availability of appropriate quantities of products as needed are still a hindrance (Argyropoulou et al., 2019). The smaller margins, high prices, and steep learning curves associated with SFSCs make them viable on a small scale, but growing and mainstreaming them have proven challenging as they may be outcompeted by conventional supply chains, which are typically more cost and resource-efficient; hence, SFSCs are usually idiosyncratic success stories and are unlikely to completely replace longer food supply chains (Moore et al., 2022).

Also, definitions of short supply chains vary, with the public procurement approach highlighting distance and the number of intermediaries as the two more tangible elements. However, we can also identify approaches focusing on relationships, information flows, and trust. A significant share of the related benefits is linked to sustainability: these include environmental benefits, aspects of social responsibility, and economic benefits (e.g., employment, more flexibility, and a higher quality supply). These aspects can also be explicitly linked to the greater objectives of public procurement.

3.2.2 Socially responsible public procurement and local firms

Socially responsible public procurement advocates looking beyond the cheapest offers for the best value for money. This helps create positive social outcomes such as more jobs, better working conditions, social inclusion, gender equality, and non-discrimination (European Commission, 2021). Since the public sector procures various goods and services for its day-to-day operations, for which it devotes a significant portion of its budget, small business owners may benefit from this. The European Single Market Scoreboard (Public Procurement Scoreboard, 2021) claims that 71% of bidders in public procurement are SMEs, on average. Public organizations allocate a significant proportion

of their budgets to buying activities, so achieving positive social impacts should be the ideal consequence. Supporting SSCs through public procurement, especially in agriculture, is critical to reducing the need to support the sector through other public interventions and spending (Storey, 1994; Canfora, 2016). However, price is still the most significant decision criterion in public buying (evaluated at almost 60% of the decision weight on average in 2021 by the Public Procurement Scoreboard), which impedes sustainable public procurement.

It is also vital to investigate if SMEs see the public sector as a favorable customer based on their policies and payments; if not, they may hesitate to participate in public procurement (Loader, 2013). Typically, pride in selling to the government, the certainty of payments, and predictable demand (Loader, 2005) are the sources of motivation. However, local producers are reluctant to commit to being suppliers, especially for professional public kitchens, because this requires consistent delivery of large quantities of products as part of the supply contract (Lehtinen, 2012). The logistical and capacity weaknesses of SMEs are thus significant obstacles. Although legislators may stipulate that the latter should be supported, there are limits to what can be achieved. The personal motivation of purchasers and the resulting search for innovative individual-level suppliers may represent a solution (Vörösmarty and Dobos, 2019).

By working with SMEs, the public sector can support local economies, regional development, and local sourcing (Walker and Preuss, 2008) via SSCs. Morley (2021) concluded through an analysis of in-depth interviews with companies that provide food to government schools in the UK that public procurement has the potential to stimulate broader sustainability practices throughout supply chains and societal demand for sustainable food, which may motivate businesses to develop better products as well as engage them in more sustainable practices. However, the pursuit of social and environmental sustainability, the demand for competitiveness, and free trade standards collide in the context of public procurement within the European Union (Morgan and Sonnino, 2007); for example, EU procurement laws forbid specifying the requirement for "local" food in public catering contracts, which is one of several obstacles to re-localizing the food chain (Morgan, 2007). Accordingly, new ways of facilitating the purchase of more local food via short supply chains need to be engineered. For example, Regulation No 1305/2013 (8) of the European Parliament and of the council of 17 December 2013 on Support for Rural Development (EU, 2013) incorporates the notion of supporting young farmers, women in rural areas, creation of short supply chains, etc.

as a means to achieving rural development. This could be used conjoint with public procurement to justify buying from short supply chains.

2.3 Gender-responsive public procurement and SSC

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development shared by the United Nations Assembly (UN 2030) firmly supports responsible production and consumption and reducing inequalities, including gender equality. One way to achieve this is by creating favorable grounds for participation for all interested parties throughout the supply chain, along with favoring women-owned enterprises due to the latter's long history of being the most disadvantaged category of business owners (Bomani, 2020). SSCs could be one answer to this; as reported in the literature, most women-owned businesses (WOBs) are SMEs (Oluka et al., 2021), and this is the area where short supply chains are traditionally the most present.

Regarding financial or labor-related decisions, banks, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and government representatives are primarily men; this lack of representation hinders women's efforts to earn better incomes and to reduce their dependence on male family members, increasing their vulnerability (Siliprandi and Pezza Cintrão, 2021). Furthermore, Malak-Rawlikowska et al. (2019) found (from a survey implemented in several European countries and Vietnam) that almost half of the labor input in food production was supplied by women and more than half from hired labor; this indicates a role for gender-responsive employment. Siliprandi and Pezza Cintrão (2021) further claim that treating women and men equally with gender-neutral regulations (i.e. as if they have equal opportunities during public procurement) deepens gender inequality because the former are not usually reimbursed for working on family farms, and if employed, are typically seasonal workers who receive wages almost 40% less than their male counterparts; hence, there is a need to investigate the causes of this discrimination and resolve the gender inequality gap.

Currently, most national public purchasing programs are designed to attract large-scale commercial producers since small farmers, both men and women, are frequently prevented from participating due to the programs' minimal supply requirements, complicated procedures, low pricing, and late payment terms. However, public buyers increasingly try to simplify contracts to promote socially responsible public procurement (Siliprandi and Pezza Cintrão, 2021).

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development shared by the United Nations Assembly (UN, 2030) firmly supports responsible production and consumption and reducing inequalities, including gender equality. One way to achieve this is by creating favorable grounds for participation for all interested parties throughout the supply chain, along with favoring women-owned enterprises due to the latter's long history of being the most disadvantaged category of business owners (Bomani, 2020). SSCs could be one answer to this; as reported in the literature, most women-owned businesses (WOB) are SMEs (Oluka et al., 2021), and this is the area where short supply chains are traditionally the most present.

3.3 Methodology

As interviews are the preferred method for collecting new data sets (Adams et al., 2007), we employed qualitative research methodology involving semi-structured exploratory interviews to understand SSCs from the buyer, seller, and intermediary perspectives. This helped us gather responses to a fixed set of questions that reflected the themes of our research questions while also allowing us to dive deeper. Interviewees were initially selected based on the researchers' (authors') awareness of their involvement in SSCs, along with requests via email to several European organizations identified as working with SSCs via a Google search. We also used snowball sampling to obtain contacts from interviewees to connect with other potential leads. In total, 17 interviews were conducted with stakeholders from nine countries (USA, Belgium, Scotland, France, Denmark, Italy, Sweden, Romania, and Hungary).

To find interviewees who could respond to the questions from various perspectives, we aimed to find as diverse a pool of interviewees as possible by interviewing several kinds of stakeholders.

As our article focuses on applying SSC in public procurement, it was necessary to involve public procurement experts in this research (No. of interviews: 5).

We also interviewed various professional organizations and market actors, assuming that these stakeholders, as external actors, have a more complex view of the role of both public procurement and manufacturers in the SSC (No. of interviews: 10).

Additionally, it was considered important to interview producers with direct SSC experience. Due to the lack of openness to participate in the research and language barriers, fewer interviewees were recruited (No. of interviews: 2).

To avoid the need for travel, interviews were conducted online via the MS Teams software at an agreed time and date and lasted an average of 70 minutes. They were recorded and transcribed using the latter software with the prior consent of the respondents to analyze later in textual form. The recordings were then replayed manually to check them against the transcriptions; missing information and misplaced words were corrected, and fillers were removed to create a clean interview version that was easier to explore. We asked questions based on the literature review to gain insight into the interviewees' understanding of SSCs. This referred to the aspects that define SSCs, the factors that motivate the use of SSCs, the benefits, and the typical sectors in which they are used. This article examines these specific research questions:

R1: What factors help identify SSCs?

R2: What motivates producers and consumers to participate in SSCs?

R3: What are the benefits and complexities of SSCs?

R4: Can SSCs be used in sectors other than food?

In addition to the above, we also asked specific questions about the characteristics of applying SSCs, such as social or gender aspects.

R5: What social goals can be achieved by public procurement that uses SSCs?

R6: Can the public sector use SSCs to foster gender equality in public procurement?

A case study was also prepared to demonstrate the practical application of the study results. It presents a real example of a Hungarian public procurement procedure that complies with the terms and requirements of the prevalent Regulation. According to Hungarian legislation (Government Decree 676/2020 (XII. 28.) on the specific rules applicable to public procurement procedures in the field of public catering), which follows the framework of Regulation No. 1305/2013 (EU, 2013), the mandatory use of SSCs for the procurement of public catering services is set at 60-80%.

The data used in the case study is publicly available and supplements the interviews for discussing the lessons learned. The procurement subject is a public waste disposal service with a value of HUF 1,314,650,480, carried out in 2022. This case study describes how

SSCs can be managed through the public procurement procedure and the execution phase, enabling the identification of recommendations for using SSCs in a public procurement context.

3.4 Findings

The detailed outcomes of the interviews are discussed in the following section according to the research questions.

R1: What factors identify SSC?

When we asked our interviewees what dimensions they used to qualify for an SSC, the answers were as varied as the participants. For example, four respondents considered that products transacted within internal national borders conformed to the definition of SSCs. At the same time, six said they needed to be local or within a specified proximity, but there was no clear consensus about what this proximity was, and for the rest, distance did not matter as long as the overall chain was short.

Regarding the number of intermediaries, although most respondents agreed that a maximum of one was permissible, some did not tolerate intermediaries between producer and supplier. In contrast, others did not limit the number if value was added, and all parties received fair compensation. Most respondents agreed that intermediaries play a significant role in logistics aggregation, which small-scale producers may struggle with (as it represents an additional burden to production-related responsibilities). At the same time, the former can also help producers sell to the government by collecting products from several producers and bidding as a single entity. In addition, intermediaries are often needed to supply to public schools due to a lack of ample kitchen space, such as sorting and processing facilities for individual orders received.

Similarly, all participants acknowledged the role of information exchange and relationship-building in sustaining SSCs. Storytelling was considered critical for conveying product quality, and several public buyers used it to educate students about food sources and consumption habits. A public buyer pointed out that this close relationship helps suppliers and consumers adapt quickly to demands when needed.

Concerning sustainability, the majority believed SSCs to be economically and socially sustainable due to more equitable welfare distribution, but not inherently green and environmentally friendly, as buying from SSCs could sometimes mean purchasing

products made using outdated technology or chemical fertilizers, which could be more polluting than buying products produced efficiently but further away using a longer supply chain.

Last, even if the terms 'local' and 'short' supply chains seem to be used interchangeably in the SSC literature, local supply chains are, at most, a subset of SSCs. They are the preferred kind, presumably due to similar language, culture, food habits, and thus the ease of communication; however, it is difficult to define what is 'local' concretely. Additionally, as respondents pointed out, EU procurement laws do not allow public buyers to discriminate based on the 'localness' of products. Furthermore, finding all the products a purchaser requires nearby is sometimes impossible due to a lack of favorable production conditions.

To summarise, there is no common understanding of SSCs. However, there is consensus that the number of intermediaries should be as few as possible, and there is a need for active knowledge-sharing.

R2: What motivates producers and consumers to participate in SSCs?

Although enthusiasm about SSCs has existed for some time, all the public buyers first participated in them because of the government's political agenda of buying more local products to stimulate the national economy. A public buyer revealed that they usually only buy from SSCs if prices are competitive since national procurement policies focus on price only; this highlights the importance of political motivation in supporting SSCs. Second, SSC sellers' willingness to sell to the government also motivated buyers to buy from them. Factors ranked highly were better quality products, more value for money, and control over the supply chain process.

Producers are primarily motivated to sell through SSC because of the greater potential profit due to the reduced number of intermediaries and timely payments from public buyers (payments are usually made within 30 days). Moreover, once a contract is concluded, they are guaranteed to sell, giving them more confidence to sell directly. In addition, not having to store products due to their immediate sale reduces storage costs. Multiple respondents also cited a feeling of 'feeding the community' as an important source of motivation.

In terms of buyer attractiveness, although public buyers are attractive customers since they pay on time and have consistent demand, they often require strict compliance, additional administrative work, and certification, and as such, are too big for small-size producers, so the use of intermediaries or collective sales units such as food hubs or producer co-operatives can help.

R3: What are the benefits and complexities of SSCs?

Our interviewees reaffirmed the first and foremost benefit of SSCs discussed in the literature: a more significant share of profit goes to the producer, more adequately rewarding them for their contributions (rather than intermediaries taking their share of profit). This is perceived as making SSCs fairer to everyone involved. Furthermore, since producers undertake multiple activities that would be carried out by additional actors in a conventional supply chain (as one of the respondents suggested, such as raising cattle, milking, and making cheese, as well as sales), there is a greater value added as there are fewer players in the supply chain.

Second, due to direct communication between buyers and sellers, the supply chain is robust, controllable, and resilient to external shocks, assuring buyers of quality and after-sales support when needed, hence reducing the price to the client in terms of overall value for money and long-term relationship building. Third, SSCs support local development by 'representing' local products and producers; the money stays within the locality rather than being transferred to a few beneficiaries, leading to a more equitable distribution of societal benefits and a sense of belongingness. Furthermore, products proximally sourced do not usually require a lot of processing, storage, and packaging, which maintains their nutritional quality and saves on energy (-related costs). Finally, the possibility of selling non-standardized products that are otherwise not accepted for sale in big shops or supermarkets allows producers to sell more products at a fair price, reducing waste.

Although SSCs are associated with several benefits, some specificities make it challenging to administer and operate them on a large scale, such as for use in public procurement. Products are less standardized, and since sellers typically sell small quantities, quality may vary; public buyers may wish to avoid drawing up multiple contracts and tenders while also bearing the risks of inadequate quality, failed deliveries, or finding replacements quickly. Public buyers must also exert much more effort and money in the supplier identification and negotiation phases, as they must organize talks

with many potential suppliers, increasing the administrative burden. Bigger suppliers may promise a more stable supply, and replacements can easily be found due to their more extensive networks. An example of the latter is that school kitchen staff cannot handle multiple deliveries several times a day, so buying from big suppliers may be preferred (several products can be collected/delivered at once, reducing the labor involved in sorting deliveries and quality checks). Maintaining consistent quality and providing quality certification is usually difficult for small producers due to the high cost.

Similarly, to be successful, sellers must become multi-dimensional actors with competencies such as producing, selling, transporting, etc. They typically find public procurement processes complex, requiring much documentation and strict supply and delivery rules, while insufficient initial financial and training support is provided. To overcome this, all purchasing respondents agreed to collaborate with producer co-operatives or other structures and accept collective bidding; however, implementing this can be challenging.

SSCs were found to be more resilient to supply chain shocks than larger supply chains during the COVID- 19 pandemic. Nevertheless, a respondent stated their concern that even if a large proportion of the population and companies had shifted to using SSCs during this period, they had since typically returned to their usual buying practices due to cost or convenience. Furthermore, there is a need for logistics partners or intermediaries, especially with small-scale production and sales, since the latter can assemble smaller volumes of products, accumulating them in line with demand and increasing convenience for both public and private buyers.

In contrast, some interviewees suggested that publishing tenders in the local language or asking for geographically denominated products could help overcome barriers to participating in public procurement tenders. To meet demands for large quantities of products, a common problem for small-scale producers, public buyers had agreed to break bigger tenders into several mini tenders, although this involved additional effort. Until now, public buyers have only bought a small amount of their budgets through SSCs, as arrangements are not in place for purchasing larger volumes simultaneously.

R4: Can SSC be used in sectors other than food?

Although SSCs are predominant in the food sector and most of our respondents were connected to the food and agriculture industries, we asked them to think of other sectors

where SSCs could be used. Almost all of them talked about what SSCs could be developed within their own countries (i.e., restricting SSCs in terms of distance to within national boundaries), even those who had not defined distance as a necessary characteristic of SSCs in response to R1. The textile sector was the most common suggestion. Apart from this, industries whose products require less processing and are associated with strong domestic production capacity were identified, like furniture, wooden products, toys and handicrafts, construction, shoes, and cleaning products. Even if the SSC model can be replicated in other industries, as one interviewee cautioned, it is not possible to buy or sell everything through SSCs; sometimes, buying from non-domestic longer-chain suppliers is better value for money.

R5: What social goals can be achieved with public procurement that uses SSCs?

While some public buyers have already started considering factors like geographical proximity, the seasonality of products, traceability, and minimal packaging as criteria for awarding tenders (aiming to increase spending on SSC gradually), others still considered the stability of supply at the lowest price to be the main criteria, citing issues like being bound by European procurement laws concerning non-discrimination against bigger established suppliers both nationally and internationally.

Overall, views were mixed about achieving social goals with SSC. Most respondents believed that even if the number of intermediaries could be reduced, new employment opportunities would arise as demand for labor increased as SSCs grew. Some interviewees pointed out that finding an adequate workforce in certain regions is difficult, while there is high unemployment in other areas. All respondents (buyers, facilitating organizations, and sellers) agreed that SSCs could benefit society due to the provision of better- quality food, more direct compensation for efforts, and building relationships between different entities. They can also support local economic growth and promote tourism while reviving traditions and cultures due to the greater acceptance of non-uniform, non-standardized products. An interviewee mentioned how traditional crops such as the 'snake pea' had reappearance in school meals when producers were encouraged to sow it, with purchases guaranteed via public procurement. Such initiatives were important for increasing food sovereignty and educating younger members of the population about varieties of ingredients, thus influencing their food choices.

R6: Can the public sector use SSC to foster gender equality?

Concerning whether SSCs can be used to support gender equality, opinions were divided, mainly based on the affiliation of the interviewees. Most public buyers did not believe SSCs could foster gender equality, clarifying that they could not discriminate between genders and support women-owned businesses solely because of their ownership if they were not competitive enough.

Alternatively, most facilitating organizations and sellers claimed that SSCs could foster gender equality; spending within a territory gives back to the region, from which all genders benefit. Women can still be employed doing administrative tasks in sectors in which work is labor-intensive, and male dominated. This is comparatively straightforward with SSCs due to better relationships and knowledge-sharing among different actors. Vocational training and funding opportunities should be provided to encourage greater participation by women. Also, as SSCs allow for traceability, engaging in and supporting initiatives that empower women's communities is possible.

The gender imbalance in the workforce is typically greater when manual work is involved, as females produce lower output for equal hours due to their lower physical strength. All the respondents agreed that most farms participating in SSCs are family-owned; however, the property titles and representation are male-dominated. Although women make up a significant share of the workforce as helpers or supporters, they are not adequately paid for their work because of the assumption that this is their family-related responsibility, allowing them no power of decision-making. Hence, public buyers should ask for gender-balanced employment declarations from sellers as a minimum requirement.

Furthermore, some interviewees pointed out that women generally thrive as sellers in SSCs owing to their better communication and networking abilities, but product quality is still paramount. All respondents agreed that SSCs create a level playing field for male and female producers, providing them with a platform to sell their products without being discriminated against due to their gender. SSC helps support women-owned businesses because, when interacting with buyers, producers can sell their personal stories; however, enough qualified women are required; otherwise, the labour shortage will force buyers to overlook gender-equality issues. Also, public buyers should issue value statements about the need for non-discrimination and gender inclusiveness, focusing on socially

responsible procurement. In conclusion, SSCs may help overcome gender inequality by empowering farmers, and a big part of the farming community comprises women-owned businesses. Ultimately, this has a ripple effect: helping small and medium-sized enterprises via SSC also supports women and other minority groups.

3.5 SSC in School Catering: A Case Study

In 2022, Catering Services Ltd. (CS Ltd.) initiated a public procurement procedure for catering services (Public Notices: www.ted.europa.eu OJ S 135/2022 15/07/2022, OJ S 159/2022 19/08/2022). The procurement aimed to provide catering services for primary schools, colleges, and secondary schools. To target suppliers, close to the site, the contracting authority divided the procurement into two parts (lots/districts). The successful tenderer was responsible for purchasing raw materials, preparing meals in their own kitchens based on a central menu, delivering the meals in suitable containers to the serving areas, and regularly removing the waste produced. The framework contract was initially published for two years and renewable for another year based on satisfactory performance.

The procedure was conducted as an open procedure without negotiation, with the awarding criteria including the Short Supply Chain (SSC), for which 4% of the total score could be awarded. According to Hungarian legislation (Government Decree 676/2020, § 4 (2)), the SSC required in the awarding criterion must be 60% of the total value of the products procured from 1.1.2022 and 80% of the total value of the products procured from 1.1.2023. There was one bidder for each of the two parts, with whom the contract was concluded.

The main lessons learned from the interview with the head of the procuring organization, CS Ltd., in the second year of the procurement were as follows: The SSC was chosen primarily because it was a legal requirement. The contracting authority found SSCs to be closely linked to sustainability considerations. However, the service providers faced significant challenges, as the legal requirements were deemed excessive and typically feasible only for smaller contracting authorities and tenderers. The complexity of the product range contributed to the difficulty in meeting the SSC requirements.

The contracting authority's leader observed a high incidence of circumventing behavior by suppliers, who often repackaged products and falsely claimed them as EU-made, disadvantaging local suppliers. This was unacceptable to the contracting authority,

however they had to accept the bidder's declaration that the SSC conditions were met. The interviewee suggested that a clearer definition of product origin in the legislation could help address this issue, although it would increase the administrative burden. Nonetheless, the economic incentive effect would be significant. A fair approach to SSC makes sense but requires curbing excessive legal expectations and clarifying the interpretation of origin to protect both contracting authorities and compliant tenderers.

3.6 Discussion

This paper identified six research questions in the methodological section, which will be addressed based on the interviews and the case study.

The first research question addressed the understanding of SSC. We identified that the interpretation of SSCs is far from uniform, but the elements identified in the literature are present in the latter's application. The situation determines which factors—distance, number of actors, and nature of interactions—are considered important by the interviewees. We also indirectly identified that the three factors are interrelated: with fewer actors physically close to each other, it is easier to build rapport and information flow.

The second research question addressed sources of motivation. On the supplier side, many personal sources of motivation were identified (being proud of quality, being beneficial to the community, etc.). This indicates that not only are job opportunities being created through SSCs, but also a sense of social well-being. The motivation for including SSCs in public procurement stems from the EU policy of promoting environmental, social, and economic goals. These two sources of motivation are consistent to some extent, which is also connected with the next question.

The third question inquired into the benefits and complexities of SSCs. The benefits of SSCs we identified echo those identified in the literature, of which promoting SMEs and achieving environmental and social goals through public procurement are key. The motivation for public procurement activities is clearly political and regulatory. In this context, the challenge of involving SSCs as suppliers is its complexity. SMEs often have insufficient capacity and are unprepared for the extra administration involved in public procurement processes. This requires more open communication and flexibility from both partners.

Research question five addresses sustainability concerns. Expectations about the sustainability of SSCs are positive. Several promising impacts were mentioned, ranging from the development of local communities to the biodiversity impacts of food produced. While the literature is ambivalent about whether SSCs have a positive environmental and social impact, we identified strong support in this area during our interviews, with our interviewees overwhelmingly associating positive effects with SSCs.

Research question six addressed gender issues. These are seldom investigated in the SSC context. We find that gender equality, one of the priorities of EU public procurement policy, may be partly supported through SSCs. While women-led enterprises may not get direct support, women are often the driving force behind SSC initiatives, and SSCs can help provide them with opportunities as producers and suppliers.

3.7 Conclusion

SSCs cannot completely replace conventional supply chains because they are not scalable. However, they are a part of the supply chain spectrum that is becoming increasingly significant and play a role in socially responsible procurement, with the potential to be deployed in sectors other than food. Public institutional involvement can alter the role of SSCs significantly due to their purchasing power and level of demand, thereby fostering gender equality and helping achieve other social goals by focusing on an aggregate value- for-money approach (rather than being solely cost-centric) and eliminating many of the adverse outcomes private buyers face when making purchases from SSCs. A new approach and a more flexible framework will be needed to encourage their use, as SMEs (especially small and micro-enterprises) find it challenging to participate in the traditional framework of public procurement; connecting SSC-related public procurement with other government programs could be helpful.

Traditional supply chains can be explained primarily by classical economic theories (Ketokivi and Mahoney, 2020), efficiency, cost optimization, and economies of scale dominate their design and operation. Short supply chains are more related to sustainability (a combination of social, environmental, and economic objectives). An important research task in this context is to understand the shift in approach that needs to take place in both the economy and policymaking.

Further research is required to understand better how procurement from SSCs can be reconciled with the public procurement framework. While there are alternative public

policy tools that can promote sustainability and assist small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), it has been observed that utilizing public procurement is valuable. This approach could enhance stakeholders' social and economic well-being. Future research can contribute to this study by further exploring the existing research questions in detail, expanding the research focus, and identifying diverse respondents who could further contribute to the dialogue on short supply chains and public procurement. The impact of the different crises of recent years on short supply chains and whether they have had an impact beyond the period of closures could also be the subject of future research.

The current findings help identify the main characteristics of SSCs. These outcomes are useful for a greater understanding of the concept of SSCs by both buyers (public as well as private) and public policymakers. Although regulation is in place to facilitate the choice of SSCs in public procurement (EU, 2013), it would be essential to refine the regulations, develop further recommendations and incentives, and showcase good practices.

This study contributes to the fields of sustainable public procurement, short supply chains and understanding alternative supply chain networks in general. By bringing forward a buyer-seller-intermediary perspective, it aimed to summarize the existing concerns and motivations of the participants of short supply chains as well as look into the broader development of this research field by exploring sectors other than food, where this concept can be replicated. The research findings will help promote sustainable public procurement through direct buying, narrowing the buyer-supplier gap as well, and fostering women-owned businesses.

Finally, we would like to acknowledge the limitations of this study. First, due to the researchers' limited language skills, many potential interviewees whose inputs could have further enriched the analysis were omitted. Second, since the conclusions are primarily based on an analysis of the interviews, the current results might not be representative. For a more comprehensive understanding of the subject, conducting further research involving a broader range of SSC actors is advisable.

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4. Does Gender Equality Matter? Gender Responsive Corporate Procurement Efforts of Inter-Governmental Organizations

Abstract

Public sector organizations, particularly intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), are expected to integrate gender-responsive practices into their operations to promote gender mainstreaming and diversity. Such initiatives can also be incorporated into these IGOs' corporate procurement endeavors since they have more control over their corporate spending, and it can directly affect the socioeconomic development of the stakeholders involved. In the following research, the gender-responsive procurement (GRP) practices of four major development-focused IGOs - the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), UN Women, the Asian Development Bank (ADB), and the World Bank Group (WBG)—are assessed. Utilizing in-depth key-informant interviews and interpretive document analysis, case studies are developed to log the goals, efforts, policies, etc. of the selected IGOs towards gender-responsive corporate procurement. Lastly, this study also demonstrates a summary of various actionable tools and approaches utilized by these organizations, thereby expanding the research area on GRP to encompass the efforts of IGOs.

Keywords

Inter-Governmental Organizations; Gender-Responsive Procurement; Gender Equality; Gender Mainstreaming; Corporate Procurement

4.1 Introduction

The efficient and gender-bias-free functioning of political and economic relationships between countries worldwide relies, among others, on the involvement of various intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), for example UN Women, the World Bank, WHO, ADB, EBRD, the IMF, etc. (Ertürk, 2015; Jandhyala and Phene, 2015; Nilsson, 2017). For instance, WHO was particularly active during the coronavirus pandemic (Chang, 2020; Müller et al., 2021), while UNHCR was during the start of the Ukraine-Russia war (Jurić, 2022). These IGOs have been formed as a collaboration of several countries, accumulating money and other resources to achieve a common purpose (Keohane and Nye, 1974). Because of their close cooperation with host countries and utilization of public funds donated by their donors (Sapala, 2020), they are usually

considered an extension of the public sector, and their spending comes under the realm of public procurement. Usually, these expenditures are also of a considerable amount (Sapala, 2020), because of which IGOs pose significant purchasing and negotiation power with which they can contribute to several domains of socially responsible procurement.

One of these domains is supporting gender mainstreaming agendas and removing the traditional socio-economic inequality persistent between males and non-males. *Gender mainstreaming* involves evaluating the effects of any proposed actions—such as laws, strategies, or initiatives—across all sectors and levels to understand their impact on both men and women (UN ECOSOC, 1997, p.3). Of the several ways this can be done is by supporting/procuring from gender-balanced organizations or minority gender representative organizations such as women-owned businesses (WOBs), which usually are also small and medium-sized (SMEs) (McCrudden, 2004). Despite the efforts of public procurement policymakers in creating various strategies to promote the involvement of SMEs and WOBs (Flynn, 2018; Patil, 2017), women's restricted access to adequate education and finance, along with long-held cultural norms and more interrupted careers due to family obligations, prevents them from engaging in on-the-job trainings and mainstream entrepreneurial activities (McCrudden, 2004; OECD, 2011, Blau and Kahn, 2017) to benefit adequately from procurement spending. Currently, a mere 1 % out of eleven trillion USD global annual public spending is directed towards WOBs (Vazquez and Frankel, 2017). Therefore, it is essential to explore how female representation in public procurement can be encouraged.

The majority of research on gender-responsive public procurement has thus far concentrated on the government sector (Knight et al., 2012; Lloyd and McCue, 2004; Orser et al., 2021; Williams, 2024); IGOs are usually left behind, even though they are an essential constituent of the public sector, given that they are financed through public funds, have diverse stakeholders including governments and more-focused social development goals which could lead to greater GRP. Until recently, the agenda of gender mainstreaming has been carried forward primarily by global coalitions of non-governmental entities, for instance, women's right INGOs and the United Nations (True and Mintrom, 2001), and only they have been investigated by the existing peer-reviewed literature such as by Kreft, 2017; Nivedita and Deshpande, 2019; Magar et al., 2019, etc. Even then, the pursuit of gender equality through corporate procurement, wherein IGOs wield more control over their corporate spending compared to project procurements as

they don't have to collaborate with external stakeholders and consider their demands and objectives, remains underexplored.

Through this research, which is one of the few to focus explicitly on gender-responsive corporate procurement of IGOs, the author first wants to investigate how the gender mainstreaming agenda is being fostered via gender-responsive/supportive procurement within four prominent IGOs to populate the literature on research beyond the United Nations and to incorporate the often-overlooked corporate procurement side of IGO spending. Second, by documenting the attempts of IGOs to foster GRP, this paper adds to the limited yet expanding body of research linking GRP, gender mainstreaming and IGOs. Third, the study identifies potential tools the selected IGOs use for GRP. Doing so contributes to understanding diverse actionable tools/approaches which can also be embraced by other organizations, public or private, aiming to foster GRP.

Moreover, Hafner-Burton and Pollack (2001, pp. 15–16; 2002, pp. 352–353) advocate for the adoption of procedures that introduce a gender viewpoint into the formulation of policies and distribute information regarding gender issues and accountability throughout the bureaucracy. This encompasses collecting gender-disaggregated data and other indicators; gender training; gender impact assessment and gender-proofing (a comprehensive examination of proposed policies to identify any unintentional gender-discriminatory language or disparate impacts on men and women); checklists, manuals, and handbooks; monitoring and performance assessment. This paper also examines if these five procedures for integrating a gender perspective to complement gender mainstreaming efforts are part of the corporate GRP across the selected organizations.

Overall, the research investigates the following questions:

- 1) Are the selected IGOs applying gender-responsive corporate procurement practices?***
- 2) What are the key strategies and practices adopted by these IGOs to effectively implement/support gender-responsive procurement?***
- 3) Do they collaborate with other organizations/NGOs to foster GRP?***
- 4) How well do the IGOs adhere to the Hafner-Burton and Pollock procedures for gender mainstreaming?***

Moving forward, Section 2 comprehensively assesses the pertinent literature related to the topic. This is followed by the research methods in Section 3. Section 4 outlays the findings in detail and section 5 summarizes the findings, provides a discussion of analysis and research conclusions. Finally, Section 6 addresses this research's contributions and constraints.

4.2 Literature Review

4.2.1 Gender-responsive (public) procurement

Public procurement is the act of purchasing products and utilities by public-sector entities (Uyarra and Flanagan, 2010) for their routine use and to support development efforts. It is regarded as a critical activity due to the large volume of resources involved in time, money, and people. It can also be used to foster a variety of secondary policy objectives (Edquist and Zabala-Iturriagagoitia, 2012; McCrudden, 2004; Meehan et al., 2016), related to environmental, social and economic development, etc., as public purchasers exercise leverage and influence over their suppliers due to their significant purchasing power (Martin-Ortega et al., 2015). Acting on sustainability and social motives through procurement, known as socially responsible procurement (Semple, 2017), is comparatively more straightforward as the public sector is customarily focused on citizen's well-being.

Public procurement is also crucial to empower underprivileged and disadvantaged groups, especially women (Maritz, 2022; Nyeck, 2020). Fostering women in procurement revolves around the need to address their lack of employable and entrepreneurial skills and access to economic resources and networks that hinder their inclusion in procurement activities (Couch et al., 2022; Downes et al., 2017). Most SMEs, particularly those owned by women and youth, seldom engage in public procurement due to unawareness of contracting offers (Njiraini and Moyi, 2006) and perceptions of delayed and uncertain payment schedules (Pane et al., 2020). The scant presence of women in rapidly growing firms has fostered a misconception that women exhibit lower inclination or capability in leading high-growth businesses compared to men (Huq et al., 2020). The unfamiliarity with procurement procedures is an additional challenge (Inter-Trade Ireland, 2009). Also, large volumes of tenders are often perceived as too complex for small women-led organizations to fulfill completely (European Commission, 2011).

Public procurement has historically placed a premium on economic efficiency by focusing solely on cost for achieving best value for their spending, forcing the public buyers to obtain the necessary goods and services at the lowest possible price (Cravero, 2017). This approach has been replaced by the evolving principle of value for money, which has transitioned from prioritizing the lowest price to incorporating considerations for both price and quality and has further expanded to include economic, social, and environmental values to award the most economically advantageous tender (MEAT) that focuses on total cost of ownership and life cycle costing (Kumar, 2022). Even the European Commission's *Public Procurement-Guidance for Practitioners* (EC, 2018) recommends public buyers to switch from price only to MEAT award criteria and clearly define them in the tender advertisement. However, public buyers consistently face the challenge of balancing various MEAT objectives, including goals of quality, promptness, minimizing risks, maximizing competition and other non-procurement goals, against reducing costs (Thai, 2001).

Public tender bidding typically involves submitting a technical and financial proposal (Lewis, 2015). Financial proposal details the bidder's charge for the goods, services, or works they are going to provide. On the other hand, technical proposal outlines the bidder's approach, methodology, and solutions to meet the tender requirements, including project management plans, timelines, staffing, technical specifications, quality assurance measures, and relevant experience (Casiano et al., 2022; Lewis, 2015). There is often a debate over the bidding mechanism to use: single-envelope bidding, where one proposal for both technical and financial evaluation is submitted and judged; or two-envelope bidding, where bids are first evaluated based on technical competence and then on cost (ADB, 2021a). The latter approach can benefit WOBs, as they may still be considered for the tender based on their technical expertise, even if their costs may be higher than those of other enterprises. Also, usually, the public buyers supporting these initiatives have to buy from several small businesses due to individual businesses' limited capacity, leading to discouragement as additional administration work is involved; in this case, rather than buying directly from multiple small suppliers, the government can incentivize the non-minority producers to partner with minority businesses such as WOB as subcontractors or Tier two suppliers for public procurement contracts award (Porter, 2019), indirectly fostering female entrepreneurship.

GRP entails the pursuit of promoting parity between males and females for access to resources and opportunities so that everyone, regardless of their gender, can participate

in procurement projects (Sarter, 2020). Supporting GRP is essential for driving gender mainstreaming and upholding women's rights (UN Secretary-General HLP-WEE, 2017). Usually, the most common approach for organizations to foster gender equality is sourcing from women-owned/controlled businesses (Combaz, 2018). A women-owned business is one that is majority-owned (>51 %) by one or more women; additionally, women must actively control its long-term decision-making and the daily management while also maintaining independence of operations (Chin, 2017). However, implementing gender equality goals through public procurement is still in its early stages and remains under-explored (Callerstig, 2014); engaging in continuous monitoring regarding the efficacy of GRP endeavors is thus critical for identifying its impact (UNODC, 2013); the current research intends to do that.

4.2.2 Prospectives of gender mainstreaming and female entrepreneurship

Research on women entrepreneurship as a separate field only emerged in the late 1990s. Yet, it often lacks a singular theoretical foundation, relying typically on incorporating feminist theories alongside existing entrepreneurship frameworks (Yadav and Unni, 2016). For instance, Brush et al. (2009) utilized institutional theory for conceptualizing gender as a social construct, proposing societal institutions not only mirror prevailing social norms and beliefs but also play an active role in shaping and perpetuating gender identities and expectations within society. This also highlights the significance of IGOs as social institutions in influencing gender-related expectations.

The Beijing Platform for Action recognized gender mainstreaming as a crucial tool for attaining gender parity and women's empowerment (Moser and Moser, 2005). This recognition has prompted governments and international organizations to devise strategies, such as *integrationist approaches*: incorporating a gender viewpoint without upending preexisting policy paradigms but rather emphasizing on gender mainstreaming to enhance the effectiveness of existing policy goals (Nivedita and Deshpande, 2019). Gender mainstreaming, rooted in the understanding that gender distinctions influence policy development and results (Nivedita and Deshpande, 2019), require gender-based training, monitoring tools, collaboration, publication of good practices and resource allocation (Moser and Moser, 2005) for effective implementation. Intergovernmental mandates advocating for gender mainstreaming may not always explicitly use the term “mainstreaming”, instead, they might emphasize actions to integrate or embed gender equality considerations into development processes, procedures, and outcomes

(Bjarnegård and Uggla, 2018). For example, in recent years, within European IGOs, the concept of gender integration has been greatly promoted (Dhuli et al., 2024).

Understanding the fundamental power dynamics and other factors contributing to gender inequality, discrimination, and exclusion is critical, along with identifying key stakeholders who require guidance and support to foster involvement and dedication towards achieving desired gender equality outcomes (Hannan, 2022). The basis for gender mainstreaming strategies is the knowledge that gender disparity is fundamentally ingrained. In response to feminist demands, multilateral organizations have actively incorporated gender mainstreaming into their activities, modifying feminist goals to fit organizational goals in various ways (Prügl and Lustgarten, 2006; Heyzer et al., 1995).

There is a widespread acknowledgement of the significance of gender issues, as evidenced by the fact that every international organization has incorporated the notion of gender into its official mission and publications, and it is part of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDG, n.d.). However, it's crucial to recognize that, despite these admirable intentions, there is no guarantee that these ideas will always be translated into actionable behaviors (Bessis, 2004). Even then, it cannot be denied that a global feminist network that is becoming more visible at local, national, and regional levels has actively benefited from the regular organization of international conferences for networking and information exchange, which are often supported by IGOs (Bessis, 2004). Integrating gender perspectives into ongoing programs or initiatives typically entails cost reduction and greater viability. However, gender-focused interventions often necessitate actions tailored to certain genders, thus posing greater entry barriers and making rapid scalability challenging (Su and Yang, 2023).

Feminist activism refers to the collective efforts undertaken by individuals, groups, or organizations to advocate gender equality and the advancement of women rights (Nivedita and Deshpande, 2019). Studies employing feminist theory indicate that the experiences and expertise of women entrepreneurs are influenced by gender due to culturally embedded experiential variations among males and females (Huq et al., 2020). Rai (2004) observed a growing recognition that women generally faced disadvantages in their interactions with global organizations and government institutions, as these entities typically showed limited changes in their approaches and remained constrained by existing political and social structures, with local institutions often hesitating to challenge

prevailing societal norms while working with women groups. It's about time for exploring whether this is still the case through the current article.

4.2.3. The role of IGOs

Since IGOs spend a considerable sum of money on procurement (Combaz, 2018), they also have an opportunity to support gender mainstreaming initiatives through gender-responsive procurement; literature on international relations affirms that international organizations, as non-state actors, have increasing power to influence world politics and economies (Bieler et al., 2004). To be considered an inter-governmental organization, the entity must be an interstate body which is legalized through a charter or international agreement, has at least two/three members and permanent secretariat or staff, holds regular plenary sessions, and executes development activities in collaboration with government and civil society in more than one country, while having independence in operations and decisions from that of the members (Keohane and Nye, 1974; Tallberg, 2002; Vabulas and Snidal, 2013; Wallace and Singer, 1970). Stakeholders of IGOs include donor governments, sister organizations, targeted groups to be influenced, and suppliers, who have certain expectations and demand accountability for their actions (Wild and Zhou, 2011). Despite Keohane and Nye's (1974) observation that IGOs are not solid independent actors and merely tools of governments and thus unimportant in their own right as they find it incredibly challenging to come to a consensus on essential issues, IGOs have been able to precedent several conventions, policies, and guidelines that are followed in a majority of member countries, such as ILO conventions on equal pay (1951), maternity protection (1919), discrimination (1958), etc. (ILO, n.d.) highlighting their importance.

Several IGOs have committed to increasing gender balance in all aspects of their operation, including procurement activities. They have occasionally developed guidelines, handbooks, and databases to encourage GRP in both private and public organizations (Combaz, 2018). The UN Decade for Women (1976–1985) and the organization of a string of progressively important World Conferences on Women in Mexico City (1975), Copenhagen (1980), Nairobi (1985), Beijing (1995), and New York (2000) labeled a critical pivoting point for the global women's movement (Hafner-Burton and Pollack, 2001, p.7; Hafner-Burton and Pollack, 2002, p.339) backed by IGOs. The Beijing Platform for Action adopted during the UN Women's Conference in 1995, brought a gender mainstreaming agenda to the UN system so that the effects of policy

decisions on men and women could be examined (Hafner-Burton and Pollack, 2001). Since then, several IGOs have promoted gender equality, and governments worldwide have followed suit (Prügl and Lustgarten, 2006; Reanda, 1999).

GRP at IGOs as a research field is still evolving. Prior research impacting procurement and IGOs has looked into e-procurement adoption by United Nations agencies, which refers to using the internet and technology to conduct procurement of standard non-strategic purchases (Walker and Harland, 2008). It is also helpful to WOB as it allows equal access to opportunities and overcomes several public procurement participation hurdles like lack of network, access to information, etc. (Kiwেকে and Doorgapersad, 2017). Similarly, Kunz et al. (2015) assessed the effects of implementing a central in-house leasing scheme at UNHCR, which could also impact GRP, while Vaillancourt (2017) assessed consolidating procurement needs at UNICEF. Wild and Zhou (2011) devised a theoretical model of cooperative, ethical procurement due diligence; these approaches could also be extended to conduct due diligence verifying a WOB. While restricting to project procurement, Combaz (2018) looked into the gender-sensitive procurement models employed by international aid organizations.

To sum, IGOs potentially hold more significant influence due to their access to positions of power within society, leading to increased reception and adherence to their policies; hence, they should foster gender mainstreaming in every way possible (Bianchi, 2021). However, our understanding of how IGOs respond to the call for action for promoting GRP, primarily through their corporate procurement, remains limited due to inadequate research in this field. Hence, the current article aims to overcome this limitation by providing a comprehensive overview of gender-responsive corporate procurement practices at IGOs.

4.3 Research Methodology

This article assesses gender mainstreaming efforts and approaches to fostering GRP in corporate endeavors across four prominent IGOs in the development sector: UN Women, World Bank, EBRD, and ADB. Despite being separate entities, these organizations work closely to advance societies through empowerment initiatives, funding development projects, and maintaining gender mainstreaming policies (Moser and Moser, 2005), thus making them more inclined towards GRP sensitivity.

While evaluations of gender mainstreaming often prioritize institutional inputs, primarily from UN agencies, they frequently overlook operational outcomes and their impact on gender equality. Additionally, evidence suggests that participation tends to be limited to local-level participatory groups within externally driven projects (Moser and Moser, 2005). Moreover, donor-driven agendas undermine locally led gender equality initiatives (Novovic, 2023) as organizations prioritize meeting donor objectives. Therefore, analyzing corporate procurement efforts is pertinent, as IGOs have complete control over them and they can be molded based on organizational priorities.

According to True (2003); Nivedita and Deshpande (2019), scholars have differing views regarding the effectiveness of women's networks in collaborating with United Nations social agencies versus multilateral financial organizations like the World Bank. Some argue that women's networks experienced considerable triumph with UN agencies due to their more compatible worldviews (O'Brien et al., 2000 in True, 2003). Conversely, others argue that decentralized organizations like the UN, whose aid-recipient nations have more influence over policy, are less sensitive to gender issues than relatively centralized ones like the World Bank (True, 2003). Therefore, this research examines the approaches of both the United Nations and Multilateral Development Banks (MDBs).

The first selected institution was the United Nations, the world's largest IGO (Sapala, 2020), with gender equality explicitly mentioned as Goal 5 of the UN SDGs (UN SDG, n.d.). UN agencies and conferences have been pivotal in spurring women's organizations to mobilize for their constituents' interests and developing analytical instruments to critically interact with growth-focused advancement (Rai, 2004), making it a key advocate for gender mainstreaming among IGOs. Assessing UN Women, a specialized agency on women and gender issues, yet representative of overall UN values, was critical to analyze how an IGO primarily focused on gender mainstreaming utilizes corporate procurement to foster GRP.

Similarly, the three MDBs chosen are well-known for their development efforts. The EBRD was primarily established to foster development activities in European countries, while the ADB focuses on promoting development and gender equality in Asian countries. Finally, the World Bank was included due to its worldwide operations and the largest procurement budget among MDBs (Payer, 1982), making it one of the most significant IGOs in the oversight of the global economy (Heinzel et al., 2024). Overall, the selected institutions represent the major players in the IGO sector.

Employing a combination of in-depth key-informant interviews and interpretive document analysis, this study developed case studies to elucidate the strategies, policies, and objectives of the selected IGOs concerning gender-responsive corporate procurement. Drawing from the widely utilized case study technique in management research (Voss et al., 2002), which enhances comprehension of real-world phenomena (Eisenhardt, 1989); Yin (2009) instructs to use data evidenced from multiple sources that converge to the same outcome to form conclusions, so the author examined the English language pages on procurement and gender of the respective organizations and scrutinized various policy documents, procurement tenders, rules, and regulations through an interpretive document analysis approach to draw informed conclusions. A standardized evaluation scale was established to ensure consistency and applicability across cases (Wild and Zhou, 2011). Furthermore, semi-structured one-on-one interviews were conducted with a representative of every IGO, who were well-acquainted and knowledgeable about corporate procurement practices of their organization to validate the information found online by asking them about their corporate GRP efforts as well as to draw additional insights missed by document search or those not yet available publicly; they were reached out either through the contact forms on the organization's website or recommendations from research groups the author is associated with. These interviews, adhering to the framework outlined by Kallio et al. (2016) with pre-defined common structure of questions and themes, were conducted online via MS Teams from June to September 2023, and lasted between 60 and 70 min.

4.4 Brief Overview and Summary of the Findings of the IGOs Investigated

4.4.1 World Bank (Group)

The World Bank Group (WBG), has 189 member countries as shareholders, comprises five international organizations with headquarters in Washington, D.C., USA, and offices in over 140 locations (World Bank, 2022). It is a significant provider of financial, advisory, and technical assistance for global development efforts (World Bank, 2022).

Gender mainstreaming in projects and organizational processes financed by the bank began in 1977 with the establishment of the Adviser on Women in Development. This initiative continued with the formation of the Gender Analysis and Policy Thematic Group, aimed at addressing gender issues across the institution (Miller and Razavi, 1995). Additionally, several handbooks on gender mainstreaming and its integration into

projects were published to further these efforts (World Bank, n.d.-a; Prügl and Lustgarten, 2006). Notable strides have been made in recent years to strengthen its mainstreaming programs and create a comprehensive policy framework for addressing gender-related issues. The bank's policy study, *“Engendering Development Through Gender Equality in Rights, Resources, and Voice,”* emphasizing the link between gender parity, economic expansion, poverty alleviation, and effective governance, was a crucial turning point (World Bank, 2001; as found in Prügl and Lustgarten, 2006, p. 62), which several other such publications have followed.

The World Bank Group Gender Strategy (FY16–23) aimed for gender parity, poverty alleviation, and collective growth through active gender mainstreaming in projects financed by the bank in client countries and the private sector (World Bank, n.d.-b). When borrowers make purchases, the bank helps them put in place reliable procurement procedures and requests confirmation that appropriate procurement arrangements are applied to their funds (World Bank, 2017a). The Bank emphasizes principles of “value for money (price and non-price attributes), economy (economic, environmental, and social considerations), integrity, fit for purpose, efficiency, transparency, and fairness” (including equal treatment and opportunity for all bidders and consultants) (World Bank, 2017a, p.3), are applicable to both corporate and project procurement. Value for money is defined as “the effective, efficient, and economical use of resources, which requires the evaluation of relevant costs and benefits, along with assessing risks, non-price attributes, and/or life cycle costs, as appropriate” (World Bank, 2016, p.1); price alone may not necessarily be representative. It also considers sustainability criteria such as economic, social, and environmental with a lifecycle approach to support the project objectives (World Bank, 2016, p.13).

Concerning corporate procurement, the most comprehensive document available is the *“Corporate Procurement Policy Summary for Vendors Doing Business with the World Bank Group”* (World Bank, 2022) to help vendors understand the expectations of the Bank Group and guide them on how to be associated as suppliers. Along with this, their procurement guidance handbook, first issued in 2018 (World Bank, 2018) (the latest version available is of 2021), explains the types of business opportunities, the benefits of working with the Bank, the Bank's expectations, the procurement framework and process, regulations, and eligibility.

Corporate procurement spending at the World Bank amounts to nearly 2 billion USD annually and is managed by its *Corporate Procurement Unit* (World Bank, 2022). Based on the requirements of the Bank Group, the Unit formally requests bids and proposals from vendors while issuing purchase orders for smaller purchases without any formal competition (World Bank, 2017b). While vendors are not required to register to participate in Bank Group solicitations, they must be approved to win a contract award, which calls for compliance with eligibility conditions, submission of necessary paperwork and the completion of a vendor registration form through the “*WBGeProcure Supplier Self-Registration (SSR)*” portal (World Bank, n.d.-c).

The Bank prioritizes GRP through its *Supplier Diversity and Inclusion Program*, which is integral to Corporate Procurement's *Sustainable Procurement Framework* (World Bank, n.d.-d). As part of the Corporate Procurement Unit, the *Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG)* team sets the framework and provides sourcing teams tools, resources, and guidance to incorporate supplier diversity and inclusion considerations into corporate procurement selections. The priority with GRP has been to gradually increase the share of WOB globally in the World Bank value chain. For WOB, the standard definition of 51 % ownership, operation, and control by one or more women is adopted (World Bank, n.d.-d). The World Bank Group acknowledges self-certification and accepts a variety of company accreditations from appropriate federal, state, and local institutions as well as third-party certification agencies (WBENC, WEConnect International, NMSDC) (World Bank, n.d.-d). There is no set-aside or reservation of contracts for WOBs, which could have led to discrimination between bidders; instead, the aim is to motivate WOBs to compete in the procurement process on equal terms by making them aware of the opportunities and aiding them throughout the procurement process to ensure greater participation, eventually leading to more bid allocation.

For this, outreach activities are done to spread the word about the opportunities of doing business with the World Bank by using online and offline media, their website, leveraging relationships with NGOs, and active market research. Regular training has been organized through events like *Meet the Buyer and Vendor Forums* (since 2019) for WOB across different regions of the world, where the agents from the World Bank connect with WOBs, business associations, chambers of commerce, and organizations that work at the local or regional level and explain them about doing business with the Bank, set expectations and clarify doubts, explain how the contract works, provide insights on making a good submission, the procurement process, and using the *E-*

procurement platform (World Bank, n.d.-d). This 2–2.5-hour interaction opportunity also shares best practices and examples of successful business relationships with other WOBs to inspire greater participation. Initially conducted offline, it has now been adapted to a virtual setting to reach a wider audience. At the same time, the training materials are publicly available on their website for future reference by interested parties (World Bank, n.d.-d). The World Bank's e-procurement portal, called *RFX Now WBGeProcure*, also has a roster of WOBs (WOBs are flagged during the registration process by asking questions related to ownership and control (World Bank, n.d.-e); this information is later used to draw formal statistics and compare results. Support from NGOs such as WEConnect International and WEBNC is used to reach out to a broader group of WOBs for supplier discovery and awareness of opportunities at WBG and to share best practices and benchmarks against other corporate buyers (World bank, n.d.-d). They also collaborate with other MDBs and the UN Network to communicate, exchange learnings, and share best practices (World Bank, 2023).

Furthermore, the Bank Group is actively encouraging the participation of WOBs as suppliers on both Tier One and Tier Two levels. At the Tier One level, WOBs are solicited, communicated about corporate procurement opportunities, and encouraged to engage with the World Bank. To encourage participation, the Bank also provides, whenever relevant, bonus points in their point-based ranking system to bids from WOBs if they are technically compliant with the bidding requirement and financially competent. The Bank Group is also aware there may be limited opportunities to work with WOBs directly due to intense competition and stringent requirements. In this case, the Tier One suppliers are encouraged and sometimes solicited to provide a part of their sub-contracting to WOBs or other diverse suppliers whenever relevant; this is incentivized by allocating additional bonus points to bidders with diverse sub-suppliers (World Bank, n.d.-d). The activity is monitored and publicly reported regularly through the “*Tier Two Supplier Diversity Reporting Program*”, which calculates diverse spending on women, minorities, and other diverse supplier groups (World Bank, n.d.-d; World Bank, 2021). Through this, the Bank Group aims to encourage WOBs who associate as Tier Two vendors to gain experience and expertise so that they can later be more competitive to join as Tier One vendors. Along with this, regular training is provided to the staff in the procurement department so that they are aware of the market situations and any unconscious gender bias.

The Bank asserted supplier diversity is critical to making the supply chain agile and managing risk through better competition. It is crucial to their commitment as an institution and corporate sustainability; hence, they have performance goals and regularly monitor and report supplier diversity. In April 2018, they set a goal to more than double the share of corporate procurement spent with woman-business enterprises (WBEs) to 10 % by FY30 (World Bank, n.d.-f, p.28). Through process improvements, industry partnerships, outreach, capacity building, and technology leverage, the share by the end of FY22 was almost 6 % (World Bank, n.d.-f, p.28).

4.4.2 European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD)

The EBRD was founded in 1991 as a multilateral development bank and headquartered in London, the United Kingdom. It employs investment to support development across member states by promoting private and entrepreneurial initiatives and has, to date, invested 190 billion euros in >7000 development projects (EBRD, n.d.-a).

Gender equality holds significant weight in the *Environmental and Social Policy (ESP)* of EBRD (EBRD, 2019). By 2025, the policy aims to integrate gender equality measures into 40 % of EBRD's yearly operations, building on the groundwork laid by the inaugural *Strategy for the Promotion of Gender Equality (SPGE)*, implemented from 2016 to 2020. The Bank has expanded programs like the *EBRD Women in Business Program* to actively support female entrepreneurs through financial assistance, mentoring, and skill development (EBRD, n.d.-b)—rather than requiring them to take part in corporate purchases. With investments exceeding EUR 7.3 billion in gender equality advancement programs across >20 nations, the Bank has achieved notable policy milestones (EBRD, n.d.-c; EBRD, n.d.-d). Presently in effect, the second SPGE (2021–25) seeks to reinforce the gender-responsive investment culture of EBRD in all sectors and operational countries by bolstering support for the advancing equality of opportunities and integrating gender considerations in all projects and policy initiatives (EBRD, n.d.-c; EBRD, n.d.-d).

In corporate procurement, the *Procurement Operations and Delivery Department* guides and supports the procurement of supplies, labor, and services necessary for operations. The revised corporate procurement policy, effective July 2023, aims to secure goods, works, and services sustainably, with a focus on transparency, fairness, and non-discrimination in supplier selection (EBRD, 2023). In 2022, the Bank allocated 45.26

million GBP for 356 new corporate contracts and 58.33 million GBP for extending 751 existing contracts, with 320 consultancy contracts valued at 75.64 million euros awarded through competitive selection (EBRD, 2022).

Due to its UK headquarters, EBRD conducts a large amount of its corporate procurement there; however, the Bank encourages competition from firms and individuals worldwide, irrespective of membership status (EBRD, 2014). No entity is barred from tendering unrelated to performance capacity. Eligible suppliers can apply for procurement opportunities by fulfilling specific requirements outlined in advertisements such as minimum turnover or firm size for some procurements, also no list of favored suppliers is kept. In low-value contracts, direct selection may occur for goods, works, or services projected to cost <10,000 GBP, while higher-value procurement undergoes competitive selection (EBRD, 2017). Tenders are evaluated transparently, employing life cycle costing techniques to select the most economically advantageous tender (MEAT). Based on the type of product procured, payment and other contractual terms are discussed and decided upon case-by-case with each supplier (EBRD, 2017).

A life cycle costing technique is employed for assessment, with the recommendation that the contract will be awarded based on MEAT—not necessarily based only on lowest price—as long as it is submitted by a qualified and eligible participant (EBRD, 2014). The Bank employs its *SMART by GEP* platform for e-procurement (EBRD, n.d.-d), and interested vendors can evaluate new procurement possibilities on the EBRD's procurement webpage (EBRD, n.d.-f) as well as receive email updates. These advertisements provide information on how to apply, the selection process and who to contact in case of queries.

The *EBRD Gender Academy* raises awareness of gender inequalities through mandatory web-based training during staff induction (EBRD, n.d.-c). Additionally, the organization participates in the *Multilateral Development Bank's Working Group on Gender, the 2× Climate and Gender Task Force*, etc. (EBRD, n.d.-c) alongside forming strategic partnerships with other IGOs, demonstrating its collaborative efforts to address gender inequality issues.

Additionally, it prohibits blanket blacklisting of suppliers or contractors, opting for fair competition and opportunities for improvement. In general, if a company can show that it has fixed the issues causing its initial negative performance, it should be allowed to

tender for subsequent contracts (EBRD, 2012). This is advantageous for all enterprises overall as well as for WOBs.

Also, a project can be split up into individual contracts (lots) that can then be combined into groups of contracts (packages); applicants could prequalify for each individual contract or for a bundle of contracts (EBRD, 2012), encouraging WOB and other SMEs to apply. However, the Bank has not yet used gender as either a selection criterion or a tiebreaker for awarding corporate procurement contracts. The project's design caters to gender needs instead of explicitly making gender a specific selection or evaluation criterion.

4.4.3 UN Women

UN Women, an organization within the United Nations, focuses on empowering women globally and promoting gender equality by supporting member nations in setting standards for attaining gender equality (UN Women, n.d.-a). The organization collaborates with governments and non-governmental groups worldwide to formulate legislation, strategies, initiatives, and resources required for effectively implementing these benchmarks, leading to tangible benefits for women and girls worldwide (UN Women, n.d.-a). Their work is in line with international development objectives, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with a focus on SDG 5, that seeks to empower all females for achieving gender equality (UN SDG, n.d.).

UN Women supports partners, including governments, UN bodies, and businesses, to achieve socio-economic goals through GRP by integrating gender considerations into their procurement process (UN Women, n.d.-b). Within the United Nations system, UN Women is dedicated to make the UN's procurement processes more gender-inclusive, by considering GRP as a tool for socio-economic change (UN Women, n.d.-c).

In 2016, UN Women spent USD 126 million on products, services, and civil works, predominantly on service procurement (UN Women, n.d.-d). This was done either by *Micro-Purchasing* for standard-specification commodities, *Requests for Quotation* for local procurement of standard commodities, *Requests for Proposal* for complex services and goods, and *Invitations to Bid* for international competition (UN Women, n.d.-d). Guided by principles of best value for money, fairness, integrity, transparency, effective competition, and the best interest of UN Women, the entity ensures equal opportunities and treatment for all vendors. UN Women considers social (including gender equality

objectives), environmental, and economic policy objectives to calculate the total life-cycle costs of purchases (UN Women, n.d.-e).

Recently, UN Women launched their e-procurement portal, *Quantum ERP*, for bid solicitation, requiring vendor registration for eligibility to procurement participation and to receive information on future offers (UNGM, n.d.). Procurement notices are also displayed on the UNGM (United Nations Global Marketplace). Together with the UN Global Compact, they developed the Women's Empowerment Principles, a set of guidelines for companies to encourage gender parity and female empowerment at work. Suppliers to UN Women are encouraged to voluntarily sign a “*CEO statement of support*” to become signatories to these principles (UN Women, n.d.-c; Chu, 2022).

Moreover, UN Women has published several manuals and guidance notes on GRP, independently and in collaboration with other IGOs like ADB. These guidebooks also focus on sourcing from WOBs and inform companies about the barriers preventing women-owned enterprises from accessing and effectively utilizing local and global value chains along with offering concrete recommendations on how to increase the involvement of WOBs in procurement processes (UN Women, 2017). Through vendor awareness initiatives, UN Women actively collaborates with other IGOs and NGOs to advance GRP.

4.4.4 Asian Development Bank (ADB)

ADB was established in 1966 as a regional development organization, boasting 31 field offices worldwide and headquartered in Manila, Philippines. The Bank extends technical assistance, equity, guarantees, loans, and grants to its clients for development purposes (ADB, n.d.-a).

Gender equality has been a pivotal aspect of ADB's development endeavors, and it is highlighted as a driver of change in the ADB Strategy 2020 (ADB, 2008). For advancing gender equality, the Bank had in place a gender equality and women's empowerment operational plan from 2013 to 2020. This plan aimed to drive better gender equality outcomes through enhanced staff training, implementation, monitoring, and reporting of gender equality reports, and increased support for projects with gender mainstreaming targets through loans (ADB, 2013a).

In terms of procurement, the Bank upholds a fitness-for-purpose procurement framework, striving for better value for money through principles of fairness, economy, efficiency, transparency, and quality; fairness emphasizes equal opportunity and treatment for all eligible bidders, while value for money considers life-time costs, socio-economic, and environmental objectives, including gender equality (ADB, 2017). Even though open competition is encouraged, customized approaches may be applied if standardized methods prove ineffective. Quality is emphasized over price, with a focus on nurturing local industries (ADB, 2017).

Further, suppliers can participate in tenders as joint ventures, encouraging the involvement of WOBs when they can only fulfill a portion of the procurement requirements. Even though bidders from any eligible country are encouraged to take part in corporate procurement, national bids are prepared in the local language with payments made in the local currency to motivate local suppliers, whereas international advertising is done through website postings and widely circulated English-language newspapers (ADB, 2015). Information on procurement opportunities is readily available on their website, including answers on how-to's, policies, procedures, and other documents; there is also a dedicated procurement notice section for the opportunities available.

The ADB's procurement policy prioritizes sustainability by considering the total cost of ownership and the product's price vs quality to promote climate, biodiversity, and environment-friendly solutions (ADB, 2017). Additionally, the Bank's *Strategy 2030* aims to accelerate gender equality progress and reduce inequalities in at least 75 % of operations by 2030 (ADB, 2021b). The *ADB's General Conditions of Contract* (ADB, n.d.-b) is a complete document expressing the rights and obligations of ADB and the contractor when a tender is accepted. This document requires the contractor to submit a *Good Social Management Certificate* within 15 days of the contract coming into effect and then bi-annually; the document also includes clauses on gender equality in the workplace. Several outreach activities, such as seminars and presentations, are undertaken to advertise the bank's procurement opportunities, along with the possibility of receiving alerts on new offers. Furthermore, the Bank collaborates with other NGOs and IGOs to share their learnings and publish joint reports and guides, several of which are procurement related. The *Guideline on the Use of Consultants by ADB and its Borrowers* (ADB, 2013b) is another comprehensive document using gender-neutral language that sets clear expectations of the Bank and its requirements in the procurement activity for all suppliers, emphasizing equal access to opportunities and information.

4.5 Summary, Discussion of Findings, and Conclusion

4.5.1 Summary of findings

The following table answers the research questions stated at the beginning of this article and summarizes additional findings based on the overall availability of information (Table 4).

Summary of findings.				
Organization/Aspects	World Bank Group	UN Women	EBRD	ADB
Gender Equality Goals	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Gender-Responsive Corporate Procurement Efforts	Yes	N/A	No	N/A
Specific GRP targets	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Price vs Value for Money	Value for money	Value for money	Value for money	Value for money
E-Procurement	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Two-envelope bidding (Technical and Financial)	No	Yes	For bid values >120 K GBP	Yes
Easily accessible website	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Use of gender-neutral terms in procurement communication	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Collaboration with other IGOs and NGOs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Collection of gender-disaggregated statistics and other indicators	Yes	Yes	No	N/a
Gender training	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Gender impact assessment	Yes	N/A	No	N/A
Checklists, manuals, and handbook	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Monitoring and evaluation	Yes	N/A	No	N/A

Source: Author's own compilation.

Table 5: Summary of findings

4.5.2 Discussion of findings

The IGOs analyzed in this research are still in the beginning stages of incorporating GRP. With several initiatives to encourage WOB's participation, the World Bank Group is found to be leading the IGO category concerning corporate GRP. With active GRP monitoring in its supplier diversity initiatives, communication and outreach, and assessment of value for money achieved after the procurement ends, the bank group is taking diverse actions to encourage WOBs participation. It was also found that WBG encourages its primary suppliers to provide spending data about LGBT businesses and small business enterprises (World Bank, 2021), which is still not very common in public

institutions. The website section on “*Doing business with the World Bank*” and the vendor guides on corporate procurement (World Bank, 2017b) are easily accessible and well-composed, using gender-neutral grammar to address different stakeholders. Although the WBG has several approaches and strategies for increasing the proportion of WOBs in their corporate procurement, this can be improved further through clear communication with potential vendors and vendor-and-staff training. Currently, there is no tender alert system to notify registered vendors of new business opportunities. This could be improved to ease awareness of business opportunities for all businesses, including WOBs. Also, many gender and sustainable procurement initiatives are currently non-mandatory and recommendations only; their adoption is at the bidder's discretion, which could lead to reduced adoption; these should be moved towards mandatory criteria.

For EBRD, it was observed to have a thorough and transparent annual declaration report of corporate procurement spending, detailing the amount, the kind of selection (competitive or direct), the number of contracts awarded, and if new contracts were awarded or existing contracts were extended (EBRD, 2022). A dedicated *Work with Us* section on their website also explains all the details on rules, the procurement process, and how to register with the bank. The guidelines on becoming a supplier and procurement FAQs (EBRD, n.d.-d) are also very comprehensive. The pre-qualification stage in the procurement process allows suppliers who might not be adequately qualified individually to either avoid the costs associated with participating or to form a joint venture, consortium, or association (JVCA) (EBRD, 2012). This approach can increase their chances of success or lead them to consider working as subcontractors. It also benefits WOBs in their assessment of fulfilment capacity, motivating them to prepare better for future tenders and reducing their costs by not having to go through a lengthy procurement tendering process if they do not pre-qualify. Although there are several reports on gender inequality in the EBRD region (published by EBRD) with recommendations on reducing it and guidelines on GRP, the Bank is in the initial stages of GRP adoption, using non-MEAT selection and evaluation criteria. There is a vague mention of social sustainability in its request for proposals; this needs to be more straightforward and precise. In consultation with the Bank's representative, this research found that among sustainability factors, the Bank's corporate procurement is currently concentrating more on its climate commitments. Gender-responsiveness is not an explicit part of the EBRD's core corporate procurement requirements. EBRD commits to a range

of general sustainability principles; gender-responsiveness conditions could be best used under that principle. Currently, EBRD is not involved in GRP at their corporate procurement, and there are no GRP-related targets set or envisaged; however, economic inclusion and promoting gender equality are core part of the Bank's overall project strategy, and the technical competency of the bid reflects it through several gender equality considerations.

UN Women claims to have adopted methods to boost the business share of female vendors in UN Women's procurement budget and officially supports GRP as a crucial part of the answer to gender equality and empowering females; however, these tools were not accessible to the author, and neither any set-asides nor extra points for an organization identifying as WOB were noticed. Hence, no comments on their effectiveness can be provided.

Finally, despite ADB's strong emphasis on GRP, more mention of this needs to be made in their corporate procurement efforts. ADB does implement a fair and transparent system of bid disclosure with a public opening of the financial proposal (it has a two-envelope bidding system) for the firms and consultants with qualified technical proposals (ADB, 2015); this exercise is a great feedback mechanism for the unsuccessful bidders, including WOBs, to learn from successful bidders and could act as a motivation to do better in future bids. Furthermore, bid ranking is done by combining the points earned in the technical and financial evaluations (ADB, 2015); in this case, even if a WOB has a slightly premium price given their higher costs, they have an adequate chance to win the bid if they can score well in the technical evaluation.

4.5.3 Conclusion

This analysis has uncovered several considerations in IGO procurement. The in-depth interviews helped assess several concerns, solutions and approaches to GRP in IGOs and complemented the document analysis as well as validated them.

Several additional insights were uncovered during the interviews. For instance, one of the interviewees noted the vendor eligibility criteria, such as having specific years of experience or financial capacity to fulfill the requirements, etc., although could initially deter the participation of WOB, are necessary to establish the credibility of suppliers and guarantee services and goods. All the IGOs representatives investigated agreed on following the commonly known definition to define WOB as a for-profit business

enterprise, that regardless of its size, is at least 51 % owned, operated, and controlled by one or more women (Chin, 2017). However, one of the challenges faced is identifying WOBs that meet all the requirements and are competent enough to win contracts, otherwise strategies like quotas and reservations will remain unutilized. All the IGOs mentioned having a payment period of 30 days from receipt of an accurate invoice, which implies delayed payment is not a worry for their suppliers. However, none of the IGOs agreed on having a set aside or a certain quota for WOBs; instead, they focused on equipping WOBs with enough information and resources to motivate them to apply for public procurement notices and win bids to facilitate neutral and competitive procurement. Also, timely and dependable delivery of requirements matters more than anything else for the IGOs. One of the interviewees noted, in the case when a vendor is diverse but not dependable or lacks capacity; the IGOs cannot give them preferences since, as users of public funds, they aim for achieving the best value for money. Furthermore, at times, for procuring time-sensitive critical goods, the focus is on competence and the ability to quickly satisfy the buyer's needs; in such cases, set-asides can harm achieving these other operational objectives.

Gender specifics can be considered when establishing the technical requirements for goods, works, services, or consultancy services with gender-dependent characteristics. Awareness raising through dissemination of information, systematic inclusion in procurement planning and processes, and ensuring appropriate weightings in overall selection and evaluation criteria are necessary for assuring that all parties participating in the procurement processes understand and support GRP policies.

Similarly, collaboration among IGOs could be fostered through the alignment and standardization of requirements (including gender-responsive requirements), such as self-certification or a common certification, standard documents, and application forms, which could reduce the efforts of WOBs and motivate them to participate in procurement opportunities at several IGOs. This would also be beneficial since individual IGO spending power is small concerning corporate procurement compared to project procurement, where the volume of spending is significant, and GRP is more implementable since the higher an IGO's spending in a given market is, the more likely it can influence standards and practices. Furthermore, IGOs currently collaborate with NGOs working with WOBs to identify these businesses and inform them of opportunities.

The IGOs also agreed that the possibility to self-certify as a WOB is advantageous, this is also supported by existing literature illustrating the limited financial capacity of WOBs, for whom certification comes at an additional cost (Boateng and Poku, 2019; Coleman, 2002). The most common proposal was to allow WOBs to self-certify with the possibility of verifying their status/ownership at discretion. Moreover, it was suggested that the focus of GRP should extend beyond WOBs to include gender-responsive businesses. These businesses, regardless of ownership, have policies and objectives aimed at empowering minority genders. Supporting such businesses could yield overall benefits for both males and females.

Electronic procurement is a tool that can provide a just environment and equal access to opportunities for all kinds of organizations, be it a large-scale organization with entire departments committed to scouting procurement opportunities or a small WOB that lacks the human resources to find these opportunities by looking into several sources but can easily access the procurement portals for consolidated information search; this could reduce the barrier to entry as well. It is already in use by all the IGOs investigated.

Most IGOs use a two-stage bidding system where technical and price proposals are submitted separately but simultaneously. Initially, bids are evaluated based on technical competence and then on price, which can result in better overall value for money. The success of implementing GRP can be measured by tracking the volume and value of contracts awarded to these businesses. Small-scale, newly formed WOBs might not meet the financial stability and experience requirements to apply directly as suppliers, the IGOs encouraged WOBs to participate as subcontractors to gain the necessary experience, enabling them to apply as primary contractors in the future.

The focus for IGOs should also be on publishing the bid requirements as clearly as possible. By defining well the specifications, the IGOs can set the standards and expectations. Having a clear and concrete request will help WOBs prepare a competent bid, thus increasing their chances of success. Although most IGOs try to make their communication gender neutral as much as possible, there is a need to look deeper into it to ensure they do not fall victim to any unconscious bias, nor do the communications make any particular groups uncomfortable in pursuing procurement opportunities at IGOs.

In terms of value shaping, the role of corporate procurement is probably limited due to low spending and limited reach into broader society, as IGO's impact is usually determined by their projects rather than corporate procurement spend. However, for the overall holistic achievement of gender equality goals, corporate procurement cannot be left behind. IGOs' influence also depends on GRP's alignment with the national policy practices; if GRP is part of the national/local approach, it will be easier to get suppliers to respond to gender-responsive requirements as IGOs largely reflect the values of the societies they operate in, and, to some extent, help shape those.

All in all, representation matters, and giving visibility to gender-responsive corporate procurement will help create this to normalize women-owned and women-empowering businesses as suppliers. GRP is about furthering gender inclusion through economic empowerment and considering the needs of all genders in developing societies. There is the gender equality goal itself, which is part of the agenda of most IGOs, as well as the SDGs (Goal 5). Also, several other SDGs are impacted by the degree of gender inequality in society such as aims to reduce poverty and hunger, improve health and wellbeing, reducing inequalities, etc. (UN SDG, n.d.). To summarize, IGOs are vital in reducing gender inequalities, and corporate procurement should not be left behind.

4.6 Contribution, Limitation and Further Extension

This study adds to the prevailing discourse on promoting gender equality through procurement from a not yet investigated corporate procurement perspective, providing a more nuanced and sophisticated understanding of how IGOs facilitate GRP. Overall, it adds to the theory of gender studies, procurement and female entrepreneurship by examining the underlying factors contributing to gender disparities of WOBs and summarizing interventions used by IGOs to address them. It advances our knowledge of gender mainstreaming, policy implementation and change management by investigating how IGOs implement GRP in their corporate endeavors. It sheds light on the efforts of IGOs in advancing gender mainstreaming agendas and identifies opportunities for enhancing gender-related outcomes by shaping impactful procurement policies.

Furthermore, examining the adoption and implementation of gender-responsive policies within IGOs contributes to feminist institutional theories, highlighting how IGOs use procurement to disrupt current notions of gender. Feminist institutionalism, as a burgeoning subfield of feminist political science, asserts the significance of institutions,

highlighting how their structure influences their capacity to address gendered issues and promote women's representation (Thomson, 2018), thereby supporting this study on GRP.

Moreover, the research unveils various managerial implications. Primarily, it raises awareness of the prevailing gender inequalities encountered by WOBs, shedding light on the initiatives undertaken by prominent organizations in this domain. Strategies like training and capacity building, establishing performance metrics and evaluations, and pursuing gender inclusion goals represent actionable practices that potential public procurement suppliers can emulate. Also, identifying supplier-diversity programs as integral to risk management and adopting gender-responsive policies fostering equality within IGOs expands these entities' operational landscape. This expansion is facilitated through collaborative efforts and knowledge sharing, fostering enhanced capacity management, extensive networking, and an overall upswing in operating scale. Monitoring and reporting on progress in gender equality by IGOs can enhance understanding of the efforts made relative to expectations, the effectiveness of these interventions, and provide an overview of their comparative progress.

This research also has some limitations; firstly, only four existing IGOs were analyzed. The limited sample size prevents the conclusions from being instantly generalizable, even if most IGOs have comparable stakeholder objectives, strategic goals, and operating processes (Wild and Zhou, 2011). Additionally, the deductions drawn are supported by a small number of interviews and are based on information currently obtainable online. Due to time constraints, it is plausible that substantial confidential and yet-to-be-published data required for a complete understanding of corporate GRP practices was missed. Nonetheless, these results provide an overview of the operations of IGOs, and the findings are indispensable to a better understanding of GRP.

To improve generalizability, future research questions may explore larger IGO samples and use more thorough data-gathering techniques, such as in-depth multiple-stakeholder interviews and surveys. By taking this approach, the constraints of the current study would be addressed, and the intricacies of corporate GRP in the context of IGOs could be further deconstructed. Nevertheless, the establishment of women empowerment and gender mainstreaming policies has catalyzed legislative changes and initiatives to promote equality and addressed prejudice within legal systems; and the role of IGOs has

been critical. Analyzing the IGO's own corporate GRP practices, this research contributes to the investigation if the IGOs follow what they preach about fostering gender equality.

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5. Supporting the Participation of Women-Owned Businesses in Public Procurement

Abstract

This study investigates the barriers and opportunities for women-owned businesses (WOBs) to participate in public procurement, exploring critical issues such as systemic challenges, the effectiveness of e-procurement and certification, and the comparative advantages of public versus private procurement for WOBs. It examines strategies to encourage WOB involvement, including the impact of dividing larger contracts into smaller lots and the merits of goal-based versus quota-based approaches in preferential treatment policies. Additionally, the research assesses how supporting WOBs can enhance supplier diversity and foster gender equality in public procurement systems.

Using semi-structured interviews with 22 participants—including WOBs, public buyers, and procurement and gender experts from 16 countries—the study employs thematic analysis to uncover recurring themes. Key findings reveal systemic challenges and structural inequities, emphasizing the role of public buyers in addressing these barriers through targeted interventions. The research also explores nuanced and novel issues, such as the paradox of dividing contracts into lots, the trade-offs between goal-based and quota-based approaches, and the rise of dominant WOBs, contributing new insights to the existing literature. A dedicated case study further provides a practical lens into these dynamics, showcasing how state-level policies and initiatives can foster WOB participation.

Keywords

Women-owned businesses (WOBs); public procurement; gender equality; supplier diversity; gender responsive public procurement

5.1 Introduction

Approximately half of government spending and around 20% of a nation's GDP can be attributed to public expenditure (OECD, 2019), giving the government market-shaping powers. Consequently, gender-responsive public procurement (GRPP) involves leveraging the state's purchasing power as a strategic policy instrument to promote gender equality, aligned with the UN Sustainable Development Goals of Gender Equality (SDG5) (Bissat, 2022) and Reduced Inequalities (SDG10). GRPP can extend support to

fostering women's empowerment by encouraging women-owned businesses' (WOB/s) participation in the supply chain. Furthermore, sourcing from diverse suppliers including WOBs also constitutes a key component of risk management and supplier diversity initiatives for purchasers.

GRPP is critical because women and WOBs have been disadvantaged and underrepresented in public procurement due to issues like lack of training, access to information, capacity, networking, financial and other constraints (Basheka & Auriacombe, 2020; Orser et al., 2021; Martínez-Rodríguez, et al., 2022). Restricted access to information and communications technology, infrastructure, a shortage of managerial expertise and skilled employees for preparing high-quality proposals; insufficient funding to cover bidding expenses with limited access to external funding and higher interest rates impede the growth of WOBs and compel them to exit markets (Coleman, 2000; Rasheed, 2004; Basheka & Auriacombe, 2020; Bissat, 2022). Hence, neglecting gender equality considerations from both the demand and supply sides in public procurement can potentially divide efforts in advocating for women's empowerment and inclusive development (Nyeck, 2015). Several challenges, such as non-compliance with policies/regulations, inadequate planning, insufficient measures for monitoring and evaluation, and unethical buyer-supplier behavior, are still a hindrance to (gender-responsive) procurement (Fourie & Malan, 2020), and until these issues are resolved, achieving gender equality through procurement is far-fetched.

In contrast to the extensive literature on sustainable public procurement, more research has yet to investigate GRPP to explore its potential and current utilization (Grandia & Meehan, 2017). As Vyas-Doorgaprasad and Kinoti (2015) point out, investigating the underdeveloped and under-researched relationship between gender and public procurement practices is imperative for achieving sustainable economic development; the author believes the current study is timely for the following reasons: there is no existing study that covers all the research questions mentioned below on such a broad scale; hence, it bridges a significant research gap in the literature, since, although the current literature talks about gender equality and gender-responsive procurement, examination of the extent of their implementation to support WOBs is lacking. Such an overview is helpful to better understand the field and further the research on GRPP. A comprehension of gender equality and public tendering processes necessitates an awareness of public administration procedures and the factors that support and obstruct the inclusion of gender equality in public procurement (Sarter, 2020); the current study

aims to do so by analyzing the problems faced by WOBs participating in public procurement, understanding the role of e-procurement and certification as well as unveiling ways in which WOBs' participation can be encouraged in public procurement. Alongside, a case study is also presented to showcase success story.

The research utilizes aspects of contingency theories (decision as a process that begins with consideration of environmental factors such as culture, industry, organization, personal, social, and economic), transaction cost economics (cost-benefit analysis), social exchange theory (long term supplier-buyer relationship building), etc. (Hawkins et al., 2011) to finalize the research questions. The following research questions are addressed:

RQ1: What are the barriers for WOBs to participate in public procurement?

RQ2: Is E-procurement useful for supporting WOBs in public procurement?

RQ3: Is certification as a WOB advantageous?

RQ4: Is supporting WOBs in public procurement useful for supplier diversity?

RQ5: Is public procurement more favorable than private procurement for WOBs?

RQ6: How can WOB's participation in public procurement encouraged?

RQ7: In the case of preferential treatment is goal-based approach better than quota?

RQ8: Can dividing larger contracts into smaller lots attract more WOBs to public procurement?

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: first we review the relevant literature to ease the understanding of pertaining concepts. Subsequently, the research methodology and the research outputs are illustrated followed by a discussion and conclusion section.

5.2 Review of Literature

This section reviews and summarizes various excerpts of literature relevant to the current study. First the current status of WOBs in public procurement is briefly outlined, then the concept of supplier diversity and how it supports inclusion of WOBs is shared. Following this, the broader concept of GRPP within which inclusion of WOBs fall is

talked about before moving to the relevant literature on the concept of price and value for money, as the concept of value for money is often prioritized by public buyers who support social goals such as supporting WOBs.

5.2.1 WOBs and public procurement

In the context of public procurement, a women-owned business is typically defined as a business that is either entirely or majority-owned (>51%) by one or more women along with them having active control in the long-term decision-making and the daily management and administration of business operations (Chin, 2017). Several authors analyzing different country contexts unanimously agree that WOBs face comparatively more hardships to participate and grow in public procurement (Rasheed, 2004; Basheka, 2018; Kithatu-Kiwekete, 2018). Through the research on gender-responsive procurement (GRP) in Uganda, Basheka (2018) also found that most women and their businesses involved in public procurement were in the supply and trade sectors, which usually have lower procurement volumes than the more lucrative works and consulting tenders. Public procurement has a responsibility to promote labor participation among women and reduce the gender gap (Pierri et al., 2021) as it stands out as a critical source of sales in several fields, including the defense, health and research-related sectors, the construction, energy, and transportation equipment industries (Choi, 2010). GRPP may be the principal means by which WOBs might penetrate these typically male-dominated industries. Nevertheless, in an environment where public procurement participation is gradually encouraged, WOBs still need to overcome obstacles because they have inadequate support networks, limited access to finance and lack of any comprehensive training program that intends to increase their involvement in public procurement (Basheka, 2018).

5.2.2 Supplier diversity and inclusion of WOBs

Supplier diversity in procurement pertains to the strategic procurement of goods and services from companies run by visible minority groups, such as WOBs, disabled veteran businesses, regional and other recognized minority business enterprises (Adobor & McMullen, 2007; IFC, 2018). It not only addresses the social aspect of supply chain management known as socially responsible buying or sourcing (Zorzini et al., 2015) but also serves as a risk management tool by ensuring multiple sources of products, rather than depending on only one supply source thereby reducing supply-related uncertainties

and dependency in terms of critical resource. Even though handling multiple supply sources is more complex, web-based supplier management solutions often known as e-procurement tools are now making it possible to handle a variety of suppliers more closely, optimize operations, and ultimately reduce procurement expenses (Burke et al., 2006). Furthermore, rather than buying directly from multiple small suppliers, the government can incentivize the non-minority producers to partner with WOBs as subcontractors or Tier II suppliers for contracts award (Porter, 2019).

Minority suppliers like WOBs must recognize that, despite diversity initiatives like quotas, success in public procurement depends on continuously improving competencies, fostering learning, and building strategic partnerships (Adobor & McMullen, 2007). Likewise, for the implementing organization, supplier diversity should be measured not by spending on minority organizations but by its broader societal impact (Miguel & Tonelli, 2023). To emphasize, multiple supplier diversity initiatives have demonstrated how public procurement expands entrepreneurial opportunities for minority and underrepresented groups, including WOBs, by integrating those often excluded from the labor market (Friedman, 2014).

Overall, enabling government procurement for WOBs can enhance women's economic benefits, diversify supply chains to reduce risks (Kirton, 2013), and foster competition, potentially lowering procurement costs (Popović-Pantić, 2020).

5.2.3 Implementing gender responsive public procurement (GRPP)

GRPP incorporates gender equality into public procurement by ensuring contracts, processes, and services address gender inequalities (EIGE, n.d.) as public purchasers operate within legislative and institutional frameworks that ensure efficiency, fairness, and transparency (Kumar, 2022). While preferential programs and set asides may appear discriminatory, they are sometimes necessary (Oluka et al., 2020) to promote social goals, supplier diversity, and employment (Cravero, 2017). To increase WOBs' participation in public procurement, governments must implement policies based on a clear understanding of participation barriers (Basheka & Auriacombe, 2020). Countries that have enhanced opportunities for women have invested in targeted training (Basheka, 2018) and conducted gender analysis as a first step toward integrating social responsibility in procurement (Djan, 2015).

Similarly, a key challenge in procurement is selecting the most suitable methods of conducting it with proper justifications (Amemba et al., 2013). One such method is E-procurement, which automates procurement by integrating web-based services (Nawi et al., 2016). This improves communication with suppliers, streamlines purchasing, supplier management, and promotes productivity, transparency, and cooperation (Croom & Brandon-Jones, 2005; Toktaş-Palut et al., 2014; Nawi et al., 2016). Despite its benefits, full implementation is hindered by challenges like cost concerns, inadequate IT infrastructure on the part of both supplier and buyer, and resistance to change (Toktaş-Palut et al., 2014). Although e-procurement might limit small SMEs who are not e-enabled (Walker & Brammer, 2012), it supports WOBs with adequate IT infrastructure by reducing search costs, marketing spend, improving supplier governance (Croom & Brandon-Jones, 2005), and lower barriers to entry through simplified regulatory processes (Nawi et al., 2006).

Even then, several obstacles hinder WOBs' participation. Procurement officers may not recognize how to support the women's agenda within the law, compounded by a perceived lack of women bidders and poor performance from previous winners due to capacity issues (Basheka, 2018). Additional challenges include inconsistent definitions of WOBs, lack of standardized targets for procurement allocations, and the absence of a uniform monitoring framework (Basheka, 2018). Furthermore, the lack of gender-specific statistics on government contractors suggests policymakers may not fully understand how well women entrepreneurs, particularly in SMEs, succeed in securing contracts (Kirton, 2013). Gender-sensitive data is essential for procurement planning, ensuring that it aligns with gender equality standards (Djan, 2015). Overall, data structure, disaggregation, and quality issues create significant barriers to evidence-based policies supporting WOBs through GRPP (Bissat, 2022).

5.2.4 Price vs value for money

Public procurement has historically prioritized economic efficiency, focusing on cost to obtain the necessary quantity and quality at the lowest price (Cravero, 2017). This is evolving into the concept of value for money, which now considers price, quality, and broader economic, social, and environmental value, aiming to award the most economically advantageous tender (MEAT) based on total ownership and life-cycle costs (Kumar, 2022) benefitting WOBs. However, public buyers face challenges balancing MEAT objectives, such as quality, timeline, risks, socio-economic goals, and

competition, against cost pressures (Thai, 2009). Additionally, having gender-sensitive procurement policies that focus on value for money does not guarantee increased benefits for WOBs without reliable, disaggregated data on their performance (Nyeck, 2023) and if not implemented properly.

5.3 Research Methodology

This study employed semi-structured first-hand interviews as the primary data collection method to explore the nuanced and context-specific experiences of WOBs, public buyers, gender and procurement experts in public procurement. This approach enabled a balance between structured questioning and the flexibility to delve deeper into participants' unique perspectives. Pre-defined questions ensured that central themes—inclusion of WOBs, motivations, participation challenges, and potential interventions—were consistently addressed. Simultaneously, the open-ended format allowed participants to elaborate on significant issues, often uncovering insights beyond the predefined scope.

Tailored strategies were employed to identify interviewees: women business owners were identified and contacted through their testimonials found on the WEConnect International website (<https://weconnectinternational.org/>; a non-profit organization that certifies WOBs), while public buyers, gender and procurement experts were approached via direct emails and the author's professional network. The sampling strategy was based on the availability and willingness of participants to contribute. While outreach efforts targeted a much broader range of candidates across various countries, only 22 individuals from 16 countries agreed to participate, which included eight public buyers, nine public procurement and gender experts, and five WOBs actively or indirectly engaged in public sector procurement participating both at municipal and national level. Furthermore, the WOBs had worked as primary supplier, sub-contractors as well as in partnership arrangements. The participants represented insights and experiences from diverse regions, including Asia, Africa, the USA, and the European Union, offering perspectives shaped by distinct economic and political realities. For WOBs, the enterprises were qualified as such if they were 51% owned and operated by one or more women.

Interviews were conducted between October 2024 and January 2025 in English language via Microsoft Teams, lasting an average of 75 minutes. Along with ethical clearance from the institutional committee, informed consent forms were required from participants, ensuring that their identities and professional affiliations would remain confidential. The

data collected was manually coded and analyzed using thematic analysis. This process involved clustering participant responses to identify recurring themes and sub-themes, which formed the foundation of this study's findings.

5.4 Research Findings

This analysis explores key themes emerging from interviews with various stakeholders involved in public procurement, with a particular focus on supporting the participation of WOBs in public procurement processes. These are aggregated based on the earlier stated research questions:

RQ1: What are the barriers for WOBs to participate in public procurement?

WOBs encounter numerous barriers that impede their effective participation in public procurement. These challenges, deeply rooted in structural and systemic inequities, disproportionately affect women entrepreneurs, particularly those operating as small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) or micro-enterprises.

Many WOBs interviewed, despite over five years of experience in public procurement, faced significant challenges due to limited expertise and resources. Most operated as micro-enterprises or sole proprietors, focusing on services rather than production or construction. Their small scale, combined with limited staff and procurement knowledge, made it difficult to navigate complex processes. A key issue was the lack of digital skills, especially in rural areas with limited internet access and digital literacy. Additionally, WOBs are often overwhelmed by the excessive number of procurement opportunities, forcing them to allocate resources based on cost-benefit analysis and perceived success likelihood, limiting their participation.

The complexity of procurement procedures is another major barrier for WOBs, with many perceiving the processes as overly complicated and lacking transparency, deterring participation. This is particularly evident in sectors where women are underrepresented, as WOBs tend to be concentrated in low-value, service-oriented industries like catering, cleaning, and hospitality, while male-dominated sectors like energy, technology, and construction remain less accessible. This sectoral segregation limits their access to high value contracts and reinforces structural inequalities in procurement opportunities.

Certain procurement criteria, like turnover thresholds, multi-year financial statements, sustainability plans, and specific certifications, are burdensome for smaller or new

businesses with limited resources and operating scale. The administrative burden of lengthy bid preparations and excessive documentation adds to these challenges. Access to financial capital is also a critical barrier for WOBs, particularly those seeking to scale. Many women entrepreneurs face financial risk aversion due to unequal family responsibilities and lack of financial buffers. Furthermore, high upfront costs, such as insurance and bid-writing fees, deter WOBs unless they see a high chance of success. Delayed payments worsen financial instability, disrupting cash flow and limiting their ability to participate in multiple tenders.

Public procurement systems often lack gender-responsive policies and frameworks to support WOBs, with the absence of gender-disaggregated data hindering targeted policy development. Without clear metrics, measuring progress or identifying areas for intervention is challenging. The lack of a national definition for WOBs complicates efforts to track their participation and provide targeted support. GRPP remains underutilized, with limited government commitment to using procurement to address gender inequality. Country-specific challenges and varying procurement practices further complicate the issue, affecting the consistency and effectiveness of support. Despite efforts to support SMEs, gender-specific challenges for WOBs remain largely unaddressed, resulting in their low representation in high-value contracts. GRPP is often relegated to the margins of policy discussions, without centralized government support, inevitably leading public procurement systems ill-equipped to promote inclusive participation.

A systemic issue is also the lack of professionalization among procurement officials. Many lack the training and awareness to implement gender-sensitive policies, often excluding WOBs by failing to apply gender-responsive measures. For instance, standardized procurement requirements tend to overlook WOBs' unique needs, applying a one-size-fits-all approach that disadvantages smaller businesses. WOBs also face operational challenges, such as time constraints due to caregiving responsibilities, limiting their ability to engage in complex procurement processes. Intense within-sector competition reduces profitability, particularly for smaller businesses that struggle to offer competitive pricing. Direct procurement methods, like below-threshold purchases, can be more accessible but often require significant discounts, further limiting margins. Larger companies, with economies of scale, ability to offer volume discounts, customization, state of the art technology, fulfill more easily sustainability requirements

further disadvantage WOBs operating at smaller scales. These operational and structural barriers create a complex set of obstacles for WOBs in public procurement.

RQ2: Is E-procurement useful for supporting WOBs in public procurement?

The growing use of e-procurement systems in public procurement presents both opportunities and challenges for WOBs. These systems centralize procurement opportunities, increasing visibility and offering features like tender notifications, filtering by specific criteria, and access to training resources, creating a more level playing field offering opportunities that were previously inaccessible to WOBs due to lack of awareness of their existence. E-procurement also reduces paperwork, simplifies bid submissions through standardized digital formats, to promote environmental sustainability and reduce administrative burden. In regions with well-integrated systems, e-procurement also reduces human interaction, minimizing discrimination and corruption risks for WOBs.

Despite the benefits of e-procurement, WOBs face several challenges. A major issue is the lack of centralized portals at various government levels, where all tenders advertised could be accessed in one place. Currently, tender notifications are scattered across multiple platforms like government portals, private websites, newspapers, and even physical notice boards, complicating the process for WOBs, who must spend significant time and resources searching for opportunities. This fragmentation is especially burdensome for smaller businesses lacking dedicated staff. Additionally, while e-procurement systems often store basic supplier information, the absence of standardized bidding formats requires WOBs to start from scratch with each tender, adding complexity.

Although e-procurement systems enhance transparency, accessibility, and inclusivity, their effectiveness is hindered by the digital divide. Many WOBs, particularly those in agriculture or small-scale manufacturing, lack the necessary digital skills, infrastructure, technological adoption/awareness or resources. Governments must recognize the unique challenges faced by different WOBs and offer support through mentoring, digital literacy programs, targeted training, accessible funding, and user-friendly platforms. The overwhelming volume of notifications from e-procurement platforms is another challenge. WOBs often receive alerts for tenders outside their expertise, necessitating

manual filtering to identify relevant opportunities. This inefficiency calls for more refined filtering systems that align better with WOBs' capabilities and preferences.

E-procurement also highlights broader structural challenges within public procurement. The lack of end-to-end digital systems in many countries, particularly in Africa, limits the transformative potential of e-procurement. In these contexts, reliance on paper-based processes persists, fostering inefficiencies and increasing the likelihood of corruption. While digital systems can reduce such risks by promoting transparency, their uneven implementation leaves many WOBs at a disadvantage. For instance, the absence of consistent internet access and infrastructure in rural areas exacerbates the digital exclusion faced by women entrepreneurs. To sum up, while e-procurement systems have made strides in improving transparency and accessibility in public procurement, they are not in their current state without challenges for WOBs.

RQ3: Is certification as a WOB advantageous?

Certification as a WOB offers substantial advantages, particularly for businesses seeking greater visibility and access to procurement opportunities. Most WOBs in this study were certified by WEConnect International, a globally recognized organization certifying women entrepreneurs. Certification enhances credibility and visibility, enabling businesses to connect with multinational corporations and public entities actively seeking diverse suppliers. It serves as a hallmark of legitimacy, making certified businesses more attractive to buyers committed to sustainability and gender equality.

The benefits of certification go beyond recognition. Membership in organizations like WEConnect provides access to training programs, seminars, and networking events that enhance business acumen and market reach. Certification is particularly effective for WOBs entering male-dominated industries, such as oil and engineering, where supplier diversity programs favor certified-businesses. Additionally, organizations such as the United Nations often require certification as part of their procurement criteria, making it a critical enabler for WOBs to secure contracts.

Alternatives to third-party certification can also support WOB's participation while addressing cost-related barriers. Some public buyers have developed their own certification programs that impose no direct costs on businesses. These programs may include rigorous requirements, such as documentation on ownership and operational structure to ensure authenticity but can reduce financial burdens for smaller enterprises.

Similarly, self-certification allows businesses to identify as WOBs without external verification. However, this approach requires mechanisms for validating claims as women-owned, through audits or external reviews by independent organizations whenever needed, to prevent misrepresentation. State managed public registries offer another viable alternative where buyers can verify ownership details. Such systems streamline the verification process and avoid excluding smaller businesses that cannot afford third-party certification. However, their success depends on sufficient infrastructure and robust governance to ensure accuracy and broader reach.

While certification opens doors to diverse procurement opportunities, interviewees emphasized that sustained success depends on quality, competitiveness, and active engagement in professional networks. Certification should not be the sole qualifying criterion, as it may inadvertently exclude small or micro-WOBs unable to meet their financial or administrative demands. Instead, pre-market consultations can identify feasible certification and alternative verification methods that balance inclusivity with accountability.

RQ4: Is supporting WOBs in public procurement useful for supplier diversity?

In regions where public procurement programs aim to foster supplier diversity and inclusion, a common strategy is to provide incentives for including diverse and under-represented businesses in procurement processes. For example, extra points may be awarded in the proposal evaluation if the bidder includes subcontracting plans with WOBs.

However, while such initiatives exist, they do not always place a strong emphasis on gender, leaving an opportunity for more targeted gender-responsive approaches, even when the use of GRPP as a supplier diversity strategy holds significant potential in reducing market monopolies. By supporting a more diverse supplier base, GRPP can provide opportunities for women-owned SMEs to compete more effectively. In turn, this contributes to a more balanced and inclusive economy, offering WOBs the chance to enter markets that may have previously been inaccessible. Encouraging WOB participation through GRPP and supplier diversity initiatives can stimulate the economic growth of these businesses, helping them develop capacity and increase market share over time.

However, it is important to recognize that WOBs often face initial barriers to enter public procurement markets. To overcome these, they may need mentoring and coaching to build the skills required for larger-scale engagements. One way to facilitate this growth is by allowing WOBs to first operate as tier 2 or tier 3 suppliers within larger contracts. This pathway provides a lower-risk opportunity for both WOBs and public buyers to develop trust and understand each other's operational capabilities. As WOBs gain experience, they can gradually move into higher tiers, thus becoming more integrated into procurement ecosystems, making them an integral part of public procurement.

From a supplier diversity perspective, including WOBs also offers a strategic advantage for public procurers. By identifying suppliers with potential and nurturing relationships with them, public buyers can avoid the risks associated with overdependence on a small number of suppliers. Supplier diversity not only mitigates this risk but also supports innovation and competitiveness, as diverse suppliers bring new perspectives and ideas to the table. While initially, working with WOBs might seem costly due to the need for investments in training, organizing events, and improving information availability, the long-term benefits far outweigh these initial expenses as a diverse supplier base enhances the overall procurement process, making it more resilient, competitive, and sustainable. Over time, the gains from supplier diversity, including reduced costs, increased innovation, and a more equitable market, prove to be a valuable investment.

RQ5: Is public procurement more favorable than private procurement for WOBs?

Public procurement is a highly regulated sector which, due to its predefined laws, transparent processes, and adherence to principles of equal treatment, offers an environment where tenders are evaluated based on objective criteria. However, in practice, incumbent suppliers may have an advantage due to their familiarity with the procurement process and their previous successful delivery of work. This preference for established suppliers can create a barrier for new entrants, particularly WOBs, who may face challenges in breaking into markets dominated by long-term suppliers with proven track records. Although public procurement aims to level the playing field, such biases can still persist, potentially undermining the opportunities available to emerging WOBs.

Even then, for many WOBs, public procurement presents an attractive market due to its stability, size, and the potential for long-term contracts that provide consistent revenue streams. Public sector contracts offer significant growth opportunities, particularly in

regions where diversity and inclusivity are prioritized in procurement policies. The prospect of gaining reputation, building credibility, and expanding market reach through successful public sector engagements motivates many WOBs to pursue these opportunities.

However, most WOBs do not limit themselves to public sector procurement but also engage in private sector contracts. This dual engagement allows businesses to diversify their client base and mitigate risks associated with depending on one sector. While public procurement provides stability and long-term benefits, the private sector is often more attractive due to its flexibility in payment terms, contract structures, and opportunities for innovation. The private sector's less bureaucratic and agile processes appeal to WOBs that are looking for speed and fewer administrative hurdles. In contrast, the public sector's rigid processes and bureaucratic nature can be deterrent.

Public procurement does, however, have a distinct advantage when it comes to feedback mechanisms. In the public sector, providing feedback to bidders is a legal requirement, which means WOBs can obtain valuable insights into their performance and areas for improvement. This is not always the case in the private sector, where feedback is often discretionary and depends on the buyer's openness. This transparency in the public sector is a significant advantage for WOBs looking to refine their processes and increase their chances of success in future bids. That said, some WOBs had expressed concerns about the lengthy, time-consuming nature of public procurement processes. The extensive requirements and the high level of competition can make it difficult for WOBs to succeed, especially when faced with issues such as corruption and favoritism in certain cases. The complexities and delays involved in securing public sector contracts often discourage some businesses from pursuing them, particularly when the chances of success seem limited. As a result, many WOBs prefer to maintain a balance between both public and private sector contracts, using public procurement as a reliable avenue of income while diversifying risk by engaging in more flexible private sector opportunities with fewer barriers to entry and documentation requirements.

In the private sector, the inclusion of SMEs and WOBs is often more straightforward. Private companies are not subject to the same regulatory constraints as public entities, allowing them more freedom to engage diverse suppliers. This lack of regulation makes it easier for private companies to establish relationships with WOBs, offering more opportunities for inclusion. Working with WOBs aligns with their corporate social

responsibility objectives helping them meet their Environmental, Social, and Governance compliance goals. On the other hand, while public procurement is less financially rewarding for WOBs due to smaller profit margins, growing competition, and the focus of public buyers on lowest price leading them to often sell at negligible profits, it plays a crucial role in branding and to establish business credibility. Successfully securing public contracts can significantly enhance a WOB's reputation and increase their visibility in the market, opening doors to more opportunities, particularly in high-value contracts, both public and private.

In some regions, the dynamics between public and private procurement differs. A WOB based in Japan, for instance, shared that being a WOB did not provide any advantage in securing public sector contracts. However, in the private sector, her status as a WOB was valued, as private clients tend to prioritize diversity in their supply chains. While public procurement remains attractive, many WOBs find they secure more private sector contracts after engaging in public procurement due to reputation-building and polishing their business management skills through navigating the complexities of public procurement.

Despite the advantages that public procurement offers, public sector contracts are often seen as having more red tape, with longer, more complex procedures compared to the private sector's more streamlined processes. The large volume of private sector opportunities available also makes it less essential for many WOBs to pursue public sector contracts, especially when they can access more immediate, flexible, and profitable deals in the private market. Nonetheless, the public sector continues to offer stability and credibility, which remains an essential consideration for WOBs seeking long-term growth and market presence.

RQ6: How can WOB's participation in public procurement be encouraged?

Increasing the participation of WOBs in public procurement requires addressing structural barriers, promoting capacity building, implementing targeted strategies and fostering an inclusive procurement ecosystem.

One of the critical steps is creating opportunities for networking and raising awareness about procurement processes. Initiatives such as regular (virtual) meetings, video tutorials and pre-market consultations can facilitate connections between WOBs and procurement officers while helping women entrepreneurs understand market

expectations and prepare effectively. These events provide an opportunity for WOBs to interact directly with buyers, learn about procurement requirements, and assess their capabilities. Expanding such efforts to both offline and online platforms, especially post-COVID-19, has proven beneficial for WOBs that are able to only participate remotely. Public buyers can further support networking by organizing supplier meet-and-greet events or matchmaking sessions that encourage collaborations between smaller WOBs and larger firms, fostering mentorship and the exchange of best practices.

A significant barrier for WOBs lies in the complexity of procurement processes, which are often seen as complicated, unfamiliar, and burdened with excessive administrative requirements, discouraging smaller WOBs. The lack of standardization across different contracting authorities, which often require varying formats and information, also creates inefficiencies that discourage participation. Addressing these inconsistencies through standardized formats of commonly requested documents, eliminating duplication, and providing clear guidelines could save time and reduce errors. Establishing a centralized and well-maintained supplier registry system could further streamline participation by enabling WOBs to submit documentation once and update only when necessary. Additionally, implementing practices such as publishing procurement plans in advance and ensuring that procurement requests are widely circulated can improve transparency and provide WOBs with adequate preparation time. Providing personalized post-bidding feedback also improves transparency and motivation to participate again even when bids were unsuccessful initially.

Also, WOBs frequently face challenges due to insufficient technical expertise, limited financial capacity, and a lack of dedicated manpower to identify and pursue procurement opportunities. Smaller businesses, especially those newly established or operating on a micro-scale, often lack the resources to meet stringent procurement requirements. Providing technical assistance in areas such as tender writing, contract management, execution and compliance, financial management, understanding complex procurement specifications can help bridge these gaps. Capacity-building initiatives should include sector-specific training tailored to industries where WOBs are underrepresented, encouraging their participation in high-value or manufacturing sectors. Training efforts must go beyond knowledge transfer to include resource expansion and retention of skilled staff within WOBs.

Procurement officers often favor large, well-established firms, creating additional challenges for WOBs. Introducing measures such as partial bids, division of contracts into smaller lots, and preferences for partnerships or consortiums involving WOBs can level the playing field. Below-threshold purchases, commonly used for routine goods and services, can be a gateway for WOBs to gain experience and build capacity. However, such measures should not confine WOBs to micro-procurements indefinitely but rather act as a steppingstone toward larger opportunities. Strategic policies that prioritize quality and sustainability over price can further level the playing field.

Subcontracting offers another pathway for WOBs, especially those with limited capacity. Public buyers can encourage primary contractors to include WOBs in critical processes as sub-suppliers, boosting their participation, provided that safeguards are in place to ensure fair treatment, timely payments, and skill development for subcontractor-WOBs. Financial constraints, such as cash flow issues caused by untimely payments, disproportionately affect WOBs. Implementing timely payment policies such as milestone-based payments rather than one-time payment on project completion or introducing mechanisms to ensure that WOB subcontractors are paid directly can mitigate these challenges. Flexible insurance requirements, such as conditional activation upon contract award, can also reduce the financial burden on small sized WOBs. Public buyers must ensure that contracts are awarded based not solely on price but also on quality and sustainability, reducing the likelihood of WOBs being outcompeted by abnormally low bids.

Social and cultural barriers also significantly impact WOB participation. In some cultures, the idea that women should not out-earn their husbands creates additional barriers. Addressing these deeply rooted norms requires societal change, including better support systems for shared caregiving responsibilities and initiatives to challenge traditional gender roles. Family and community support, as well as financial assistance, play crucial roles in helping women scale up their businesses. Raising awareness about opportunities present in sectors where women are traditionally underrepresented, such as manufacturing and STEM fields, can inspire more women to pursue careers and businesses in these areas.

Strategic use of public procurement also requires buyers to adopt a mindset that values inclusivity and gender responsiveness. This can be facilitated by training procurement officials to recognize and address unconscious biases, ensuring that procurement policies

prioritize inclusivity, and integrating gender equality into national public procurement frameworks. Horizontal measures, such as training and technical support, should be complemented by vertical measures, like quotas and market reservations, with careful monitoring to avoid market distortions. Promoting community-focused procurement that prioritizes local WOBs can also benefit marginalized groups.

Data collection is a vital component of implementing effective GRPP. Collecting and analyzing gender-disaggregated data on suppliers can help track progress, identify gaps, and inform policy adjustments. Enhanced market research and consultation, including pre-market assessments, can help contracting authorities understand the capacity and needs of WOBs, enabling better-targeted interventions. Feedback mechanisms, such as detailed post-bid evaluations, can help unsuccessful bidders improve their competitiveness for future opportunities.

Lastly, collaboration with financial institutions, providing targeted incentives for WOBs, and leveraging technology to improve transparency and efficiency in procurement processes are essential for creating an ecosystem that supports the active participation of WOBs in public procurement.

RQ7: In the case of preferential treatment is goal-based approach better than quota?

Public procurement policies in various countries are increasingly adopting preferential schemes, such as set-asides, quotas, and incentive points, to promote the participation of WOBs. These measures aim to correct historical imbalances and ensure that WOBs have equal opportunities. Quotas were seen as a necessary tool by quite a few public procurement experts interviewed and appreciated by WOBs to address systemic discrimination rather than being discriminatory themselves.

Even while quotas are typically viewed as an essential instrument for advancing gender equality, their effectiveness hinges on having a sufficient number of WOBs with the requisite training and expertise. Several public buyers argued that quotas may distort competition, especially if there aren't enough WOBs with the necessary experience or resources; mandatory quotas could potentially lead to procurement failures. However, others asserted that quotas are an effective way to level the playing field, ensuring that WOBs, who often lack the same resources as larger suppliers, can compete in a fairer environment. Although, in some regions, such as the EU, implementing quotas can be

further complicated due to procurement regulations that prioritize non-discrimination across all member states, adding complexity for countries aiming to balance these goals with the legal framework.

Instead of quotas, public buyers can also use goal-based approaches, where the focus is on ensuring opportunities are dispersed to a diverse pool of suppliers with a goal to increase their participation in public procurement given that they are equally qualified and competitive to any other business. This method offers flexibility, allowing procurement processes to encourage the inclusion of WOBs without favoring underserving and less qualified WOBs just by the virtue of their ownership. For example, some public buyers encourage bigger suppliers to include subcontracting plans with WOBs, and in case of below threshold purchases buy from WOBs directly to meet their goals. The goal-based approach, in this case, can allow flexibility while still promoting diversity and ensuring fair competition. Incorporating mandatory minimum qualifications ensures compliance and excludes non-compliant suppliers.

RQ8: Can dividing larger contracts into smaller lots attract more WOBs to public procurement?

The division of procurement contracts into smaller lots is a strategy designed to encourage the participation of smaller businesses, including WOBs, by reducing the scale of individual requirements and making opportunities more accessible. Splitting a large contract into smaller lots adds responsibilities for public buyers, including increased effort in procurement and contract management. Despite this, public buyers often consider this strategy beneficial for promoting inclusivity. Smaller lots can mitigate the rigid and complex nature of public procurement processes by simplifying procedures, reducing the investment and volume of product/service demanded, lesser administrative burdens, making it easier for smaller WOBs to participate. By eliminating the need for large-scale time-consuming procurement processes, lots may encourage greater participation from resource-constrained businesses, including WOBs.

However, this approach carries inherent challenges and potential drawbacks, which could be described as a paradox. While smaller lots aim to level the playing field and attract small-size sellers, they can inadvertently reduce the motivation for small businesses to participate due to the lower potential financial gains relative to the effort and resources required for bidding. WOBs with limited application capacity may instead prioritize

high-value contracts, viewing them as more worthwhile investments of their time and resources as they also provide better returns on the investment of time, money, and resources, making them inherently more attractive to small businesses than divided lots of lesser value. This leads to a reduced number of applications, potentially counteracting the intended inclusivity of this approach. This paradox highlights the tension between making opportunities accessible and maintaining their appeal to smaller businesses.

Additionally, excessive administrative burdens, complex requirements, and inflexible procurement rules can deter WOB participation, regardless of the provision of lots defying their purpose to lure more small businesses into public procurement. An effective solution to address this paradox could involve striking a balance between smaller and larger size lots. Public buyers might create a combination of high-value contracts and smaller granular lots, with provisions that prevent suppliers from winning multiple lots, ensuring broader distribution of opportunities and attractiveness due to higher chances of success. This approach can indirectly prioritize smaller businesses without overtly discriminating against larger firms.

5.5 Case Study: Supporting WOBs in state procurement in the states of Texas, USA

In the state of Texas, public procurement practices have been carefully designed to enhance diversity and support small businesses, especially those owned by women and minorities. The state has committed to fostering a fair and competitive procurement process that opens doors for historically underutilized businesses (HUBs) recognized by conducting periodic diversity studies which helps to identify under-represented group of suppliers in public procurement.

In case of WOBs, Texas encourages businesses to participate in state procurement by offering a state certification that ensures they meet the necessary standards of being 51% women-owned, operated, and managed. The certification, known as HUB certification, is free and valid for four years, after which it must be renewed to maintain eligibility. Though this certification is specific to Texas and doesn't apply nationwide, it provides WOBs with a distinct advantage in bidding for public contracts within the state.

While there are no mandatory set-asides for these businesses, the state makes a concerted effort to integrate them into procurement opportunities and has set goals which all public agencies are made aware of. The approach relies on outreach, education, and the

promotion of socially responsible procurement practices, encouraging public agencies to consider HUBs when making purchasing decisions.

For contracts above a certain threshold, Texas requires vendors to submit a subcontracting plan that outlines how HUB-certified businesses will be involved in delivering the contract. This plan encourages the inclusion of WOBs in subcontracting opportunities, though the primary focus in bid evaluations is on overall value for money. This ensures that while diversity is encouraged, businesses are selected based on their ability to provide quality services at competitive rates.

Additionally, for lower-threshold purchases where formal bidding processes may not apply, Texas' public procurement rules encourage buyers to consider HUB-certified businesses when making purchasing decisions. Since these purchases are also counted toward achieving the HUB goals, buyers are motivated to prioritize HUBs in their selections, contributing to the broader objective of increasing WOB's participation. This mechanism ensures that even small purchases can have a meaningful impact on the inclusion of underutilized businesses, providing a consistent flow of opportunities for WOBs.

In tracking these efforts, agencies are asked to report the expenditures made toward HUBs, allowing for accountability and transparency in the procurement process, also impacting future fundings. The visibility of these reports not only holds agencies accountable but also creates a sense of healthy competition among them, pushing them to achieve better participation outcomes for WOBs.

Texas has also introduced initiatives like the Mentor-Protégé Program to further assist small businesses, including WOBs, in developing the necessary skills and resources to compete successfully in the marketplace. This program pairs experienced businesses (mentors) with smaller, less experienced ones (protégés) to help them build capacity, navigate the complexities of procurement, and expand their network of contacts. The goal is to provide guidance and support new or growing businesses, helping them improve their competitiveness and participation rate.

In this context, Texas' approach to supporting WOB's participation in public procurement emphasizes the value of goals over quotas. Unlike mandatory quotas, which can lead to the selection of businesses that may not be fully qualified or capable of fulfilling a contract, goals offer a more flexible and supportive approach. There is no

penalty for not meeting the goals, but there is an expectation of good faith efforts, which means that public buyers are not forced to select underqualified vendors simply to meet a numeric target, potentially undermining the quality of service provided. Instead, the emphasis is on creating opportunities, encouraging participation, and fostering an environment where qualified businesses can thrive. It's a "hands up, not hands down" approach, which helps level the playing field without undermining the standards of the procurement process. The state's procurement practices also include pre-market consultations, where bigger vendors can access centralized lists of qualified HUBs. This gives small HUB certified businesses the chance to connect with larger companies for potential subcontracts or joint ventures.

Texas continues to make strides with strategic outreach, education, and periodic disparity studies that help identify areas where more focus is needed. These efforts have proven effective, as the number of certified HUBs continue to grow, and a larger portion of procurement spend is being directed toward these businesses. One unique aspect of Texas' approach is its policy on business "graduation." If a business outgrows the HUB criteria by surpassing certain thresholds of money received through participating in public procurement, it can no longer count toward the state's inclusion goals. This ensures that new and emerging businesses continue to have access to procurement opportunities, while established businesses that no longer need the HUB designation can focus on competing in a broader marketplace.

By implementing certification processes, promoting inclusive practices, and establishing mechanisms for tracking participation, Texas has fostered an environment where minority-owned small businesses can grow and succeed. These efforts have not only increased the representation of WOBs in procurement processes but also created a culture of accountability and opportunity that benefits all parties involved.

5.6 Discussion

The findings of this study illuminate the multifaceted barriers and opportunities for WOBs in public procurement, as well as the broader implications of integrating GRPP into existing frameworks. One significant observation is the sectoral disparity in WOB participation, with WOBs disproportionately concentrated in low-barrier service sectors rather than capital-intensive industries such as construction or manufacturing. Structural barriers, including limited access to resources, information, and support systems,

exacerbate this underrepresentation. The role of public buyers is pivotal in addressing these disparities. While some have adopted flexible payment terms and below-threshold procurements to support WOBs, others remain constrained by legal and institutional inertia. Notably, the potential for favoritism in below-threshold procurements (which could sometimes also unfairly benefit some WOBs as well) highlights the need for transparent criteria to ensure fairness and accountability. Training and mentoring programs for WOBs, combined with awareness campaigns and engagement initiatives can help demystify public procurement and empower women entrepreneurs. Success stories from countries implementing structured GRPP policies offer valuable lessons for global application and need to be brought to the forefront.

A recurring theme among interviewees was the lack of robust guidelines and metrics for implementing and monitoring GRPP. The absence of detailed criteria for integrating gender considerations into procurement processes has resulted in fragmented and ad hoc initiatives. This undermines the need for comprehensive national guidelines, coupled with tools for data collection and monitoring, to track WOB participation and evaluate the broader social and economic impacts of procurement strategies. Moreover, leveraging technology to enhance transparency and streamline access to procurement opportunities could address critical barriers faced by WOBs, particularly in understanding and navigating complex procurement systems. Examples include e-procurement through digital platforms that provide real-time access to tenders and resources for capacity-building.

Political climate and legal frameworks can significantly enable/disable the participation of WOBs in public procurement as public buyers are bounded by such policies and their procurement budget and spending is dependent on it. This includes national, regional, and local policies related to gender equality, procurement regulations, and international obligations especially in case of EU countries who need to comply with EU wide regulations and goals. The broader economic environment, including the availability of government funding, the impact of economic downturns, or the effect of global supply chain disruptions, can disproportionately push certain policies and not promote others at all. Understanding the intersection of these macroeconomic factors with procurement processes is important for a holistic view of GRPP and realizing avenues to support WOBs. For example, several public buyers mentioned their focus was currently more towards achieving climate neutrality and supporting SMEs in general and in case of gender equality it was more towards ensuring equal terms of pay and employment than

fostering WOBs because these agendas were supported by the political sentiments of their leaders.

It was also identified that over time, a few WOBs that manage to participate in public procurement are able to experience growth as they navigate the learning curve. Through repeated participation, they become adept at understanding procurement procedures, meeting compliance requirements, and building valuable networks. These WOBs may begin their journey as sub-suppliers, leveraging partnerships and collaborations that eventually position them as prominent players. This rise is further supported by certifications, which, while beneficial for demonstrating credibility and capacity, are often expensive and inaccessible for smaller or newly established WOBs. As a result, these WOBs gain a competitive edge and are more likely to secure contracts. Over time, these dominant WOBs become preferred suppliers due to their proven track record, established networks, and ability to meet delivery expectations. Public buyers, aiming to support supplier diversity along with mitigating risks and ensuring reliable performance, often favor these businesses for repeat contracts. This trend can result in a concentration of public procurement benefits among a select few WOBs, creating an unintended consequence: while public buyers may successfully meet their goals of allocating a set percentage of procurement spend to WOBs, the benefits are often not distributed widely across the sector. This concentration sabotages the broader goal of fostering a diverse and inclusive range of WOBs in public procurement. Instead of benefiting a variety of WOBs, the focus inadvertently shifts to a limited number of well-established players, perpetuating inequities within the system. Hence, it is critical to ensure that mechanisms are in place to support a diverse array of WOBs, particularly smaller and less established ones, and not solely those that have already risen to dominance.

5.7 Conclusion

This research highlighted the potential of GRPP as a transformative tool for addressing systemic gender inequalities and supporting the participation of WOBs in public procurement systems. While WOBs remain underrepresented across many sectors, targeted interventions such as flexible procurement policies, transparent guidelines, and capacity-building initiatives can and have created a more inclusive ecosystem. Extending GRPP to encompass gender-balanced organizations and integrating it within broader gender equality strategies can further enhance its impact across diverse industries. Specific examples of sectoral interventions, such as promoting WOB participation in

green infrastructure projects or technology sectors, can further illustrate these opportunities.

Despite growing global advocacy for gender equality, public procurement systems have yet to fully embrace gender-responsive measures. Gender considerations often remain secondary or are only indirectly addressed under broader responsible procurement frameworks. The emphasis on more visible and quantifiable issues, such as carbon emissions or modern slavery, has overshadowed the less tangible but equally critical issue of gender equity and supporting WOBs. Given the practical constraints of a single procurement contract, it is rarely possible to address all sustainability concerns simultaneously. Public buyers must often make trade-offs between competing sustainability priorities, which are typically influenced by national or organizational commitments. For example, climate goals such as reducing carbon emissions or promoting renewable energy may take precedence in procurement decisions, especially when countries have binding international commitments like achieving carbon neutrality. Similarly, other pressing social or environmental goals may overshadow gender equality or the support towards WOBs, particularly when no formal commitments exist to prioritize them.

To elevate gender equality and WOB participation within procurement, clear and formal policy commitments are essential. This requires embedding GRPP into policy frameworks, setting measurable targets, and ensuring alignment with other sustainability priorities. Moreover, innovative approaches are needed to design procurement tenders that allow multiple sustainability goals to coexist without overburdening suppliers.

The current study spotlights the importance of adopting a multipronged approach that combines policy leadership, stakeholder collaboration, and innovative practices. Public buyers, procurement experts, and civil society organizations must work together to dismantle structural barriers and promote supplier diversity. By prioritizing WOBs' participation alongside other sustainability goals, governments can leverage public procurement to advance gender equality and foster equitable economic growth. Additionally, aligning GRPP with digital transformation initiatives can ensure that procurement processes are more accessible, efficient, and transparent, thus broadening the reach and impact of these policies.

Finally, while GRPP is often viewed through the lens of supporting WOBs, its implications extend far beyond. By fostering supplier diversity and promoting inclusive organizational practices, GRPP can serve as a catalyst for broader societal transformation, including community development, social justice, and gender equality. Achieving these goals, however, requires GRPP to be embedded within overarching gender mainstreaming strategies and supported by multi-stakeholder collaboration, resource allocation, and political will. Aligning GRPP with global frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—particularly SDG 5 (gender equality) and SDG 12 (responsible consumption and production)—provides a structured pathway for long-term progress.

Nonetheless, this study is also subject to several limitations. First, while the interviews provided rich, qualitative insights, the sample size was limited to 22 respondents, which may not fully capture the diversity of experiences across all WOBs, public buyers, gender and procurement experts globally. The findings may also reflect regional and cultural contexts specific to the participants' locations, which could limit the results' generalizability to other regions or sectors. Additionally, the study relied on self-reported inputs from participants, which may have been influenced by personal biases, selective memory, or a desire to present their practices in a favorable light. Participant bias may have influenced the findings, as those who volunteered were more likely to have familiarity with or interest in GRPP. The exclusive use of English for communication posed language barriers, limiting access to valuable perspectives from non-English-speaking stakeholders. Another limitation lies in the potential lack of representation from certain industries, particularly those where WOB participation is either minimal or absent, resulting in a less comprehensive understanding of sector-specific challenges. Lastly, the focus on qualitative methods, while beneficial for exploring perceptions and experiences, may not have provided the quantitative depth needed to measure the broader systemic impact of GRPP initiatives in supporting WOB's participation in public procurement. Future research could address these limitations by incorporating larger, more diverse samples, quantitative analyses, and comparative studies across different countries or sectors. That being said, the results of this study showcasing the obstacles faced by WOBs and ways in which their participation can be furthered are useful both at managerial and policy level for including more WOBs as suppliers and will also help understand the struggles of other minority gender identities as these are replicable.

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6. Thesis Conclusion

In addressing the research gaps previously identified, this thesis contributed to the underexplored area of public procurement and gender equality, specifically through gender-responsive public procurement (GRPP). Previous literature on procurement-related gender concerns was often fragmented, focusing on specific national contexts or narrow aspects of the issue. This thesis uniquely filled several gaps. First, it systematically categorized gender-related procurement challenges from 45 peer-reviewed studies, offering a comprehensive overview of existing issues. Second, it introduced the application of short supply chains (SSC) as a viable strategy to enhance the participation of WOBs in public procurement. Third, it provided new insights into the role of intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) in promoting GRPP through corporate procurement—an area that had not been previously examined in detail. Lastly, it investigated the actual problems faced by WOBs to participate in public procurement by getting their firsthand accounts along with documenting potential remedies to overcome this by consulting with WOBs, procurement experts and public buyers, alongside introducing novel concepts like paradox of division into lots, rise of the dominant WOBs, etc. These contributions not only expanded the theoretical understanding of GRPP but also provided practical frameworks for policymakers and procurement practitioners, supporting more inclusive and equitable procurement practices.

Although public procurement, in its fundamental definition, pertains to the acquisition of goods, services, and works by the public sector, it encompasses a multifaceted supply chain process that includes numerous stages: writing calls for expressions of interest from suppliers, publishing legally compliant and accurate tenders, identifying potential suppliers, managing the bidding process, finalizing vendor selection and contractual terms, procuring the goods and services, and conducting post-purchase monitoring and evaluation to ensure equitable, transparent, and cost-effective acquisitions. The procurement process is usually standardized across numerous countries and municipalities for the majority of goods and services acquired, with exceptions for direct purchases that do not involve competitive tenders. This leads to a highly intricate public procurement system that manages a multitude of suppliers and a diverse array of products and services. Implementing sustainable and gender-responsive procurement necessitates not only significant motivation from the procurement department but also an organization-wide commitment, occasionally requiring political support, to transition

from prioritizing the lowest-priced products to those that provide comprehensive value for money, aligned with national and local policies. Stritch et al. (2020) discovered that as governments pursue enhanced sustainability objectives via procurement policies, their procurement processes and responsibilities become increasingly intricate, necessitating the consideration of numerous factors prior to the approval of purchasing decisions, which frequently conflict among various sustainability criteria and lack clear evaluation standards.

A gendered approach to procurement is vital, since research and empirical evidence from both affluent and impoverished economies consistently reveal that women have been, are, and will continue to be disadvantaged in accessing economic possibilities within the procurement sector. While the total closure of the gender inequality gap remains unrealized, including a gendered approach to procurement may facilitate progress towards this goal. The prevailing lack of awareness about the execution of gender-responsive procurement strategies concretely obstruct the effective implementation of gender equality policies and the prospective beneficial effects these policies may have on women's social and economic advancement.

It is imperative to acknowledge that women commence bidding for procurement contracts from a disadvantaged position compared to men. Therefore, a comprehensive organizational commitment to gender equality and GRPP is crucial to incentivize procurement officials to advance in this direction. Additionally, an internal analysis is necessary to determine if modifications to policies and objectives can be made to embed this commitment within the core organizational values and guarantee its effective execution.

Also, Mailovich et al. (2023) contend that gender-responsive procurement often disproportionately focusses on involving women-owned businesses. They assert that genuine social and economic advancement requires a framework that surpasses business ownership and incorporates the interests and perspectives of women across the whole procurement process, including gender-balanced enterprises at all management levels. Focusing on gender-responsive firms in the future would enhance gender equality by necessitating structural changes inside businesses and accelerating women's economic empowerment, since it aims to provide advantages to all women, not only women-owned businesses (Williams, 2024).

The objective of this thesis was to advocate for the assertion that public procurement may integrate gender considerations by deliberately endorsing women-owned businesses through budgetary allocations, therefore aiding in the reduction of gender disparities encountered by them through enhanced access to opportunities. It concludes that to transform procurement methods and policies for inclusive results, it is essential to thoroughly comprehend the market's supply characteristics and structural constraints first, then take reformative actions and assess their impact periodically in order to successfully implement GRPP and reduce the gender inequality issues prevalent in public procurement. Overall goal of GRPP should be to encourage the participation of women, WOBs and gender responsive businesses to benefit from public spending. And there is a need for identifying ways to foster WOBs without hampering the competitiveness of the public procurement markets. Actions like dividing contracts into lots encourages broader participation, including SMEs, social enterprises, and women-led businesses, but does not promote GRPP unless supplemented by measures like market engagement, reservations, and tailored award criteria (EIGE, 2022).

However, one needs to also realize gender equality actions are executable solely within the scope of the existing contract, pertaining exclusively to the subject matter of the contract (limited to the products, works, and services that the public buyer intends to get, excluding broader activities of any organization). Outlaying GRPP at the early stages of communication, preferably at the pre-procurement stage allows the contracting authorities to set expectations and for the suppliers to better prepare the bid seeking help through consultation if needed to clarify concerns.

Finally, concrete GRPP performance metrics need to be established in order to measure the impact of GRPP interventions. Aspects such as percentage of spend on WOBs, average size of contract for WOBs, number of WOBs participating in public procurement could be good starting points.

This thesis aimed to explore how public procurement can integrate gender considerations and promote GRPP to reduce gender disparities and empower WOBs. Across the four studies presented, it became evident that GRPP, while still emerging in practice and research, holds substantial promise for fostering social and economic advancement through inclusive procurement policies. The following paragraphs summarize the key findings from each paper and emphasize the necessary steps for future research and policy development in GRPP.

The first article, *“Gender Issues in Procurement: A Review of Current Themes and Future Research Directions”*, provided a comprehensive review of existing literature on gender issues in procurement. It identified four key themes: the glass ceiling effect, team diversity, skill sets and supplier diversity which continues to impede women's advancement in the procurement field. The analysis highlighted the necessity of collaborative efforts and future research directions to dismantle these barriers.

The second article, *“Short Supply Chains: Frameworks and Extensions to Public Procurement”*, examined the role of short supply chains (SSCs) in public procurement and their potential to contribute to socially responsible procurement practices, including gender equality. Although SSCs are not scalable enough to fully replace traditional supply chains, they offer opportunities to integrate sustainability and inclusivity into procurement, especially when governments and public institutions utilize their purchasing power to support SMEs and WOBs. This study emphasized that a more flexible procurement framework is needed to encourage WOBs' SSC participation.

The third article, *“Does gender equality matter? Gender responsive corporate procurement efforts of inter-governmental organizations”* explored gender-responsive procurement practices in IGOs, revealing several challenges and potential solutions. The interviews and document analysis emphasized the importance of vendor eligibility criteria, self-certification for WOBs, and the need for more collaborative approaches among IGOs to streamline gender-responsive requirements. IGOs' procurement processes, while aiming for neutrality and competitive fairness, need to balance gender-specific initiatives with operational objectives such as timely delivery and value for money. The study also pointed out that GRP should extend beyond WOBs to include gender-responsive businesses, as this broader approach could better promote gender equality across procurement activities. The insights gathered provide a foundation for future research examining GRP in corporate procurement within IGOs.

The fourth chapter, *“Supporting the Participation of Women-Owned Businesses in Public Procurement,”* explores the barriers faced by WOBs in accessing public procurement opportunities and identifies strategies to foster their inclusion. Through stakeholder interviews, the research uncovers multifaceted challenges and opportunities for WOBs, as well as the broader implications of integrating GRPP into existing frameworks. The findings highlight GRPP's potential as a transformative tool for addressing systemic gender inequalities and enhancing WOB participation in public

procurement systems. While WOBs remain underrepresented across many sectors, targeted interventions such as flexible procurement policies, transparent guidelines, and capacity-building initiatives have demonstrated the ability to create a more inclusive ecosystem. The study also examines the role of certification beyond merely identifying businesses as WOBs, emphasizing its potential to enhance visibility and provide networking opportunities through certifying agencies. Additionally, it stresses the importance of adopting e-procurement systems, investigates dividing contracts into smaller lots, and implementing preferential treatments such as quotas and goals to support WOB participation. Notably, the research reveals sectoral disparities, with WOBs disproportionately concentrated in low-barrier service sectors rather than capital-intensive industries like construction or manufacturing.

Overall, the findings from this thesis highlight the potential of GRPP to reshape public procurement in ways that advance gender equality and social inclusion through inclusive procurement practices. Public procurement is not just about acquiring goods and services; it is a powerful policy tool that can promote social objectives, such as gender equality, through strategic interventions. However, achieving this requires an organizational commitment to GRPP, supported by political will and clear policy frameworks that incentivize procurement officials to incorporate gender considerations into procurement processes.

The findings of this thesis offer significant utility for both market operators and academic researchers, bridging the gap between theory and practice in GRPP. For market operators, including procurement managers, policymakers, and IGOs, the research provides an overview of the existing situation, raises awareness, provides actionable insights and practical frameworks to integrate gender-responsive practices into public procurement systems. By adopting strategies such as direct buying, dividing contracts into smaller lots, use of e-procurement, standardizing procedures, encouraging participation as sub-suppliers, having targeted quotas and goals, measuring actions against results, identification and acknowledgement of existence of gender inequality issues—public buyers can foster greater inclusivity and competitiveness, particularly for WOBs. Additionally, the emphasis on pre-procurement engagement and capacity-building initiatives, as outlined in the second and fourth studies, offers a roadmap for public buyers to better understand and address the unique challenges faced by WOBs. The introduction of performance metrics, such as the percentage of contracts awarded to

WOBs and the average contract size, provides a tangible way to measure the impact of GRPP interventions, ensuring accountability and continuous improvement.

Academically, this work makes a substantial contribution to the underexplored intersection of public procurement and gender equality. By systematically categorizing gender-related procurement challenges in the first article it provides a synthesis of existing gender-responsive procurement literature. Documenting the voices of WOBs to understand their participation motivations and hinderances while introducing novel concepts like the paradox of division into lots and the rise of dominant WOBs, the thesis expands the theoretical understanding of GRPP. The exploration of short supply chains in the second study and the analysis of IGOs' corporate procurement practices in the third study further enrich the literature, offering new perspectives on how procurement can be and has been leveraged as a tool for social and economic advancement. By bridging these theoretical insights with practical applications, this thesis serves as a valuable resource for advancing both managerial practices and scholarly understanding of GRPP, while also providing a foundation for future research and policy development in this critical area.

There is also a need for further research to understand how GRPP performance can be measured effectively, particularly through concrete metrics such as the percentage of contracts awarded to WOBs, the average contract size, and the overall participation of WOBs in public procurement. Additionally, there is an urgent need for policy refinement to foster greater participation of WOBs without compromising competitiveness. This can be achieved through market engagement and tailored award criteria. Ultimately, the goal of GRPP should be to encourage the participation of women, WOBs, and gender-responsive businesses, ensuring that public spending contributes to reducing gender inequalities and promoting social and economic development for all.

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7. Limitations

A rigorous scientific approach was employed in the overall thesis, which involved analyzing relevant literature, developing interview themes and guides, conducting unbiased interviews with field experts, transcribing and analyzing the data, evaluating documents and policies, etc. In two out of the three articles, the coding was reviewed by co-authors to ensure accuracy and consistency of outputs.

Nevertheless, the studies conducted have certain limitations; as GRPP remains a niche topic, the experts contacted throughout the thesis formation for providing clarity on the topics may have held pro-GRPP views suggested by their availability to interview, potentially skewing their responses. Furthermore, their answers might have been influenced by the image they wished to convey about their organizations and themselves. Given the small sample size, while the respondents offered thoughtful and rich perspectives, the findings are not easily generalizable to all circumstances and organization's procurement practices.

However, since the research objective was exploratory, employing semi-structured interviews to gather diverse opinions and ideas on the topic (Bryman, 2016); therefore, the lack of generalizability is not considered a limitation. This research should act as a basis for future research wanting to explore how procurement policies can effectively support the career progression of women and WOBs; enhance supplier diversity to promote gender equality across the entire procurement spectrum, using new scientific methods, and a more diverse participant pool benefiting from this work as a starting point.

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