

CORVINUS UNIVERSITY OF BUDAPEST
DOCTORAL SCHOOL OF BUSINESS AND MANAGEMENT

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

Doctoral dissertation - Thesis Booklet

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Introduction

Public procurement, defined as the acquisition of goods and services by public-sector organizations (Uyarra and Flanagan, 2010; Vyas-Doorgapersad and Kinoti, 2015), is a powerful policy tool for governments to address market imperfections, promote sustainability, and foster inclusive economic growth. Beyond its operational role, public procurement serves as a strategic mechanism to incentivize private sector participation in developmental agendas, including efforts to reduce economic exclusion and discrimination (OECD, 2019; Grandia and Meehan, 2017). Within this context, gender-responsive public procurement (GRPP) has emerged as a critical approach to leveraging the state's purchasing power to promote gender equality and support women-owned businesses (WOBs). However, despite its potential, GRPP remains underexplored in academic research, with significant gaps in understanding how public procurement systems can effectively address systemic gender inequalities and foster inclusive economic participation.

This PhD thesis situates itself within two key research streams: (1) the intersection of public procurement and gender equality, and (2) the role of supplier diversity in promoting inclusive economic growth. While existing literature has examined the barriers faced by WOBs in accessing public procurement opportunities—such as limited access to resources, complex procurement processes, and sectoral segregation—there is a lack of comprehensive studies that systematically analyze these challenges across different contexts. Furthermore, the role of intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) and the potential of innovative strategies like short supply chains (SSCs) in advancing GRPP remain underexplored. This thesis addresses these gaps by providing a structured analysis of gender-related procurement challenges, exploring the applicability of SSCs, and investigating the corporate procurement practices of IGOs in promoting GRPP.

The relevance of this research lies in its potential to inform policy and practice by offering actionable insights into how public procurement systems can be redesigned to support WOBs and promote gender equality. By focusing on WOBs—defined as businesses with at least 51% ownership and control by women—this thesis contributes to the broader discourse on gender equality and inclusive economic development. Women represent the largest underrepresented demographic in public procurement, and addressing their exclusion is critical for achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 5 (Gender Equality)

and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities). Moreover, this research highlights the importance of supplier diversity as a risk management strategy, demonstrating how inclusive procurement practices can enhance market competition, reduce costs, and foster innovation.

The overarching goal of this thesis is to make specific contributions to the academic and practical understanding of how public procurement can be leveraged as a tool for gender equality. By systematically categorizing gender-related procurement challenges, exploring the role of SSCs and IGOs, and identifying strategies to enhance WOB participation, this research provides a foundation for future studies and policy development. It also introduces novel concepts, such as the paradox of dividing contracts into smaller lots and the rise of dominant WOB players, which offer new perspectives on the complexities of GRPP implementation.

In summary, this PhD thesis advances the academic discourse on GRPP by addressing critical research gaps, offering practical frameworks for policymakers, and contributing to the broader goal of creating equitable and inclusive procurement systems. By bridging theory and practice, it provides a roadmap for leveraging public procurement as a transformative tool for gender equality and sustainable development.

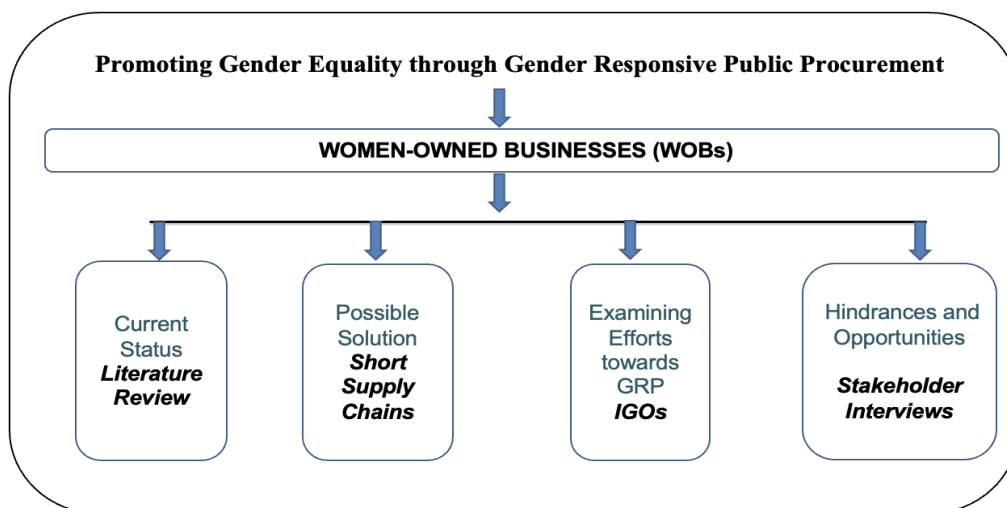


Fig 1: Thesis logic flow

The subsequent chapters of this thesis seek to further the understanding of GRPP by analyzing the following research questions. The subsequent research gap they aim to address is also mentioned along with other relevant details:

Research Question	Research Gap	Article Title	Author/s	Status	Journal Rank	Citation
<i>What are the prevalent gender-related challenges in public procurement recognized by the current literature?</i>	<i>No prior systematic reviews conducted extensively in this field.</i>	Gender related issues in procurement – A Review of Current Themes and Future Research Directions	Dibya Rath, Gyongyi Vorosmarty, and Tunde Tatrai	Published by Budapest Management Review	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.
<i>Can short supply chains facilitate the involvement of WOBs in public procurement?</i>	<i>Lack of actionable measures in the existing literature on ways in which we can facilitate the participation of WOBs in public procurement on a wider scale.</i>	Short Supply Chains: Frameworks and Extensions to Public Procurement	Gyöngyi Vörösmarty, Dibya Rath, and Tunde Tatrai	Published by Cleaner Logistics and Supply Chain	Q1 by SCIMAGO Jr	Vörösmarty, G., Rath, D., & Tatrai, T. (2024). Short supply chains: Frameworks and extensions to public procurement. <i>Cleaner Logistics and Supply Chain</i> , 13, 100182.
<i>Are intergovernmental organizations as users of public funds (falling under the domain</i>	<i>Existing literature often ignores the significant power that civil society organizations like IGOs can have on</i>	Does gender equality matter? Gender responsive	Dibya Rath	Published by Women's Studies Interna	Q2 by SCIMAGO Jr	Rathi, D. (2024). Does gender equality matter? Gender responsive corporate procurement efforts

<i>of public-sector organization) and promoters of gender equality agenda integrating GRPP into their corporate procurement?</i>	<i>supporting social issues such as gender equality in procurement.</i>	corporate procurement efforts of inter-governmental organizations		<i>tional Forum</i>		of inter-governmental organizations. <i>Women's Studies International Forum</i> , 105, 102937.
<i>What are the hinderances faced by WOBs as suppliers and how can we support the participation of WOBs in public procurement?</i>	<i>Current literature lacks a comprehensive analysis of stakeholders from diverse countries to understand from first-hand experiences the obstacles faced by WOBs and in what ways their participation can be increased.</i>	Supporting the participation of Women-owned businesses in public procurement	Dibya Rath	Include d in this thesis as a chapter , submitted for publication		

The articles are interconnected and serve to offer together a comprehensive overview of GRPP and answer the research questions. A brief summary of each follow:

1) Gender Related Issues in Procurement – A Review of Current Themes and Future Research Directions

This paper provides a comprehensive literature review of gender-related themes in procurement research, analyzing 45 peer-reviewed articles published between 2000 and 2022. The study employs a semi-structured literature review methodology to systematically identify, categorize, and analyze gender-related issues in procurement. Using databases like Scopus and Web of

Science, the research initially focused on public procurement but expanded to include private sector procurement due to the limited number of public procurement-specific articles (n=17). By incorporating private procurement studies (n=28), the study broadened its sample base, enabling more robust statistical comparisons and making the findings relevant to a wider academic audience. The analysis reveals four major themes: the glass ceiling effect, team diversity, skill sets, and supplier diversity. The findings highlight persistent gender disparities, such as women facing barriers in career advancement, wage gaps, and challenges as entrepreneurs, particularly in accessing resources and contracts. The glass ceiling effect is evident in both sectors, with women underrepresented in senior roles due to male-dominated cultures, negative stereotypes, and inadequate work design. Supplier diversity research emphasizes the challenges women-owned businesses face, including limited access to resources and complex contracting processes, while also showcasing successful initiatives like the Women into Construction Project in the UK, which promoted gender inclusion in public procurement.

The study also explores the impact of gender diversity on decision-making processes, emphasizing the benefits of inclusive teams. Research on team diversity shows that gender-diverse teams bring varied perspectives, particularly in sustainability and ethical decision-making, leading to better outcomes. Skill set studies reveal gender differences in negotiation, communication, and ethical behavior, with women often demonstrating higher ethicality and collaboration skills. For instance, women buyers were found to be more loyal to their organizations and more inclined toward ethical considerations, while men tended to set more ambitious targets in negotiations. These findings suggest that including both genders in procurement teams can enhance performance and foster a broader range of perspectives. Additionally, the research highlights the role of procurement as a policy tool to promote social objectives, such as gender equality, through supplier diversity programs and supportive policies. However, the literature also identifies gaps, such as the need for more research on how procurement can address internal organizational gender dynamics and the effectiveness of policy tools like supplier codes of conduct.

The paper concludes by stressing the social significance of gender-responsive procurement in achieving sustainability goals and promoting equality. It identifies emerging themes, such as the promotion of social objectives through supplier diversity and calls for future research to explore how procurement can be leveraged as a policy tool to address gender-related issues more

effectively. The study also highlights the need for comparative research between public and private sector procurement practices to identify best practices and areas for improvement. By integrating findings from both sectors, the review provides a holistic understanding of gender-related challenges in procurement, such as wage discrepancies, occupational segregation, and the complexity of contracting processes for women entrepreneurs. Overall, the review emphasizes the importance of integrating gender considerations into procurement processes to advance sustainable development goals and create more inclusive and equitable supply chains. Addressing the identified research gaps can help future studies contribute to a deeper understanding of how procurement can drive social change and promote gender equality in both organizational and supplier contexts.

2) Short Supply Chains: Frameworks and Extensions to Public Procurement

This article explores the concept of Short Supply Chains (SSCs) and their potential application in public procurement, particularly to support women-owned businesses (WOBs) and achieve social and environmental goals. While SSCs are traditionally linked to the agricultural sector, this study investigates their relevance beyond food production, focusing on how they can be adapted to public procurement to promote gender equality, sustainability, and local economic development. The research employs a qualitative methodology, conducting 17 semi-structured interviews with stakeholders from nine countries, including public procurement officials, producers, and intermediaries. A case study of a Hungarian public procurement procedure is also analyzed to provide practical insights.

The findings reveal that SSCs are characterized by fewer intermediaries, closer relationships between buyers and sellers, and a focus on local production. Key motivations for participating in SSCs include higher profits for producers, better product quality, and the ability to support local economies. However, challenges such as administrative complexity, limited capacity of small producers, and difficulties in meeting public procurement requirements hinder their scalability. Despite these challenges, SSCs are seen as a means to achieve social goals, including gender equality, by empowering women-owned businesses and creating employment opportunities. The study also highlights the potential of SSCs to enhance supply chain resilience and sustainability, particularly in the context of recent global disruptions like COVID-19.

This paper concludes that while SSCs cannot replace traditional supply chains entirely, they offer significant benefits for socially responsible public procurement. To fully leverage their potential, policymakers need to refine regulations, provide incentives, and develop flexible frameworks that accommodate the unique needs of small producers. Future research should explore the broader applicability of SSCs in non-food sectors and investigate how public procurement can be better aligned with sustainability and gender equality objectives. This study contributes to the growing body of literature on sustainable supply chains and provides actionable insights for policymakers and practitioners aiming to integrate SSCs into public procurement practices.

3) Does Gender Equality Matter? Gender-Responsive Corporate Procurement Efforts of Intergovernmental Organizations

This article examines the role of intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) in promoting gender-responsive procurement (GRP) through their corporate procurement practices, focusing on four major IGOs: the World Bank Group (WBG), the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), UN Women, and the Asian Development Bank (ADB). While gender-responsive public procurement has been widely studied in government contexts, IGOs—despite their significant purchasing power and influence—have been largely overlooked. The study addresses this gap by analyzing how these IGOs integrate gender equality objectives into their corporate procurement processes, which are more controllable than project procurement due to the absence of external stakeholder influence.

The research employs a mixed-methods approach, combining in-depth interviews with key informants and interpretive document analysis to develop case studies of the selected IGOs. The findings reveal that while all four IGOs have made strides in promoting gender equality, their approaches to GRPP vary. The World Bank Group leads in this area, with a robust Supplier Diversity and Inclusion Program that actively encourages WOBs to participate in procurement processes through outreach, training, and bonus points in bid evaluations. EBRD, while transparent in its procurement practices, has yet to explicitly incorporate gender criteria into its corporate procurement, focusing more on broader sustainability goals. UN Women, despite its strong advocacy for gender equality, lacks visible set-asides or specific incentives for WOBs in its procurement processes. ADB emphasizes fairness and value for money but does not explicitly

prioritize gender in its corporate procurement, though it encourages joint ventures and local supplier participation, which indirectly benefits WOBs.

The study highlights several actionable tools and strategies used by IGOs to foster GRPP, including e-procurement platforms, vendor training programs, and collaborations with NGOs. However, challenges remain, such as the lack of mandatory gender criteria in procurement evaluations and the difficulty in identifying qualified WOBs. The research also highlights the importance of aligning GRPP with national policies and the need for clearer communication of procurement requirements to ensure WOBs can compete effectively.

In conclusion, while IGOs are making progress in integrating gender-responsive practices into their corporate procurement, there is significant room for improvement. The study calls for more explicit gender criteria in procurement evaluations, increased collaboration among IGOs to standardize GRPP practices, and greater transparency in monitoring and reporting gender-related outcomes. By addressing these gaps, IGOs can better leverage their procurement power to advance gender equality and contribute to the broader sustainable development goals. This research contributes to the growing body of literature on GRPP and provides valuable insights for policymakers and practitioners aiming to enhance gender-responsive practices in public and private procurement.

4) Supporting the Participation of Women-Owned Businesses in Public Procurement

This study explores the intersection of gender and public procurement, focusing on the challenges and opportunities for WOBs to participate in public procurement systems. Through a qualitative research approach, the study conducted 22 semi-structured interviews with WOBs, public buyers, and procurement and gender experts across 16 countries. The interviews, conducted between October 2024 and January 2025, employed thematic analysis to identify recurring themes and provide nuanced insights into the barriers and strategies for fostering WOB participation. The research addresses a critical gap in the literature by examining systemic challenges, the effectiveness of e-procurement and certification, and the comparative advantages of public versus private procurement for WOBs. It also investigates innovative strategies such as dividing larger contracts into smaller lots and the merits of goal-based versus quota-based preferential treatments,

offering a comprehensive understanding of how public procurement can promote gender equality and supplier diversity.

The findings reveal that WOBs face significant structural barriers, including limited access to resources, complex procurement processes, and sectoral segregation, which often confine them to low-value service industries. While e-procurement systems enhance transparency and accessibility, they are hindered by the digital divide and fragmented platforms, limiting their effectiveness for WOBs. Certification as a WOB offers advantages such as increased visibility and access to opportunities, but high costs and administrative burdens can exclude smaller businesses. The study also highlights the paradox of dividing contracts into smaller lots, which, while intended to attract WOBs, may reduce their motivation due to lower financial returns relative to the effort required. Additionally, the research uncovers the emergence of dominant WOB players, which, while beneficial for supplier diversity, risks concentrating benefits among a few and undermining broader inclusivity goals. These findings contribute to the literature by providing new insights into the complexities of GRPP and offering practical recommendations for policymakers and practitioners.

The study makes several contributions to the field of public procurement and gender equality. First, it provides a detailed exploration of the barriers WOBs face, offering actionable strategies such as capacity-building initiatives, flexible procurement policies, and the use of e-procurement platforms. Second, it highlights the importance of certification and supplier diversity programs in fostering WOB participation, while also cautioning against the unintended consequences of market concentration among dominant WOBs. Third, the research unfolds the need for goal-based approaches over rigid quotas, as demonstrated by the case study from Texas, USA, which showcases how state-level policies and mentorship programs can effectively support WOBs without distorting competition. Finally, the study emphasizes the role of public buyers in creating an inclusive procurement ecosystem, advocating for transparent guidelines, pre-market consultations, and feedback mechanisms to ensure equitable opportunities for WOBs.

In conclusion, this research uncovers the transformative potential of GRPP in addressing systemic gender inequalities and promoting supplier diversity. By integrating gender considerations into public procurement frameworks, governments can leverage their purchasing power to advance

gender equality and foster equitable economic growth. However, achieving these goals requires a multipronged approach that combines policy leadership, stakeholder collaboration, and innovative practices. The study calls for further research to explore sector-specific interventions, the impact of macroeconomic factors on GRPP, and the development of standardized metrics for monitoring and evaluating WOB participation. By addressing these gaps, future research can build on the findings of this study to create more inclusive and effective public procurement systems that support the growth and success of WOBs worldwide.

Overall Research Methodology

Given the limited existing knowledge on GRPP, this thesis adopts an exploratory approach, utilizing qualitative research methods to gain a deeper understanding of the subject. Qualitative methods, such as semi-structured interviews, case studies, and interpretive document analysis, allow for an in-depth, flexible exploration of the topic, enabling the researcher to delve into unique experiences and perspectives (Lapan et al., 2012; Miles et al., 2014). These methods are particularly suited to uncovering the complexities of GRPP, as they prioritize understanding authentic human interactions, organizational processes, and the meanings individuals attach to their experiences—insights that quantitative research often fails to capture (Gephart, 2004).

The research employs both deductive and inductive approaches to data analysis. The deductive approach, used in the first article, applies a pre-existing theoretical framework to systematically review and categorize gender-related procurement challenges from existing literature (Snyder, 2019). In contrast, the inductive approach, used in the second, third, and fourth studies, focuses on raw participant data to identify emerging themes and develop new insights. This approach is particularly effective in exploring the barriers faced by WOBs and identifying strategies to enhance their participation in public procurement. Semi-structured interviews, conducted through snowball sampling, allow for a natural flow of conversation, enabling participants to share their unique perspectives and experiences (Azungah, 2018). Additionally, cross-case analysis is employed in the third study to compare and contrast gender-responsive procurement practices across IGOs, providing a comprehensive overview of their approaches to GRPP. The fourth study adopts an investigative approach, first identifying barriers to WOB participation and then proposing reformative actions to address these challenges. Thematic analysis of interview data reveals key

patterns and insights, offering a detailed understanding of the issues and potential solutions. Throughout the research, interviews are recorded, transcribed, and analyzed to extract relevant themes, ensuring privacy by deleting recordings after data extraction.

This thesis assumes gender as a dichotomous attribute (male-female) due to the lack of adequate data and literature on non-binary gender identities in public procurement. It focuses on WOBs, defined as businesses with at least 51% ownership and control by women, as they represent the largest underrepresented group in procurement. While this focus is justified by the availability of data and literature, future research should aim to adopt a more inclusive definition of gender to ensure GRPP benefits all marginalized groups.

Conclusion

This thesis investigates the integration of gender considerations into public procurement through GRPP, addressing critical research gaps and offering actionable solutions to promote gender equality. It systematically categorizes gender-related challenges in procurement, explores the potential of SSCs to enhance the participation of WOBs, and examines the role of IGOs in advancing GRPP. The research also identifies barriers faced by WOBs, such as limited access to resources and complex procurement processes, and proposes strategies like market engagement, flexible procurement policies, and goal-based approaches to foster inclusivity. The findings emphasize the need for organizational commitment, political will, and clear policy frameworks to effectively implement GRPP. By bridging theory and practice, this thesis provides practical insights for policymakers, procurement practitioners, and researchers to create equitable and inclusive procurement systems. By addressing the challenges faced by WOBs and proposing actionable strategies, this thesis contributes to the broader goal of fostering gender equality in public procurement systems. Future research should focus on developing performance metrics, refining policies, and exploring sector-specific interventions to support WOBs while maintaining market competitiveness.

Limitation

The thesis employed a rigorous scientific approach, including literature analysis, interview development, unbiased expert interviews, data transcription, and policy evaluation, with coding reviewed by co-authors in two studies to ensure accuracy. However, limitations exist, such as potential bias from pro-GRPP experts and the small sample size, which may limit generalizability. Despite this, the exploratory nature of the research, aimed at gathering diverse perspectives, mitigates this limitation. The findings provide a foundation for future research to explore how procurement policies can support women and WOBs, enhance supplier diversity, and promote gender equality, using broader participant pools and advanced methodologies.

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