

ISSUE BRIEF

# RETHINKING GENDER-RESPONSIVE PROCUREMENT: ENABLING AN ECOSYSTEM FOR WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT



International  
Labour  
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# INTRODUCTION

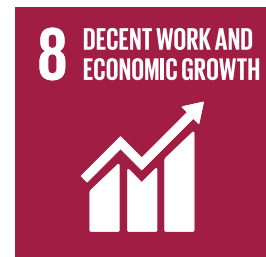
This issue brief, prepared by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) and the International Labour Organization (ILO), discusses ways to broaden the scope of gender-responsive procurement (GRP) from a focus on only promoting women’s enterprises to also include gender-responsive enterprises. The brief aims to inspire a transformative conceptualization of gender-responsive procurement that supports both equal market opportunities for women’s enterprises and equal outcomes for women in the labour market and the business environment.

The paper proposes an evolved vision of gender-responsive procurement that leaves no one behind and creates outcomes for gender equality and women’s empowerment, not only opportunities. This vision would contribute to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially Goals 5 and 8, which focus on gender equality and decent work respectively. Starting from the “buy from women-owned” approach, which seeks to offer equal opportunities for women’s enterprises to access markets, the brief then takes a step forward to consider the potential to leverage gender-responsive procurement for expanded benefits to all women in value chains as a means to address gender inequality. This culminates in an expanded approach to gender-responsive procurement that favours gender-responsive enterprises regardless of ownership, thereby potentially allowing all women and men to benefit from decent business and employment opportunities. The brief further posits a GRP ecosystem as a prerequisite for the transformation, and finally makes a call to action for concrete ways to make this vision a reality. Finally, the paper applies these concepts in the context of COVID-19.

## Definition:

### GENDER-RESPONSIVE ENTERPRISES

For the purpose of this paper, a “gender-responsive enterprise” is one that meets criteria for integrating gender equality and women’s empowerment principles in its policies and practices that are in alignment with international norms and standards. To be considered gender-responsive, comprehensive compliance with the [Women’s Empowerment Principles \(WEPs\)](#) and ILO labour standards would be required.



# I. CONVENTIONAL THINKING ON GENDER-RESPONSIVE PROCUREMENT: EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES THROUGH BUYING FROM WOMEN'S ENTERPRISES

The premise of gender-responsive procurement is that government and private sector sourcing policies and practices can be strategic entry points for shaping markets to promote the development of women's entrepreneurship and women's economic empowerment. Public and private procurement generates trillions of dollars in economic activity and fuels market interactions that span the globe. This is evident in the size of public procurement around the world, which accounts for 12 percent of global Gross Domestic Product (GDP),<sup>1</sup> representing 10 to 15 percent of the GDP in developed countries and up to 30 to 40 percent in least developed countries.<sup>2</sup>

The private sector also relies heavily on purchasing and procurement. For example, 55 percent of sales in the manufacturing sector are attributed to procurement.<sup>3</sup> Most buyers do not comprehensively track how many of their suppliers are women's enterprises. From the little information that is available, it is estimated that sourcing from women's enterprises accounts for only about 1 percent of spending of large businesses.<sup>4</sup>

Illustrative examples of government and private sector policies and practices that focus on women's enterprises are discussed below.

## 1.1. Governments

Since public procurement is a significant proportion of GDP, public procurement laws and policies that promote certain socioeconomic objectives can have a significant effect. Some governments and state-owned enterprises use procurement in a strategic way to support women's enterprises through a "buy from women-owned" approach, focusing on enterprises

certified to be owned or led by women. An evaluation of public procurement policies in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) member countries found that only 24 percent of them have a policy on women's enterprises.<sup>5</sup>

Countries that integrate the "buy from women-owned" approach into law and policy include:<sup>6</sup>

- Tanzania's 2016 Public Procurement Act allocates 30 percent of government tenders to enterprises led by women, youth, older persons and people with disabilities as a follow-up to the Women's Entrepreneurship Development (WED) assessment.<sup>7</sup>
- Kenya has a policy of reserving 30 percent of procurement spending for women-owned enterprises as well as those owned by youth and people with disabilities.
- The United States has a target of 5 percent of federal procurement spending to be allocated to small women-owned enterprises.

1 Bosio, E. and S. Djannkov. 2020. "How large is public procurement?". World Bank Blogs. 5 February. <https://blogs.worldbank.org/developmenttalk/how-large-public-procuremen>

2 Kirton 2013.

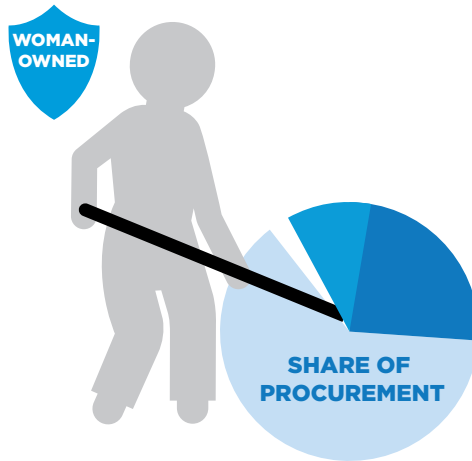
3 Monczka et al. 2015.

4 Vazquez and Sherman 2013.

5 OECD 2019.

6 The ITC has a useful database at <https://procurementmap.intracen.org/> to review legislative policies that promote women's businesses. Another source of information is the ILO Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations. The Committee has reviewed such practices when applying the ILO Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958 (No. 111) and under the Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951 (No. 100). Documentation of the process can be found here [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_norm/---relconf/documents/meetingdocument/wcms\\_174846.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_norm/---relconf/documents/meetingdocument/wcms_174846.pdf)

7 ILO 2019.



### Gender-Responsive Procurement is a Strategic Lever

- South Africa's Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment Act has affirmative procurement provisions that apply to women-owned enterprises.
- Botswana, Chile and India, among other countries, have some type of policy that supports women-owned enterprises in public procurement processes.<sup>8</sup>

#### Tools for supporting gender-responsive procurement

The ILO and UN Women provide practical tools to support governments in reforming procurement policies to be more gender-responsive. For example, through national assessments of Women's Entrepreneurship Development (WED Assessment), the ILO works with national constituents to assess frameworks and conditions conducive to the empowerment of women entrepreneurs, including access to markets and technology,

#### 1.2. Private sector

The private sector can take action by leveraging buying power and supply chains to have a positive impact on gender equality. In accordance with Principle 5 of the Women's Empowerment Principles, promoted by UN Women and the UN Global Compact, enterprises can support gender equality by procuring from women suppliers and distributors and by supporting contractors to promote gender equality in the workplace, marketplace and community.

In 2017, companies, including Accenture, Citi, Ernst & Young and Procter & Gamble, announced a goal to source USD 100 million each through their supply chains from women's enterprises in developing countries.<sup>10</sup> To contribute to this goal, Procter & Gamble worked with UN Women to pilot strategies to expand business relationships with subdistributors and women's enterprises in Egypt, Nigeria, Pakistan and South Africa. The results of the pilot project showed that collaboration between the UN and procuring entities can facilitate access to market opportunities

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