

# Gender-responsive Public Procurement



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## Disclaimer

It has been acknowledged that broader inclusiveness goes beyond gender equality and intersects with disability inclusion, LGBTQIA+ identities youth and other forms of diversity. Comprehensive gender procurement policies should transition towards the study of intersecting vulnerabilities. However, data on intersectionality is still scarce; therefore, more work is needed to understand the impact of procurement policies on transgender people, people with disabilities, or the youth. In this context, UNOPS Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) methodology has yielded evidence-based positive results for gender equality. While acknowledging existing gaps, this paper shows how gender equality considerations can be successfully integrated into procurement policies and processes.

Also, it is noteworthy that there is no universally accepted definition of a women-owned or women-led company, rendering comparisons between countries difficult. women-owned businesses (WOBs) are usually owned by women (by at least 51 per cent), whereas women-led businesses (WLBs) are controlled and managed by women (by at least 51 per cent).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The World Bank and Procurement for Latin America and the Caribbean. *Towards Gender Responsive Procurement*, Practice Note, The World Bank and PROLAC, 2022.

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This report may be cited as follows: United Nations Office for Project Services [UNOPS]. (2023). Gender-responsive Public Procurement

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# Foreword

As the Secretary-General has stated, “Achieving gender equality and empowering women and girls is the unfinished business of our time and the greatest human rights challenge in our world.” Despite the progress made in many domains, including in laws and policies globally, gender discrimination and pushback on gender equality in practice is a worrying trend. Upholding the rights and meeting the needs of those alive today is crucial to pave the way for a better future. Attaining gender equality is one of the decisive factors in ensuring that future generations will enjoy a life of dignity and rights.

The latest available SDG 5 data show that the world is not on track to achieve gender equality by 2030<sup>2</sup>. Despite progress in reforming laws, closing gaps in legal protections and removing discriminatory laws, it could take up to 286 years before gender equality is achieved based on the current rate of change. By encouraging gender equality in the procurement of goods and services, public spending can help shift the dial on women’s empowerment. Women’s access to finance is hampered by societal bias and several other issues. As a result, a comprehensive approach to supporting women-owned or women-led small and medium-sized businesses is needed. At UNOPS, we believe that procurement plays an important role in not only working towards creating economic empowerment but also promoting equality and inclusivity.

As the UN agency with a mandate to provide infrastructure, procurement and project management services to help build the future, we believe that we must harness the power of public procurement to operationalize gender-responsive procurement (GRP). This short practical report aims to provide public sector actors with an insight into making GRP, with all its challenges, a reality.



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<sup>2</sup> Azcona, Ginette, *Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals: The Gender Snapshot 2022*, United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women and United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Statistics Division, 2022.

# Introduction

Neglecting to invest in women is no longer an option. Women's empowerment is at the crux of the 2030 Agenda, and equal participation is at the core of sustainable development. It is critical for building peaceful and stable societies. Simultaneously, greater public spending effectiveness can address social inequalities, increase resilience to shocks from a changing climate or pandemics, and lay the foundation for a cleaner, more sustainable world.

The world economy could grow by five trillion US dollars if women and men equally participated as entrepreneurs.<sup>3</sup> Diversifying supply chains can give women-owned businesses (WOBs), young people, people with disabilities, ethnic minorities and other traditionally disadvantaged groups a chance to prosper.

Across the world, how governments spend money has a significant impact on development. Public spending in most countries accounts for 15 to 30 per cent of the gross domestic product (GDP). The sheer scale of this purchasing power encapsulates a force for change. Yet, WOBs account for only 1 per cent of public procurement.<sup>4</sup>

WOBs and governments face many challenges when engaging in sustainable public procurement.

WOBs face different types of barriers related to national legal frameworks, complicated tender processes, disproportionate requirements, and lack of access to adequate information, technology, and business capacity, including access to finance.

Governments face challenges when procuring from women-led businesses (WLBs). There is no universally agreed definition of a WLB, and suppliers' lack of gender-disaggregated data translates to difficulties in establishing government WOB support programmes and tracking WOB- or WLB-specific data. Moreover, there are weak communication channels and negative perceptions between procurement systems and WLB, impacting bids negatively<sup>5</sup>.

However, as key drivers of change, government partners are essential in leading with examples of how public procurement can positively impact society. Government representatives, as policymakers, are responsible for creating a robust legal framework that ensures equality between men and women in business. Moreover, as buyers, they can facilitate the inclusion of WOB in public procurement processes.

UNOPS believes there is a huge unrealized potential in using public procurement in a more targeted and strategic way. More sustainable and resilient procurement models can strengthen supply chains, enhance transparency and fight corruption. UNOPS aims to demonstrate how public procurement practices can transform our future.

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<sup>3</sup> Unnikrishnan, Shalini, and Cherie Blair, *Want to Boost the Global Economy by \$5 Trillion? Support Women as Entrepreneurs*, Boston Consulting Group, 30 July 2019.

<sup>4</sup> International Trade Centre, *Making Public Procurement Work for Women*, ITC, Geneva, November 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Value for Women and Open Contracting Partnership, *Towards Gender Balance in Procurement: Understanding the Barriers and Solutions to Include Women-Led Businesses*, VfW and Open Contracting Partnership, 2020.

# The UNOPS Approach to Mainstreaming Gender Responsive Procurement

UNOPS considers Gender Responsive Procurement (GRP) as a tool to achieve socioeconomic objectives, considering the gender power relations in value chains when selecting services, goods or works. GRP aims to bridge wage gaps, create jobs for women and negate gender-related labour imbalances.

The UNOPS GRP approach is aligned with the Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) mainstreaming strategy and responds to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 5, 8, 10 and 12 on gender equality<sup>6</sup>. In practice, GRP in UNOPS relies on the following three pillars:



Gender considerations are incorporated into the procurement process.



The procurement process is inclusive and does not discriminate against women.



Goods, services and works sourced by UNOPS positively impact gender equality and women's empowerment.

## 676 tenders

Representing **64%** per cent of UNOPS contract value awarded via eSourcing included gender criteria. An example of gender criteria in UNOPS tenders is that the bidder shall provide documentation that details their approach to ensuring equal opportunity, diversity and inclusion in their organization (for example, through an equal pay policy, parental leave, the ratio of female to male employees, percentage of women in management positions, grievances disaggregated by gender, transparency of promotion criteria, and sexual harassment policies).

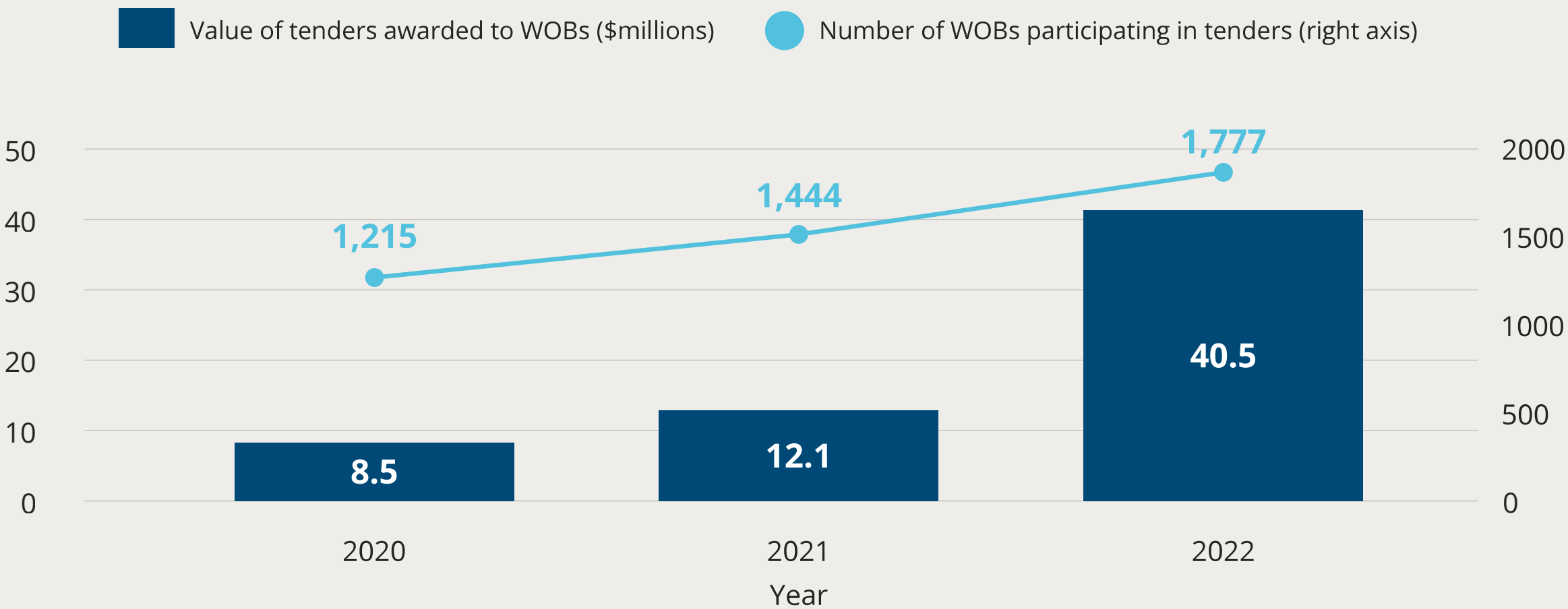
## 4900 employees

**Benefited** from the corrective actions when suppliers implemented the UNOPS Delivering Responsibility in Vendor Engagement (DRiVE) programme – a sustainability inspection, assessment and corrective action planning programme designed to enhance risk management, contract management and sustainability initiatives – in the area of gender equality, diversity and inclusion in the workplace. UNOPS supported this initiative through the development of organizational-level policies and the improvement of recruitment and HR practices.

<sup>6</sup> Gender Equality, Decent Work and Economic Growth, Reduced Inequalities, and Responsible Consumption and Production, respectively.

UNOPS has developed a comprehensive approach to GRP that considers all stages in the procurement process. Through the United Nations Global Marketplace (UNGM), information about ownership status and size is self-reported by registered suppliers. As of mid-2023, 397,067 suppliers are registered in the UNGM, 34,717 of which identify as women-owned. In 2022, based on data from suppliers, over 1,700 women-owned businesses participated in tender processes, and an estimated \$40 million worth of contracts were awarded to women-owned businesses via online tenders.

**Figure 1. Participation of and sourcing from WOBs, 2020-2022.**



The data above confirms that GRP yields promising results. Moreover, as illustrated by the subsequent case studies, GRP is efficient and smart, even though it may require extra effort from project teams. These efforts are essential for achieving SDGs and pay off in promoting equality and inclusivity.





## Case Study

# Improving the inclusion of women in mine action through procurement

The Peace and Security Cluster procured \$124 million worth of goods and services in 2022, including \$63 million of demining and explosive detection services. Traditionally, teams providing these services have been predominantly male. UNOPS, together with the United Nations Mine Action Service, has progressively sought to improve gender inclusivity in procurement related to mine action services. Including specific requirements related to gender in procurement has encouraged potential bidders to include gender considerations in their proposals.

During the period of 2019-2020, UNOPS set the requirement of a minimum percentage of female technical staff for a demining project procurement process in South Sudan. The winning bidder not only met but exceeded the 30 per cent minimum requirement, achieving a representation of 35 per cent female technical staff. In addition, 80 per cent of the Community Liaison Officers were female.

In 2022, UNOPS introduced changes to improve gender balance requirements in tender scoring. During the pre-bid conference, UNOPS emphasized the recognition of innovative approaches related to gender balance during evaluation, including distinct scoring for the gender criterion.

Currently, all mine action teams are mixed-gender. Over time, as female staff members gain experience, they are increasingly occupying more senior positions. This shift has brought about a positive change in the operational culture, influencing how gender is perceived in the context of mine action. This positive shift is not limited to the internal dynamics of the teams but also extends to external perceptions of gender within the mine action field.

Peacekeeping in Mali © UNOPS/John Rae





## Case Study

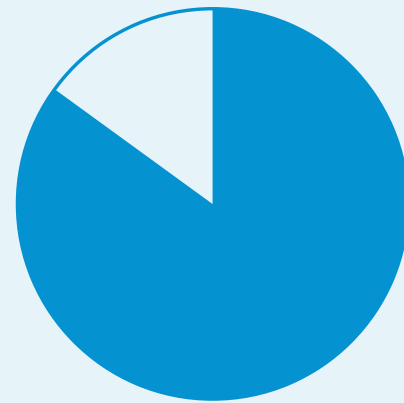
### Sierra Leone: UP Forum

The UNOPS Possibilities (UP) programme was launched in 2015 to support local Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), WOBs and other diverse suppliers in their business with UNOPS. This programme involves organizing supplier engagement and capacity development events (UP Forums) and a suite of targeted resources for suppliers, following a self-assessment (UP Toolbox).

UNOPS in Sierra Leone organized a UP Forum to create more awareness and visibility of business opportunities with UNOPS. Given the homogeneous range of suppliers working with UNOPS, the forum also aimed to increase awareness and participation of technically compliant diverse suppliers in UNOPS tendering processes. The UP Forum targeted all MSMEs, both goods and services suppliers, in the sectors where most tenders emerge.

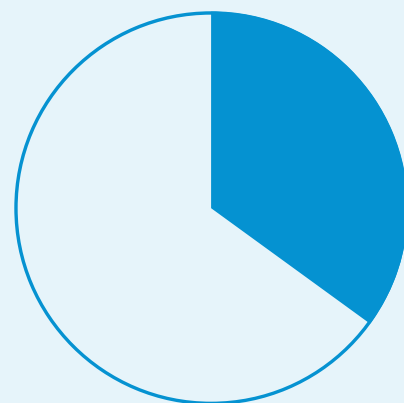
Aerial view of newly installed solar panels at a health clinic in Sierra Leone. © UNOPS





**+85% of suppliers**

Have a lack of knowledge regarding navigating online tendering platforms such as UNGM and eSourcing



**35% of suppliers**

Cited financial constraints as their biggest hurdle

UNOPS conducted a pre-engagement survey to identify the main obstacles hindering suppliers' participation in UNOPS tenders. The initial outreach and pre-engagement survey targeted a list of 800 suppliers, whose names were obtained through market research, referrals, existing contractors, business associations and word of mouth. The results provided clear information about the following main challenges:

- 85 per cent of suppliers stated that they do not know where to find the tenders, resulting in a lack of knowledge regarding navigating online tendering platforms such as UNGM and eSourcing.
- Approximately 35 per cent of suppliers cited financial constraints as their biggest hurdle. Based on the suppliers' feedback, UNOPS designed and conducted a two-day in-person training programme to address their challenges. The training covered sustainable procurement training, exploring business opportunities at UNOPS, defining guidelines for ethics and fraud prevention, using an interactive methodology with hands-on demonstrations on UNGM and eSourcing, and open discussions.

The results of this initiative exceeded expectations in the following aspects:

- Up to 93 diverse suppliers, including 39 WOBs, attended the event.
- There was increased awareness of the tools and resources available for MSMEs and diverse suppliers, instructional videos on online tendering platforms, and the UP Toolbox.
- More diverse suppliers were technically compliant in tenders.
- There were successful networking opportunities for UNOPS and suppliers, and possible collaborations with the National Public Procurement Authority, the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women), and the World Bank.
- The initiative was covered by three media outlets, strengthening UNOPS presence in the country and reaching prospective WOBs.



## Case Study

# Nicaragua: Gender Mainstreaming Criteria in Tenders

In 2021, UNOPS Nicaragua, in partnership with the European Commission, included gender criteria in the CALIDAD project. The CALIDAD project promotes school retention by addressing barriers to quality and equitable secondary education in Nicaragua.

The Request for Proposal (RFP) was floated for procuring consulting services to conduct a diagnosis, baseline, proposal, and follow-up to improve students' employability in Nicaragua. Mainstreaming gender equality in the RFP aimed to positively impact all beneficiaries' quality of life, avoiding unintended inequalities. Therefore, the procurement practitioners decided to include the following key gender criteria in tenders in alignment with the UNOPS Sustainable Procurement framework:

- One specialist in education and gender approach
- The percentage of key women personnel is proposed to be not less than 50 per cent
- Gender, diversity and inclusion strategy

Once the tender was published, 62 suppliers submitted bids, demonstrating that including such criteria does not translate to less competition.

Finally, the awarded offer included 50 per cent of key positions filled by women and the inclusion of a gender specialist to ensure mainstreaming of a gender approach during the contract period.

No cost implications are associated with applying gender criteria in tenders. GRP plays an important role in supporting the fundamental "best value for money" procurement principle, which measures how well procured goods or services allow organizations to meet social, environmental and overall strategic objectives in the context of the SDGs.

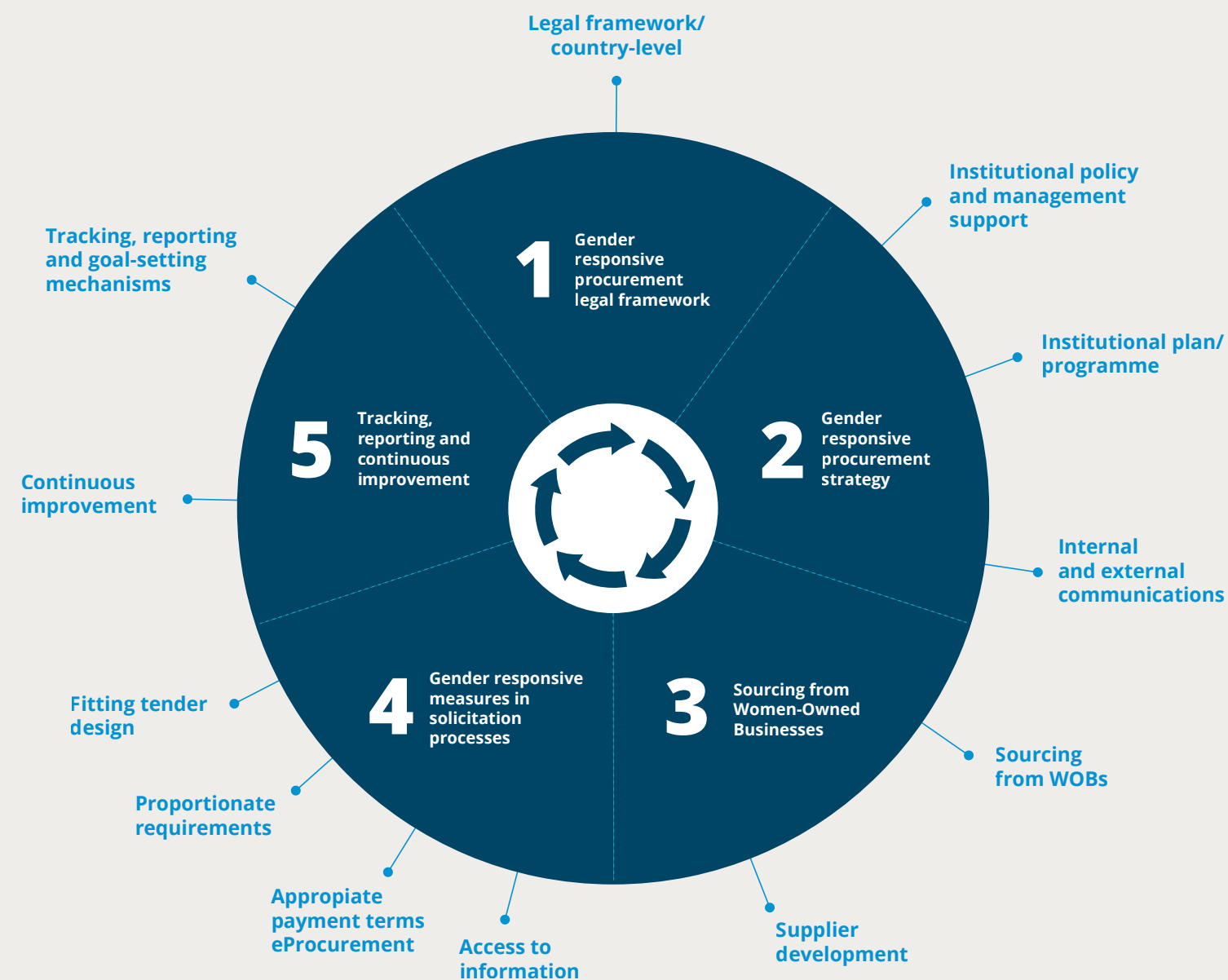
Latin America-Nicaragua © UNOPS



# Recommendations

Governments can transform procurement processes into systems that favour inclusiveness. They can move the wheel of GRP by taking action in different stages of the process. The following figure shows how including GRP features and taking measures in different processes generates positive feedback, improving the system.<sup>7</sup>

**Figure 2. Approach for continually improving a gender-responsive procurement strategy**



<sup>7</sup> This section is based on Chin, Keric, *The Power of Procurement: How to source from women-owned businesses*, United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, 2017, International Trade Centre, *Empowering Women Through Public Procurement*, ITC, 2014, International Trade Centre, *Making Public Procurement Work for Women*, ITC, Geneva, November 2020, and UNOPS experience mainstreaming gender in procurement.

## 1. GRP Legal Framework

Governments, as policymakers, must create a legal framework that ensures equality between men and women in business. A GRP legal framework at the country level can be created by the following means:

- Develop or strengthen the general legislative and regulatory framework on gender equality in businesses and labour, particularly laws and regulations on gender equality regarding access to finance and property. In addition, laws and regulations that prevent discrimination against women, such as maternity and paternity leave, flexible work, and laws on gender violence in the workplace, should be developed and strengthened.
- Mainstream gender in the procurement legal framework. The procurement legal framework should include gender equality as a clear objective and specific gender criteria in all stages of the procurement process – planning, qualification, selection, award, contract management, reporting, and evaluation. The procurement law should also establish GRP target assistance and preferential measures for WOBs, such as subcontracting, reservations and price preferences, and clear mandatory requirements. Finally, all gender procurement legislation, procedures, in-country regulations, manuals and guidelines should be harmonized.
- Establish a country-level definition of WOB.<sup>8</sup> This is critical as it ensures all stakeholders know which businesses are considered WOBs and qualify for and benefit from existing policies.

<sup>8</sup> See the United Nations Global Marketplace (2020) definition of a WOB: United Nations Global Marketplace, 'UN Women: Gender Responsive Procurement'.

## 2. GRP Strategy

Plan a GRP strategy with gender-responsive objectives, actions and indicators in the following manner:

- Determine how to identify and source from WOBs and other diversity-, equity-, and inclusion-friendly suppliers by assessing the following:
  - Gender risks and opportunities related to procurement needs and product specifications.
  - Market preparedness of products that can cater to the needs of women and men.
  - Market preparedness for WOBs to engage as suppliers, market engagement, and businesses' capacity building.
  - Consultations with WOB groups and associations.
- Identify targeted assistance strategies based on what the procurement law permits: target, subcontracting, price preferences, reservations, and so on.<sup>9</sup>
- Establish thresholds for selecting open and closed tender procedures. In closed procedures, WOBs can be invited to participate. Lower thresholds enable more WOBs to compete in open procedures. All businesses can bid in open procedures, and WOBs are likelier to opt for smaller contracts.<sup>10</sup> Incorporate gender-responsive criteria into tender requirements for all suppliers, beginning from the development stage. At the solicitation stage, ensure that the documents explicitly include a gender clause as one of the evaluation criterion against which the offers will be assessed.
- Determine key performance indicators, including sex-disaggregated data, to monitor success and data collection needs.

<sup>9</sup> Definitions – Target: a predetermined percentage of spend is realized at WOBs. This drives procuring entities to tender in a WOB-friendly manner, but other businesses can compete and win. Subcontracting: in high-value contracts, choosing a WOB subcontractor is obligatory. Price preferences: WOBs get a competitive advantage through adjusted price evaluation scores. Reservations: only WOBs can participate in tenders in a certain category, such as the market sector (Making Public Procurement Work for Women, p. 14)

<sup>10</sup> Intracen page 15: An open procedure, however, does not guarantee WOBs will win. Second, higher thresholds may enable WOBs to win tenders, if procuring entities invite WOBs as bidders in closed tenders.



- Build capacity for gender procurement design and implement the GRP plan. It is important to design and implement capacity building initiatives for civil servants responsible for public procurement, which include information about GRP's relevance, current gender inequalities in public contracting processes, challenges faced by WOBs, targeted measures, and the initiatives for managing and collecting sex-disaggregated data. A toolkit is a useful internal instrument for all personnel on GRP's "how to".
- Initiate (internal and external) communication. Disseminate information about GRP's government vision and objectives, plan internally, communicate to suppliers, and publish GRP results in annual reports.

### 3. Sourcing from WOBs

Identify potential women-owned suppliers for procurement processes. Specifically, map existing WOBs per the procurement area, share invitations with registered WOBs to bid, and advertise business opportunities in media that reach WOBs.

- Organize procurement fairs targeted at nurturing an inclusive public procurement market. Public procurement fairs can help in sharing information with WOBs, understanding the needs of WOBs, networking, and creating synergies with different stakeholders of the entrepreneur system, namely banks and financial institutions, business development service providers, non-governmental organizations, and professional associations and corporations.
- Provide business support services to WOBs to equip them with the right tools, capacity and skills to participate in bidding processes in the public sector. This support can be provided by establishing links and alliances with wider government or non-government programmes that support WOBs.
- Establish a tender helpdesk that shares a wide range of information about public procurement, such as how to bid, open bids, and training available in business, accounting, marketing and management certifications, and shares feedback with unsuccessful candidates to improve future tenders. Furthermore, governments can **streamline the procurement process** for WOBs by minimizing the burden of excessive document requests. By utilizing electronic platforms for checking and submitting documentation, governments can simplify the process, reduce administrative barriers, and make it more accessible for WOBs to participate in procurement opportunities.

- Create a WOB-friendly procurement process by implementing **payment deadlines and sanctions** for late payments. By enforcing these deadlines and imposing sanctions for late payments, the government ensures that WOBs receive timely compensation for their goods or services, maintain cash flow and meet their financial obligations.
- Governments can support WOBs by permitting **advance or interim payments**, alleviating financial burdens on WOBs, enabling them to cover operational costs, investing in resources, and effectively managing projects. Governments can also support WOBs and subcontractors **by mandating direct payments** from the government to subcontractors working for WOBs.
- Finally, governments must establish **gender-balanced procurement departments** and committees to promote inclusivity and utilize **gender-neutral language** in the procurement process, avoiding bias or discrimination.

## 4. Gender-responsive Measures in the Solicitation Process

### WOB-friendly solicitation procurement process

#### NOTE

This section focuses on gender-responsive measures mainly targeted at WOBs as per UNOPS experience and literature review findings. However, gender-responsive measures go beyond WOBs, for example, collecting sex-disaggregated data or applying solicitation measures to diversity- and equality-friendly suppliers. Targeting WOBs is an entry point to expand gender-responsive measures in the solicitation process.

It is important to **customize solicitation methods** to align with the government's procurement strategy implementing measures related to subcontracting, price preferences, reservations, and standardized, user-friendly procurement procedures and documents to create a WOB-friendly solicitation procurement process.

Another effective approach is to **divide tenders into smaller lots** and restrict bidders from competing for all lots, promoting fair competition and providing greater participation opportunities for WOBs. Additionally, setting limits on the duration and renewal of agreements, particularly for framework agreements, ensures flexibility and encourages the inclusion of a diverse range of suppliers, including WOBs.

To enable WOBs to effectively submit tenders, providing ample information and issuing early notices is crucial. Providing comprehensive information about procurement awards, procedures and scoring criteria allows potential bidders, including WOBs, sufficient time to prepare and participate in the procurement process by **promoting transparency** and trust.

Utilizing the **most economically advantageous** tender criteria is also essential. Fair evaluation and selection processes based on quality and value can be promoted by focusing on performance or functional requirements rather than price. This approach benefits the procuring entity and WOBs by selecting the most suitable and capable vendors.

**Tailoring requirements** proportionately is another key aspect. It is important to consider the size of and risks associated with assignments and create requirements that encourage participation of WOBs. These requirements include incorporating relevant standards and certifications and allowing joint bids with the option to rely on other parties' track records.

Finally, when it comes to **financial aspects**, it is recommended to set reasonable financial qualification levels and minimize requests for audited financial accounts. Reducing or eliminating the use of financial guarantees and bid bonds can significantly lower the financial barriers for WOBs, making it more accessible for them to participate in the procurement process.

By implementing these measures and strategies, governments and other procurement actors can create a procurement environment and solicitation procurement process that is friendly to WOBs, ensuring equal opportunities and promoting diversity and inclusion.

## 5. Tracking, Reporting and Continuous Improvement<sup>11</sup>

Governments should establish a supplier tracking system to enable results reporting. Such a supplier tracking system should be able to track WOB spend by unit/department, buyer, commodity, geographical area, or the number of bids by WOBs, among other factors.

Performance results should be measured against established goals, reviewed and recalibrated regularly. An organization should also track and report on its prime non-WOB suppliers and their actions for gender equality, capacity building activities and impact.

The senior officials team should regularly review key GRP metrics and align them with appropriate gender-related public policies. It ensures continued support for the programme across the organization.

Governments should regularly update assessments and analyses to identify market sectors with potential WOB suppliers. Capacity building sessions can then be organized to enhance the capabilities of WOBs in these sectors, aligning with the upcoming procurement cycle.

Establishing an ongoing communication process between the organization and WOBs is also important.

Additionally, governments should periodically review their procurement policies and practices, considering the results achieved. This evaluation identifies and eliminates any barriers that hinder the participation of WOBs. If necessary, recommendations may be made to improve the legal framework, ensuring that the procurement process is fair and accessible to WOBs. Moreover, gender-responsive policies and plans should undergo annual reviews to adapt to changing circumstances and align with the achieved results.

Cross-functional teams must be engaged to incorporate GRP considerations at the engagement stage.

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<sup>11</sup> Abstracted from UNOPS procurement assessment.



# Conclusions

UNOPS recognizes the importance of GRP as a powerful tool in fostering more inclusive and equitable economic opportunities. GRP has the potential to address gender disparities and help build a more just and gender-responsive society. Based on experience in implementing GRP in the past years, UNOPS recommends some key steps that can be taken in the procurement process to ensure successful implementation of GRP in organizations and governments interested in contributing to the achievement of the SDGs through sustainable public procurement. These steps are:

## 1. Embrace transparency

Transparency is an effective means of attracting diverse suppliers. As per UNOPS experience, tools such as eSourcing encourage suppliers to participate in UNOPS tenders as they perceive the process as fair, transparent and easily accessible.

## 2. Enhance supplier communication

It is essential to communicate business practices with suppliers transparently. Governments must improve communication and resources available to suppliers. Suppliers need to have a go-to centre to resolve common questions about tenders and the process of participating in public bids. Tools such as the UP Portal and Forum have helped UNOPS improve communication during the procurement cycle.

## 3. Incorporate GRP early

A well-defined GRP strategy with objectives, goals, methodology and indicators ensures a comprehensive approach to including gender in the procurement process. Considering your strategic goals and objectives, GRP must be included in all procurement documents and contracts from the outset.

## 4. Empower WOBs through capacity building

Build the capacity of your potential suppliers, especially WOBs. It is important to consult WOBs to understand their main challenges when participating in public contracts. Subsequently, training must be provided to suppliers to make them technically compliant. Partnerships with key players in GRP at the local level can support capacity building initiatives. Furthermore, local women-owned business associations must be leveraged to advertise tender opportunities.

## 5. Monitor progress

Engage with suppliers and monitor their performance during contract management.

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