

In brief:

Enhancing women's economic opportunities in procurement in East Africa

Research in five countries of East Africa shows how collaboration, capacity building and evidence-based advocacy with stakeholders are key to ensuring that procurement frameworks benefit women entrepreneurs.

Public procurement remains a largely untapped opportunity for women entrepreneurs, as businesses around the world supply governments with the goods and services they need to meet their commitments in health, education and other critical areas. According to [UN Women and the International Trade Centre](#), government procurement accounts for up to 12% of the world's annual gross domestic product. Yet, on average, only 1% of these contracts goes to women-led enterprises. Across Africa, [World Bank specialists](#) estimate that government spending on public goods, works and services averages 17% of GDP. To reduce gender and social inequalities, in recent years, governments in East Africa have tailored procurement policies and programs to benefit more businesses owned or operated by women and other disadvantaged groups. Both Kenya and Tanzania, for example, have policies designed to reserve 30% of government spending for enterprises led by women, youth or people with disabilities.

Despite these efforts, women-led businesses face many barriers in navigating procurement systems. Government contracts typically require formal business registration, minimum enterprise or consortia sizes, and access to capital and collateral. These requirements can impede women entrepreneurs, whose businesses tend to be smaller and are more likely to be informal. Women also contend with persistent biases and social norms – such as shouldering the bulk of domestic care work – that undermine their ability to compete in labour markets.

In 2021, [UN Women and the International Labour Organization](#) called for a new and transformative approach to procurement that would go beyond simply reserving contracts for women-led enterprises. They highlight the need for companies to integrate gender equality and women's empowerment principles within their workplace policies and practices, and across their markets and communities – regardless of their ownership. In other words, they argue for a more gender-responsive procurement ecosystem.

A synthesis of GrOW-EA research on gender-responsive public procurement recommends that policymakers:

Researchers:



Be clear in defining how women entrepreneurs can benefit from procurement.



Monitor implementation with clear targets and indicators.



Mainstream gender criteria and enhance gender balance in decision-making.



Expand training and other support to women entrepreneurs.



Address sexual corruption.



Building an evidence base for gender-responsive procurement

[Growth and Economic Opportunities for Women East Africa](#)

(GrOW – East Africa) is a multi-funder research program that seeks to advance gender equality in the world of work. Focussing on Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda, it provides evidence and guidance to inform policies and actions that promote economic empowerment for women. From 2020-21 to 2023-24, GrOW – East Africa supported three projects focused on improving women’s access to public procurement contracts.

In Kenya, Strathmore Business School led efforts to evaluate the Access to Government Procurement Opportunities (AGPO) program – launched in 2013 to benefit women, youth and those with disabilities – and other relevant programs. In Tanzania, a team led

by the Economic and Social Research Foundation (ESRF) worked closely with government, private sector and civil society partners to develop and scale innovative interventions that facilitate gender-responsive public procurement. And across the five countries, the African Freedom of Information Centre (AFIC) led action research to identify barriers preventing women-led businesses from accessing procurement opportunities, assess emerging practices to improve their participation, and suggest reforms that would enhance the gender-responsiveness of procurement practices.

Through research, capacity building and engagement with decision-makers in these five countries, these projects went beyond pinpointing the factors that impede women’s access to procurement: they identified existing policies and practices that are effective in enhancing women’s procurement opportunities and offered recommendations to strengthen them.

Table 1: GrOW – East Africa supported research on women’s empowerment through procurement

Project title	Geographic scope	Research partners
Fostering gender-responsive public procurement: Understanding the barriers and solutions to include women-led businesses in East Africa	Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda	African Freedom of Information Centre (lead); Open Contracting Partnership; The Institute of Social Accountability; and Value for Women
Empowering women-owned businesses through public procurement in Tanzania	Tanzania	Economic and Social Research Foundation (lead); REPOA; and Women and Social Protection Tanzania
Enhancing the effectiveness of government procurement programs in achieving women’s economic empowerment	Kenya	Strathmore University Business School

Understanding the barriers and how to move past them

In Kenya, where AGPO was launched more than a decade ago, a survey found that women had only landed 1.75% of public contracts by value as of September 2022 – a far cry from the program’s target. In Uganda, research showed that less than 1% of government procurement contracts were awarded to women entrepreneurs. The evidence from these three projects shows that women entrepreneurs face many interconnected challenges in accessing government procurement opportunities. These include legal, policy, capacity, operational, sociocultural and structural barriers, such as:

- the lack of gender-disaggregated data and a clear definition of women-led businesses, which hampered governments’ ability to target and promote their tenders to reach women, and monitor how they were benefiting from contracts
- women’s lack of knowledge on formalization requirements and how to submit bids, their lack of collateral and finance, and lack of resources to cope with delayed payments
- norms and expectations that undermine women’s ability to compete, including negative perceptions about women entrepreneurs, corruption and the expectation of sexual favours in return for contracts

Research in Kenya found that women who obtained public contracts made financial gains. But as of September 2022, only 1.75% of public contracts had gone to women entrepreneurs.

In Rwanda and Ethiopia, research found that these barriers were compounded by the absence of affirmative action laws or actionable policies. In Tanzania, women entrepreneurs struggled with complex tender information published in English rather than Swahili on the government's procurement platform. Across all five countries, women also cited corruption – including demands for bribes and sex – as a key barrier.

GrOW – East Africa research confirmed that overcoming these barriers will take a combination of focused policies and capacity building support – along with efforts to tackle social norms and structural barriers that blunt the effectiveness of preferential government procurement programs. Governments can use a range of levers – such as creating set-asides for target groups; unbundling large tenders to reach smaller bidders; and increasing access to finance – to help more women participate in procurement programs.

Good practices already implemented in the five GrOW – East Africa focus countries include:

- mandating federal procurement bodies to focus on gender
- having positive legal frameworks that ensure women have equal opportunities in procurement tendering and provide a legal basis for advocating for these rights

- having e-procurement systems that promote transparency throughout the process
- providing business development training for women-led businesses and gender-focused training for procurement staff
- having financial institutions that offer special services to women-led businesses

The project teams worked closely with partners in each country to build on these practices and overcome specific barriers identified through research.

Key changes in policy and practice

Through sustained evidence-based advocacy, capacity building and engagement with stakeholders, changes were seen at many levels in the five countries – in policy, regulation and administration of procurement; in training and other supports provided to women entrepreneurs; and in women's levels of awareness about preferential procurement and their abilities and confidence in bidding on contracts.

Procurement authorities in all five East African countries have committed to more equitable practices that contribute to a gender-responsive procurement ecosystem. These include:

- adopting open contracting data standards
- addressing the lack of data for gender-responsive procurement
- linking beneficial ownership data to procurement systems (to make clear who enjoys the benefits of ownership even if a company is registered under another name)
- increasing local content in procurement



Evidence also informed considerable progress seen within individual countries, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Procurement gains for women backed by GrOW – East Africa research evidence	
In Ethiopia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Public Procurement and Property Administration Proclamation was amended in June 2024 to grant preferential treatment to women and persons with disabilities. • A government committee was formed to address barriers faced by women in public procurement. • The Ministry of Labour and Skills committed to providing ongoing training for business owners on public procurement.
In Kenya	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A Pending Bills Verification Committee was established in 2024 to expedite payments to women-led service providers after research showed that delayed payments were a major deterrent for women. • Government implemented a public education campaign on gender-responsive procurement and raised awareness of the grievance procedure for bidders. • An existing fund for women entrepreneurs (valued at USD67 million) was relaunched. • Strathmore University Business School integrated procurement training modules into an executive incubation program launched for women entrepreneurs in September 2024.
In Rwanda	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parliamentarians amended Sections 6, 23 and 32 of the 2022 Procurement Act to ensure at least 30% of tendering committee members are women and to waive the requirement for bid security (collateral) on certain contracts. • The Auditor General is now required to monitor inclusivity in public procurement.
In Tanzania	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The size of women-led consortiums required to bid for public contracts was reduced from 15-20 members to five. • Training jointly created with Tanzania's public procurement authority significantly increased the number of women bidding on government contracts. • Supported by research teams, a new e-platform for government procurement launched by the Public Procurement Regulatory Authority addresses several barriers identified by women-led businesses, including by adopting Swahili to overcome language barriers. • The government's procurement regulator and anti-corruption agency committed to working together to address corruption in procurement after research findings on sexual corruption in procurement were shared with over 20 government departments.
In Uganda	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parliamentarians fast-tracked passage of procurement guidelines, informed by research, to reserve 15% of public contracts for businesses owned by women, youth and persons with disabilities. • AFIC helped to create a legal definition for women-owned businesses within public procurement guidelines.

In Tanzania, capacity building played a significant role in increasing women's success in bidding on contracts. A training program involving nearly 400 women entrepreneurs – jointly developed with the public procurement regulatory authority – addressed taxation, business formalization and registration as a government contractor. The training, which gave women access to information and networking opportunities, increased their rates of business formalization and licencing and eased their registration on the public procurement electronic portal.

Women also reported gains in financial and business management skills. Among those who took part, the time taken to bid for a public contract went from an average of 30 days to just 15 days. Moreover, 56% who underwent the training applied for a public sector contract, with 43% of applicants successfully landing a contract. This compares with only 5.5% of women

who had obtained a public contract when a baseline survey was conducted. Women achieved even greater success with private sector bids: 85% of trainees applied for a private sector contract, with a 60% success rate.

Training was also provided to public officials on integrity and gender-responsive procurement. Women entrepreneurs were central to this training and were able to directly voice their experiences with sextortion and bribery.

In Tanzania, before training, only 5.5% of women surveyed had obtained a government contract. After training, 43% successfully bid on a contract.

Factors that drive change

The many beneficial changes seen in these five countries were the result of both internal and external factors. Internal drivers included:

Sustained engagement and advocacy with key stakeholders – backed by research evidence

- All three projects began with surveys, focus groups and validation workshops to compile evidence on the barriers and opportunities related to gender-responsive procurement. Through dialogues, participation in high profile events, and strong working relations, all engaged early and often with key stakeholders to raise awareness of their findings and to make recommendations. This included outreach to procurement authorities and other ministry officials, women's business groups, parliamentarians, private sector leaders and other key stakeholders.

Co-creating training modules with public authorities

- Project teams worked closely with procurement and labour skills development officials in the five countries to co-develop new training modules that addressed key barriers to gender-responsive procurement. The active participation of procurement officials in the training and coaching raised their awareness on the aims of gender-responsive procurement. It also allowed for real-time refinement of procurement training content and facilitated government commitments to sustain training for women business owners.

A holistic approach to capacity building that addressed women's expressed needs

- While the training approaches varied by project, they built on evidence gathered through surveys on the wide range of practical challenges faced by women-led businesses – extending beyond procurement basics to topics such as financial planning and tax management. Training in Tanzania was supplemented by mentorship, coaching and hands-on practical support. All of these factors improved women's business acumen and management skills and their ability to navigate complex procurement systems.

The key external drivers of change were countries' **existing commitments to gender equality**, and in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania, **supportive frameworks for gender-responsive procurement**. Even if these commitments and frameworks were imperfectly realized, they provided a basis for collaboration. The positive changes seen were ultimately a result of authorities' **openness to working with researchers** to strengthen their frameworks and implementation.

Recommendations for policymakers

The evidence and outcomes that emerged from these three projects point to practical measures that policymakers can take to ensure that procurement policies and programs are more effective in benefiting women-led businesses.

1. **Increase clarity.** Governments should clarify the laws and regulations that define which businesses can receive preferences or set-asides for women entrepreneurs, and clearly describe the pathways by which women can enter public sector supply chains.
2. **Monitor implementation with clear targets and indicators.** Governments must define clear targets and indicators that public agencies should monitor; be accountable for ensuring proper implementation of the rules; and measure progress and impact. Enhanced data collection on gender-responsive procurement can help authorities better understand the impact of measures taken.
3. **Mainstream gender criteria and enhance gender balance in decision-making.** Governments should include gender criteria in all phases of the procurement system and increase women's role in procurement decision-making. Gender-balanced procurement leadership will help to mitigate the unconscious bias and gendered corruption barriers that women entrepreneurs face.
4. **Expand training and other support to women entrepreneurs.** Governments and the private sector must build the capacity of women entrepreneurs and expand support in finance, taxation and access to procurement information. Procurement officials also need relevant training to ensure gender-responsive procurement policies are fully implemented.
5. **Address sexual corruption.** Governments should consider modifying anti-corruption laws, creating appropriate reporting channels and diversifying procurement teams to tackle sexual corruption.

*This brief draws on the paper **Public procurement and women's economic empowerment: A synthesis of evidence** by Sope Williams (2025).*

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