

PROCUREQUAL

A Gender-Responsive Procurement Planning & Accountability System

Design Category: Systems & Service Design | Policy-Supporting Toolkit | Digital + Institutional Intervention

SDG Alignment: SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 8 (Decent Work), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption)

Abstract

PROCUREQUAL is a systems-level procurement design intervention that embeds gender equality directly into procurement planning, decision-making, and accountability mechanisms. Rather than treating inclusion as a post-award corrective, the system restructures the upstream rules, data flows, and institutional incentives that shape who can realistically participate in procurement markets. Grounded in Gender-Responsive Procurement (GRP) evidence and behavioral public policy, PROCUREQUAL is designed for real-world implementation within government, donor, and large institutional procurement environments. It reframes procurement as a lever for structural equality, economic participation, and accountable public value creation.

1. Introduction and Context

Public procurement accounts for approximately 10–20% of global GDP, positioning it as one of the most powerful economic instruments available to governments and large institutions. Despite this scale, women-owned and women-led enterprises consistently receive a disproportionately small share of procurement opportunities. This disparity is not primarily a function of capability gaps, but of systemic design choices embedded in procurement planning, qualification frameworks, and institutional norms. PROCUREQUAL responds to this challenge by redesigning procurement as a system that actively produces inclusion rather than reproducing exclusion.

2. Problem Definition: Structural, Not Symbolic Inequality

Gender inequality in procurement is generated through structural mechanisms rather than overt discrimination. These include contract bundling practices that exclude SMEs, disproportionate financial and experience thresholds, compressed timelines that disadvantage caregivers, and gender-blind market analysis. Together, these design features systematically filter out women-owned businesses before evaluation even begins. Procurement systems, therefore, do not merely reflect inequality; they actively produce it.

3. Evidence and Design Rationale

The design of PROCUREQUAL is informed by established Gender-Responsive Procurement frameworks developed by UN Women, the World Bank, and the OECD, as well as behavioral insights literature on public-sector decision-making. Evidence consistently demonstrates that the most exclusionary effects occur at the planning and specification stage, rather than during bid evaluation. This insight underpins PROCUREQUAL's focus on early-stage intervention, proportionality, and institutional accountability.

4. The Design Intervention: PROCUREQUAL

PROCUREQUAL is a modular procurement planning and accountability system that integrates into existing procurement workflows. It consists of four interlocking components: (1) a Gender Impact Scan applied at planning stage; (2) an Inclusive Procurement Design Kit; (3) a Gender Accountability Dashboard; and (4) a behavioral nudge system for procurement officials. The system is policy-aligned, auditable, and adaptable across sectors and jurisdictions.

5. System Workflow and Operational Logic

The system operates across five sequential stages: Gender Impact Scanning prior to tender approval; application of inclusive design adjustments; gender-responsive market engagement; live monitoring of participation and award outcomes; and post-award behavioral feedback. Each stage is designed to be lightweight, mandatory, and decision-shaping rather than advisory.

6. Methods and Evaluation Framework

The effectiveness of PROCUREQUAL is assessed through a mixed-methods evaluation framework combining quantitative performance indicators, process monitoring, and institutional learning.

Quantitative indicators include: (a) percentage and value of bids submitted by women-owned enterprises; (b) contract value awarded to women-owned firms; (c) changes in supplier diversity over time; and (d) concentration risk within supplier portfolios. All indicators are tracked longitudinally at project, agency, and sector levels.

Process evaluation examines compliance with Gender Impact Scans, uptake of inclusive design recommendations, and quality of market engagement activities. This allows assessment of whether observed outcomes are attributable to design changes rather than external factors.

Qualitative methods include structured feedback from procurement officials and suppliers to capture behavioral change, perceived fairness, and administrative burden. Together, these methods enable both accountability and adaptive improvement.

7. Implementation and Governance

PROCUREQUAL is designed for phased implementation through pilot programs embedded within existing e-procurement or ERP systems. Governance responsibility remains with procurement authorities, supported by policy mandates and reporting requirements. The system does not require legal reform to initiate but can inform longer-term regulatory updates based on evidence generated.

8. Ethical Design Principles

The design explicitly avoids quota-based approaches without capacity support, protects supplier data through aggregation and safeguards, and rejects assumptions about sectoral concentration or scale of women-owned enterprises. Equity is pursued through proportionality, transparency, and accountability rather than preferential treatment.

9. Scalability and Replicability

The modular architecture of PROCUREQUAL enables adaptation across sectors, procurement categories, and national contexts. Scalability follows a clear pathway: pilot implementation, sector-wide rollout, and eventual integration into national procurement policy and performance management systems.

10. Conclusion

PROCUREQUAL demonstrates how procurement can be redesigned as a strategic instrument for gender equality and inclusive economic participation. By intervening at the level of systems, rules, and institutional behavior, it moves beyond symbolic inclusion toward durable structural change. It positions procurement not merely as a transactional function, but as a public-value system capable of delivering fairness, efficiency, and accountability simultaneously.