



**Asia-Pacific
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WOMEN IN GLOBAL VALUE CHAINS: AN APEC BENCHMARKING STUDY

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ACRONYMS

APEC	Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation
BMO	Bank of Montreal
GDP	gross domestic product
GR-VCA	Gender-Responsive Value Chain Analysis
GVC	global value chains
IFC	International Finance Corporation
ITC	International Trade Centre
MATRADE	Malaysia External Trade Development Corporation
OWBO	Office of Women's Business Ownership
STAR	Sari-Sari Store Training and Access to Resources
TESDA	Technical Education and Skills Development Authority
WBE	Women's Business Enterprise
WEDP	Women Exporters Development Program
WEP	Women's Empowerment Principles
WOB	women-owned business

BACKGROUND

APEC is a global leader on women’s entrepreneurship, as evidenced by the 2019 *La Serena Roadmap for Women and Inclusive Growth*, which includes “empowering women through access to capital and markets” as a top priority for the region. Five of the top six economies ranked in the Mastercard Index of Women Entrepreneurs 2021 (March 2022) are APEC economies, and most other member economies appear in the top half of the index. This globally recognized index provides an important ranking of economies that are fostering enabling environments for women entrepreneurs and provides an opportunity to see where economies can improve. Yet, even in economies where women have a highly ranked enabling

environment, women entrepreneurs and business owners face a range of challenges in comparison to their male counterparts as women establish and grow their enterprises. Persistent barriers to equitable access to financing, business networks, and disproportionate care responsibilities can result in fewer and smaller women-owned enterprises compared with men. Leveling the playing field for women entrepreneurs is of top importance as the world emerges from the COVID-19 pandemic, which had a disproportionate negative effect on women in the workplace and threatened promising trends toward gender equality. As noted in an APEC Policy Support Unit brief, an International Trade Centre (ITC) study of 85 economies found that “64 percent of women-led firms self-reported that their businesses were adversely affected by the COVID-19 crisis compared to 52 percent of men-led firms” (Jones-Renaud et al., 2020). In 2023, APEC endorsed the self-funded United States project “Advancing Women in Global Value Chains in the APEC Region” to examine the experience of women-owned businesses (WOBs). Specifically, the project aims to highlight WOBs trying to access global procurement networks and corporate value chains, identify gaps in support, and demonstrate best practices in sourcing from women’s enterprises. This Global Value Chains Benchmarking Study provides an initial overview of government and private sector efforts across APEC to source from WOBs and the experiences of WOBs in engaging in global value chains. The goal of the study is to help APEC policymakers develop and/or promote programs and policies that enable women entrepreneurs to enter or advance in global value chains. Realizing the untapped potential of WOBs participating in global value chains can increase supply chain resilience and business-level growth, boosting women’s workforce participation and job growth, promoting international trade and investment, and ultimately contributing to inclusive economic growth for the entire region.

WOB Official definition	No Official WOB Definition
Canada	Australia*
Chile	Brunei Darussalam
Indonesia**	People’s Republic of China
Republic of Korea	Hong Kong, China
Malaysia***	Japan
The Philippines	Mexico*
Thailand	New Zealand*
The United States	Papua New Guinea
Viet Nam	Peru*
	Russian Federation
	Singapore*
	Chinese Taipei

* While no official definition exists, WEConnect’s International Seal of Certification Process applies in these economies

**Government committed to developing a definition under the Women’s Financial Inclusion Strategy (2020)

*** Malaysia has no definition, but the trade promotion agency of Malaysia’s definition is aligned with that of the IFC.

Establishing an official definition of a WOB is a vital step toward understanding the role that women’s enterprises play in the economy by enabling economies to track gender-related entrepreneurship trends over time and exposing gaps where targeted measures could mitigate market failures driven by gender inequality and bias. The International Finance Corporation (IFC) defines a woman-owned business as one in which:

1. A woman (or women) own(s) at least 51 percent of the enterprise; or
2. The enterprise is at least 20 percent owned by a woman/women *and* either has more than one woman as CEO/COO as well as 30 percent of the board of directors being women where such a board exists.

APEC economies that have adopted a working definition of a WOB largely align with this definition, particularly #1, but many economies in the region do not officially define the term. APEC’s Women and the Economy Dashboard tracks the percentage of firms across economies that “report female participation in ownership,” capturing a broader definition of a WOB and potentially including enterprises that are not majority owned by one or more women.

Most APEC economies have also signed on to use the WEConnect International Seal of Certification Process, which allows buyers—corporations, governments, multilateral institutions such as the United Nations and the World Bank Group—seeking to increase the number and value of contracts awarded to businesses owned by women, and want to make sure women actually receive the money and have the power to decide how to spend that money, rely on WEConnect International Women’s Business Enterprise (WBE) Certification Standard:

1. Businesses that are at least 51 percent owned, managed, and controlled by one or more women.

Even where consistent definitions exist, the use of those definitions through robust data collection is lagging. As noted in the 2021 Women and the Economy Dashboard Report, APEC-wide data on the number of WOBs is among the most persistent gaps, with *only 14 economies reporting any data*, and most figures are drawn from pre-2017 data. While data gaps exist, available data indicates WOBs in the APEC region tend to be much smaller than those owned by men and receive considerably less investment capital and other forms of formal investment (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, 2020). Such trends contribute to low representation of WOBs in global value chains because most lack direct access to large buyers and small businesses often require capital investment to expand their capacity to meet the exacting demands of corporate or government buyers with high quality standards and rigid timelines. According to some estimates, WOBs receive only 1 percent of government procurement spending and 1 percent of corporate purchasing globally (UN Women and the Asian Development Bank, 2022). When the total value of global public procurement is estimated to be USD 11 trillion annually and only 1 percent is awarded to WOBs (Nam, 2021), women entrepreneurs are shut out of significant opportunities to expand their profits, create new jobs, grow their enterprises, and build wealth. Greater supply chain stability and continuity means economies are more capable of withstanding supply-and-demand cycles with increased agility. Similarly, a more stable supplier network also leads to more value for money, greater innovation, and improved responsiveness (Asia-Pacific Economic Corporation, 2022).

Supporting supply chain inclusivity is particularly important as the COVID-19 pandemic unraveled progress on many social and economic indicators, including gender equality to the point that it will now take some APEC economies 168 years to achieve social and economic parity between men and women (World Economic Forum, 2022). Given that gender inequality costs the region billions of

dollars in lost GDP each year, efforts to increase the number of WOBs in global value chains can lead to economy-wide benefits and accelerated economic growth (Wodon and de Labriere, 2018). Taking deliberate steps to integrate WOBs in public procurement is a potent strategy for growing inclusive economies, increasing women's labor force participation, and creating the conditions where women can pursue their economic ambitions and well-being.

Stable and inclusive supplier relationships also offer demonstrated benefits at the corporate level. As UN Women notes, a corporation's "triple bottom line" – people, planet, profits – stands to gain from supply chain inclusivity efforts in several ways, including:

- **Enhance customer loyalty.** One study indicated that over three-quarters of respondents overall (women and men) would try the products or services of a WOB (UN Women and Asian Development Bank, 2022). Globally, and especially in emerging markets, more than half of consumers are increasingly seeking brands that align with their social values and drive change in society (Willige, 2021).
- **Expand customer base:** Women's purchasing power is on the rise, and they are more likely to patronize a company that supports WOBs. Leveraging the purchasing power of women requires greater inclusion of women-owned businesses in global value chains to incorporate their unique position, and increased availability of public information of female consumer spending. A 2009 report notes that women control USD20 trillion in annual consumer spending (Silverstein and Sayre, 2009). Based on these growth predictions, this number could be as great as USD44 trillion globally in 2023.
- **Inspire greater staff buy-in and a more inclusive corporate culture.** Institutionalizing supplier diversity strategies – including increased sourcing from WOBs – is a powerful way to demonstrate organizational commitment to equality and diversity, which can be an asset when recruiting and keeping top-flight talent.
- **Achieve greater sustainability, innovation, and resilience in supply chains.** By branching out beyond a narrow subset of suppliers and business types, organizations can benefit from value chains marked by greater resiliency, risk mitigation, and innovation, while also improving product quality.

While governments and businesses have much to gain from greater value chain diversity (UN Women and Women's Entrepreneurship Accelerator, 2022), progress will continue to be slow and uneven without concerted efforts to bring WOBs and other businesses owned by under-represented groups into global value chains for several reasons. Overall, economies lack policy frameworks that track and promote women's entrepreneurship. For example, according to the 2021 APEC Women and the Economy Dashboard, only nine economies have an existing law against discrimination by creditors on the basis of sex or gender in access to credit (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, 2021). Women also have less access to formal financing due to lack of collateral and capital, limited opportunity to build financial skills and experience, and pervasive social norms that privilege men in business (Arisha and Nowacka, 2020). Many women face further barriers to accessing business networks and reciprocal relationships that can open doors to new business opportunities, particularly for public procurement where information on bid opportunities, processes, and resources often flows through informal networks. Women in East Asia are among the least likely to personally know an entrepreneur, indicating weak connections with a range of business contacts necessary to build a thriving enterprise (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, 2022). Finally, women have significantly less time to devote to their businesses and skill-building

opportunities due to disproportionate domestic and care responsibilities. For example, in the Asia-Pacific region, women and girls spend an average of 11 hours per day on unpaid care and domestic work – four times more than men (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2021). In fact, if the value of unpaid care work was included in the region's GDP calculations, it would add an additional USD3.8 trillion annually. In performing this essential economic function, women must forego time investments in their own pursuits, limiting skills acquisition, income generation, networking, and everyday business management. Even accessing formal banking can be difficult when juggling care responsibilities during a bank's hours of operation (Asian Development Bank, 2018). Engaging in global value chains can also involve significant international travel, which is another hurdle for women who often have primary responsibility to care for family members. As long as there is a lack of the statutory right to childcare, insufficient childcare systems will continue to constrain women's economic potential and hinder economic growth more broadly (International Labour Organization and Asian Development Bank, 2023)

Equitable policies and programs can help women overcome structural barriers to entry related to public procurement and corporate value chains. Several proven strategies to bring more WOBs into global value chains have emerged globally and among APEC economies over the past decade, including:

- **Establish a supplier inclusion office:** The office should sit within procurement and will be responsible for first ensuring a clear definition of a women-owned business for the purpose of procurement opportunities is adopted and then establish and implement the relevant procurement policies, procedures, regulations, technologies, etc., required to support, track and measure impact over time.
- **Preferential procurement mechanisms:** Government procurement laws, policies, and regulations can specify that WOBs be given special consideration for certain contracts, which can incentivize those businesses to bid on public procurement opportunities that they may otherwise see as out of reach and untenable due to steep competition and lack of existing relationships.
- **Procurement set-asides:** Similar to preferential procurement mechanisms, governments can allow only specifically identified groups – i.e., WOBs and businesses owned by disadvantaged groups – to bid for certain contracts. This narrows the pool of applicants and increases the chances of securing a contract, making the investment of time and resources necessary to submit a bid more appealing to small firms.
- **Simplified procedures for entry-level suppliers:** Simplifying procurement and business registration processes benefits first-time and smaller businesses, which tend to be disproportionately women-owned. Leveraging technology to offer e-procurement and other online platforms lowers the barriers to information and provides time-saving benefits with positive implications for women business owners facing time constraints due to household and care responsibilities.
- **Technical assistance and other support programs:** Governments can provide targeted guidance and training to WOBs that are interested in bidding for public contracts, which can improve the quality of their bids and enable them to take advantage of preferential programs and other mechanisms designed to bring more WOBs into public procurement.

- **Certification programs:** Governments can develop their own certification systems or officially accept a third-party certification to determine whether a WOB meets the stated requirements to qualify for set-asides and other procurement preference programs. Governments and corporations can maintain and/or use a third-party database of certified WOBs to ensure eligible businesses are notified of upcoming bidding opportunities.
- **Targets:** Simply setting a target for procurement from WOBs can catalyze intra-governmental efforts to engage WOBs to meet those targets. At a minimum, a policy can be established to require at least one WOB be included in all procurement bid opportunities, and requests for special exceptions must be approved by the organization's head of supplier diversity and inclusion.

METHODOLOGY

This benchmarking exercise represents an initial investigation of the current situation regarding women and value chains and public procurement in the APEC region. The study gathered publicly available data (in English) on five key factors across all 21 APEC member economies to understand commonalities, outliers, and promising practices across the region related to WOBs in public procurement and corporate value chains. The five key factors evaluated in the benchmarking include:

1. Official definition of a WOB
2. Number of WOBs or percent of SMEs owned by women in each economy
3. Indicators of WOB contributions to the overall economy
4. Public procurement programs for WOBs
5. Industry leaders on integrating WOBs into value chains

The benchmarking study is not meant to be comprehensive, but rather an informational document to inform the design of more comprehensive research and recommendations for improving the capacity of APEC economies to support procurement from WOBs in global value chains to promote supply chain resiliency and inclusive economic growth.

KEY FINDINGS

The current state of play when it comes to increasing procurement and value chain access for WOBs in APEC economies is marked by a mix of persistent challenges and promising progress. Several trends illustrate current regional dynamics:

- **No common official definition of a women-owned business currently exists across economies.** As noted above, there is no globally or regionally accepted definition of a WOB, which poses a challenge for tracking data, establishing trends, and comparing across economies.
- **Only eight of the 21 APEC member economies have public procurement provisions** that explicitly encourage and incentivize WOBs to compete for government contracts.

- **Government data and transparency on WOBs in public procurement is limited.** Few APEC economies regularly track and publish data on the number of WOBs, much less their contributions to the economy, such as the number of jobs created by WOBs, the percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) contributed by WOBs, and the number and share of total procurement comprised by WOBs. In many cases, official data is difficult to locate on government websites. The United States is the only APEC economy that consistently reports WOB-related procurement data on an annual or bi-annual basis.
- **While notable exceptions exist, most corporations do not track or share sex-disaggregated indicators about their suppliers and value chain actors.** Moreover, most corporations generally do not regularly publish or amplify their efforts to increase the number of WOBs in their value chains.
- **Procurement and value chain preference programs are increasingly designed to benefit a range of disadvantaged groups, not just WOBs.** Several economies include preferences for minority- and Indigenous-owned businesses, and small businesses writ-large, which include, but are not limited to WOBs. Where supply chain diversity targets exist, they often encompass a similarly wide range of enterprises, which reduces the focus on WOBs. In cases where preferences and incentives target disadvantaged groups broadly, disaggregated, and intersectional data on how those programs benefit specific groups – such as women, people with disabilities, ethnic minorities, and those who claim more than one of these identities – are rarely if ever available, making it difficult to discern the impact on WOBs specifically.

PROMISING APPROACHES, CASE STUDIES, AND KEY RESOURCES FROM THE APEC REGION

GOVERNMENTS AND PUBLIC PROCUREMENT

1. **Develop an official definition of a woman-owned business at the economy level and work to align definitions across APEC:** An official definition is a necessary step towards certification, which can be used to access procurement preferences and set-asides for women and minority-owned businesses. Moreover, a standard definition will enable more consistent and comparable data analysis to identify trends, gender gaps, and success stories over time. The most common definition of a WOB is an enterprise in which a woman (or women) own(s) at least 51 percent of the enterprise. Management and control of the business is also an important consideration beyond ownership.
2. **Establish procurement targets from women-owned businesses:** For example, as part of the Women-Owned Small Business Federal Contracting (WOSBFC) Program, the **United States** established a goal to award a minimum of 5 percent of all contracting to WOBs annually (“Women-Owned Small Business Federal Contract Program,” 2023), though that target has only been met twice – in 2015 (5.05 percent) and in 2019 (5.19 percent) (Bipartisan Policy Center, 2021). The program applies only to industries where women-owned small businesses are underrepresented, as determined by the Small Business Association. **Korea’s** Act on Assisting Female-Owned Businesses of February 1999 sets a goal of 5 percent of the total procurement value of goods and services contracts to be awarded to female-owned business, and 3 percent of the value of construction contracts (Republic of Korea, 1999). **Australia** has set a target of awarding 20 percent of contracts to

SMEs, including a focus on supporting businesses owned by Indigenous Australians (Australian Government, 2023).

- 3. Create preferential mechanisms to level the playing field for WOBs, and work with civil society and business groups to increase awareness of these programs among women business owners:** While **Viet Nam** does not currently have procurement targets for WOBs specifically, the Vietnamese Law on Public Procurement (43/2013/QH13) gives preferential treatment in qualification for bidding for companies that employ over 25 percent women and/or people with disabilities (United Nations Economic and Social Commission of Asia and the Pacific, 2022). **The United States** typically designates contracts under USD250,000 to be small business set-asides (which can then be further restricted to women-owned small-businesses). Importantly, those contracts are also subject to fewer procedural requirements, which is a critical enabling factor allowing WOBs to compete for such procurement opportunities (Federal Acquisition Regulation 13.3). Raising the threshold for simplified procedural contracts could quickly increase the total share of procurement dollars secured by WOBs and encourage a greater number of WOBs to compete for federal contracts. **The Philippines** has adjusted for price differences by providing targeted groups (including WOBs) with the opportunity to be awarded a contract even if the proposed offer is more expensive than other groups' bids (OECD and ASEAN Coordinating Committee for Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises, 2017). **Korea** and **Japan** have adapted some evaluation grids by allowing additional points for representatives from target groups (UN Women, and Asian Development Bank, 2022). **Canada** is working to create a framework for special procurement initiatives in consultation with industry, pilot programs, and professional organizations such as the Women Business Enterprises Canada, the Inclusive Workplace and Supply Council of Canada, and WECONNECT International (Public Services and Procurement Canada, 2022). The City of Toronto already has clear guidelines to increase social procurement (Toronto City Council, 2013). **Australia's** Diversity and Inclusion Procurement Policy encourages government agencies to consider diversity and inclusion in procurement decisions, which could potentially benefit WOBs. Australia has also given target groups an opportunity to bid before the procurement is open to the general market (Australian Government Department of Home Affairs, n.d.).
- 4. Provide targeted technical assistance to build the capacity of WOBs:** The Phoenix Micro Start-up Plan in **Chinese Taipei** is aimed at providing supply-side support programs to potential WOB suppliers, including tendering courses and access to networks in combination with loans for start-ups, with favorable repayment terms (Workforce Development Agency, Ministry of Labor, 2020). **The United States** has established the Office of Women's Business Ownership (OWBO), which provides business training, counseling, and other resources to women entrepreneurs to increase the number of women-owned small businesses, assist in their growth and development, and help them compete in the marketplace ("Office of Women's Business Ownership (OWBO)," n.d.). **The Philippines** runs several educational programs to support capacity building for WOBs to be more competitive in the procurement process, including the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA) which opened the Women's Center in 1998 to support women's entrepreneurial and technical skills (OECD and ASEAN Coordinating Committee for Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises, 2017). The GREAT Women Project (2014-2022), implemented by the Philippine Commission on Women with funding from the Government of Canada, produced a Gender-Responsive Value Chain Analysis (GR-VCA) Framework socialized throughout the economy to share how value chains worked with women entrepreneurs and to train government entities on how to implement GR-VCA. The project

launched the GREAT Women Platform to enable global market access for women in the textile industry (GREAT Women, n.d.). The **Malaysia** External Trade Development Corporation's (MATRADE) Women Exporters Development Program (WEDP) has worked with selected woman-owned SMEs across industries since 2005 to promote competitive and sustainable WOBs to grow their product and service exports. WEDP offers tailored business development coaching, skills building seminars, sponsored trade fair visits, and networking sessions (Malaysia External Trade Development Corporation, n.d.). In 2015, **Chile's** public procurement platform implemented an action plan to enable women to access the same opportunities as men when doing business with the state, resulting in 36.5 percent of procurement going to WOBs (USAID, 2021).

- 5. Elevate the profiles of companies that are successfully sourcing from women-owned businesses:** Policymakers can create opportunities to recognize corporate supply chain diversity efforts focusing on WOBs by instituting annual awards, co-hosted events, and special partnerships to encourage a “race to the top” and broadly socialize proven supply chain diversity strategies.

PRIVATE SECTOR AND VALUE CHAIN DIVERSITY

- 1. Collect and share sex-disaggregated value chain data:** The Ethical Trade Initiative's Gender Data Initiative provides a framework for collecting “more and better sex-disaggregated supply chain data, as an integral part of supply chain risk assessments and monitoring” (Ethical Trading Initiative, n.d.).
- 2. Support and become a member of supply chain diversity programs, including:**
 - **UN Women and the UN Global Compact:** Almost 6,000 businesses have signed on to the Women's Empowerment Principles (WEPs), which include comprehensive guidance on how to promote gender equality and women's empowerment in the workplace, marketplace, and community.
 - **WEConnect International:** WEConnect International educates and connects member buyers with women-owned sellers across 135+ economies, enhances buyer and supplier capabilities to transact business together, and instills confidence that sellers meet buyers' global standards for women-owned businesses. Through the delivery the Women's Business Enterprise Certification inside the online WECommunity marketplace, WEConnect International brings together registered and certified WOBs with buyers, governments, multilaterals, and corporations that are dedicated to sourcing more products and services from women-owned businesses globally. Member buyers represent over USD3 trillion in annual purchasing power.
 - **Women's Business Enterprise National Council (WBENC):** By offering access to opportunities, programs that accelerate growth, and campaigns to influence consumer buying behaviors, WBENC's Certification is the gold standard in the United States designed to accelerate the advancement of women-owned enterprises seeking access to U.S., local, and global value chains. WBENC and WEConnect International work together to offer the Women-Owned Logo for Certified businesses to use on their products and marketing materials.

- **International Trade Centre (ITC):** ITC hosts a [Procurement Map](#) that acts as a matchmaking platform where WOBs can find detailed information for public tenders and contract awards.
3. **Establish preferential mechanisms to level the playing field for WOBs in corporate value chains:** In *the Philippines*, Bayo Manilla Inc. is a fashion wear company in which 90 percent of their vendors are owned and operated by women. Further, 100 percent of the weavers whom Bayo Manilla collaborates with are women (UN Women Asia-Pacific WEPs Awards, n.d.). In *Australia*, WestPac has developed a Supplier Inclusion and Diversity Principals document, which outlines key sourcing priorities, including actively cultivating women-owned and other companies owned and led by under-represented groups (WestPac, n.d.). The Bank of Montreal (BMO) is a leading bank in *Canada* that has a supplier diversity program wherein suppliers must be certified as a Woman Business Enterprise, an Aboriginal Business Enterprise, and/or a Visible Minority Business Enterprise. BMO then uses a tier system to ensure diverse suppliers are in consideration for each procurement, track spending, and reach their supplier diversity goals (“Supplier Information”, n.d.). Also in *Canada*, the telecommunications company, Bell, established a supplier diversity program in 2014 to encourage the participation of businesses that are at least 51 percent owned and operated by women, indigenous groups, persons with disabilities, veterans, and visible minorities. Bell also maintains a diverse supplier database and has full-time staff to run the Supplier Diversity Program (“Bell Suppliers”, n.d.). In the *United States*, Walmart spent nearly USD30 billion with women-owned businesses over seven years as part of their supplier diversity program (Walmart, n.d.). IBM has a global Supplier Diversity program that aims to increase the amount spent with diverse suppliers, including WOBs (IBM, n.d.). Intel set a goal of spending USD500 million annually with women-owned businesses by the end of 2025 (WeConnect, 2022). The *Thailand*-based company, Connecting Founders, advises female entrepreneurs to support women in accessing capital. As of 2021, the company has helped secure USD20 million for women-owned and women-led businesses in *Thailand*, *Viet Nam*, and *Indonesia* (UN Women Asia-Pacific WEPs Awards Thailand, n.d.).
 4. **Enter into public-private partnerships to benefit WOBs in value chains:** In *the Philippines*, in partnership with Coca-Cola Philippines, the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority implemented the Sari-Sari Store Training and Access to Resources (STAR) Program since 2011. The STAR Program works with women owners of small-scale retail shops through entrepreneurship training, peer mentorship, and resources (OECD and ASEAN Coordinating Committee for Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises 2017).

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