



UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN, PLATTEVILLE

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

The attached educational project, by Jessica Dirogene, entitled Federal Procurement & Women-Owned Small Businesses: Examining Barriers to Increase Supplier Participation, when completed, is to be submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the University of Wisconsin-Platteville in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the (MASTER OF SCIENCE IN INTEGRATED SUPPLY CHAIN MANAGEMENT) degree.

Approved:  Date: 1/3/2023

Project Advisor: Justin Bateh, PhD

Professor: Justin Bateh, PhD

Suggested content descriptor keywords: Public Procurement, Small Businesses

**KEYWORDS:** Procurement, Federal Procurement, Small Businesses, Women-Owned Small Businesses (WOSBs), Small Business Administration (SBA), Set-Aside, Sole Source.

A Seminar Paper

Submitted to

the Graduate Faculty of the

University of Wisconsin - Platteville

in Partial Fulfillment

for the Degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE IN INTEGRATED SUPPLY CHAIN MANAGEMENT

By

Jessica Dirogene

Year of Graduation: 2022

### **Abstract**

The federal government has consistently failed to meet its objective of awarding at least 5% of all prime procurement contracts to Women-Owned Small Businesses (WOSBs) since the policy's inception in 1994. Set-aside and sole-source contracts aimed to reduce some barriers for women entrepreneurs have proven insufficient. Many agencies struggle to meet the targets for WOSBs yearly. High levels of bureaucracy impose a greater resource (time, administrative) cost to WOSBs that are more likely to operate at a much smaller scale compared to businesses owned and operated by men. Through the execution of targeted funding, mentorship, and outreach, existing SBA initiatives can prove more efficient and effective.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Section 1: Introduction	
Procurement	6
Statement of Purpose	7
Section 2: Literature Review and Analysis	
History of Federal Procurement	8
History of WOSB Program	9
Rationale for Set-Asides	10
Federal Initiatives	11
Key Issues	13
Section 3: Methodology	14
Section 4: Discussions & Recommendations	
Discussions	16
Recommendations	17
Section 5: References	
References	19

## **Federal Procurement & Women-Owned Small Businesses: Examining Barriers to Increase Supplier Participation**

According to the World Bank organization, governments worldwide spend a combined \$9.5 trillion a year procuring goods and services from the private sector (World Bank 2018). Public procurement, which is the process by which a government entity purchases goods and services, has been deemed the globe's largest marketplace and accounts for approximately 15% of the global GDP (Konanykhin, 2018). Governments procure a diverse set of goods and services from the private sector, from chemicals to software and labor. In the United States, regulations and practices in public procurement vary between the federal, state, and local governments and reflect different needs and disparities in legal authority and fiscal capacity. In the case of the federal government, the 1997 Small Business Reauthorization Act mandated that at least 23% of federal contracting dollars are awarded to small businesses, which remains the current set-aside percentage goal of the federal government (CRS, 2022).

The federal government utilizes the small business definition established by the U.S Small Business Administration (SBA) agency to determine small business qualifications for contracting purposes. According to the SBA, a small business must meet basic eligibility such as: "organized for profit, has a place of business in the United States (U.S), operates primarily in the U.S, is independently owned and operated, is not dominant in its field on a national basis, maybe a sole proprietorship, partnership, corporation or any legal form" (SBA, 2016). In addition, the SBA created "size standards" which are the minimum criteria that qualifies a business as small. Size standards are created per industry and are assessed by either a maximum number of employees or annual revenue in millions of dollars (Federal Register, 1996). Title 13 Part 121 of

the Electronic Code of Federal Regulations (Federal Register, 1996) lists current size standards per industry and the industry categories are established by the North American Industry Classification Manual in the United States. For instance, businesses that produce stationary and are part of the Stationary Product Manufacturing industry have a size standard of 750 maximum number of employees to be considered a small business according to the eCFR list. While firms that offer warehouse storage facilities to farms have a size standard of a maximum of \$30 million in annual revenue to qualify.

The federal government established several subcategories under the small business classification, among which includes Women-Owned Small Businesses (WOSB). Specific policies are enacted to increase the utilization of women-owned firms in federal contracting and subcontracting and to encourage supplier diversity. According to the SBA, in addition to the mandated 23% of prime contracts set aside for small businesses, The government further mandates a goal of 5% of all prime and subcontracting procurement dollars for women-owned small businesses (SBA, n.d). Meeting this goal is also crucial in supporting women entrepreneurs in particularly under-represented industries.

### **Statement of purpose**

Like many private small enterprises, WOSBs depend on federal government contracts for sales and revenue. Women-owned small businesses face greater barriers to entry in pursuing entrepreneurship due to greater difficulty accessing capital and resources. For example, a 2020 study found that women-founded start-ups received about 2.3% of venture capital funds in comparison to their male counterparts (Bittner & Lau, 2021). Due to the lack of funding, WOSBs also operate at a smaller scale and make up only one-fifth of small businesses despite occupying almost half of the labor force in the United States (BPC, 2022). In order to strengthen the

competitiveness of women-owned small firms in the market, the U.S. Congress allocates a “fair proportion” of government contracts to WOSBs (BPC, 2021).

While the federal government has implemented policies to provide contracting business opportunities for WOSBs, the government has only met the 5% awarded contract goal twice (2015 and 2019) since its inception in 1994 (BPC, 2021). Failure to consistently meet this policy goal displays a lack of understanding of the barriers faced by WOSBs in pursuing federal contracts as well as strategy and implementation failures of initiatives created to encourage women-owned supplier firms. This paper will analyze additional barriers of entry for women-owned small firms and the best practices and strategies to create a U.S. federal procurement system that is efficient and encourages the participation of women-owned small businesses.

Figure 1

Federal Prime Contract Awards FY 2017-2021											
Category	Goal	2017 \$ (B)	2017 \$ (%SB)	2018 \$ (B)	2018 \$ (%SB)	2019 \$ (%B)	2019 \$ (%SB)	2020 \$ (B)	2020 \$ (%SB)	2021 \$ (B)	2021 \$ (%SB)
Small Business (all types)	23%	\$105.70	23.80%	\$120.80	25.05%	\$132.90	26.50%	\$146.66	26.01%	\$154.20	27.23%
Women Owned Small Business (WOSBs)	5%	\$20.80	4.70%	\$22.90	4.75%	\$26.00	5.19%	\$27.14	4.85%	\$26.20	4.63%

Source: Adapted from U.S Small Business Administration. (2021, July 28). *Federal Government Awards Record-Breaking \$145.7 Billion in Contracting to Small Businesses*. <https://www.sba.gov/article/2021/jul/28/federal-government-awards-record-breaking-1457-billion-contracting-small-businesses>

## Literature Review & Analysis

### History of Federal Procurement

In Yukin’s “The U.S Federal Procurement System: An Introduction,” the author provides an introductory overview of the laws and policies that guide government procurement in the United States. Yukin states that “important patterns in modern federal procurement can be traced



back to the Revolutionary War, when the Continental Congress several times organized, and reorganized, the procurement system to supply the Continental Army.” (Yukins, 2017).

Currently, defense agencies ranging from the Army to the Defense Logistics Agency account for approximately 60% of federal contracting dollars in contrast to civilian agencies, which award the remaining 40% (GOA, 2022). During the beginning of the nation’s founding, the federal procurement system was modeled after Europe’s contracting system and “called for notice, competition, and public awards during the solicitation and award process and was primarily focused on finding and awarding the lowest cost bids” (Yukins, 2022). Furthermore, during the early period of the country’s inception, “only men of substance and talents” were qualified to win government contracts which systematically discouraged women from entrepreneurship and public procurement (Yukins, 2022).

This system was less complex than what is present today, which utilizes various solicitation packages such as Requests for Proposals (RFPs) and Sole Source Contracts. Today’s federal procurement system lies on the bedrock of two key laws: the Armed Services Procurement Act of 1947 and the Federal Property & Administrative Services Act of 1949 (GMP, 2021). The Federal Acquisition Regulation (Parts 1-53 of Title 48) provides information concerning federal procurement regulations (CSR, 2021).

### **History of the WOSB Program**

To address the concerns of small businesses “owned and controlled by socially and economically disadvantaged individuals” in the federal procurement process, Executive Order 12138 was issued on May 18, 1979, to create a national policy to address the challenges faced by WOSBs in securing federal contracting opportunities (Dilger & Blackford, 2022). The Executive Order aimed to tackle this issue through targeted procurement opportunities for WOSB, financial

assistance, and business and management training (Dilger & Blackford, 2022). Dilger & Blackford further highlights P.L 100-533, an amendment that gave the SBA authorization to set an annual procurement target for WOSBs. A 5% federal contracting target was set for WOSBs in 1994, covering all federal agency spending. Each agency must also aim to award at least 5% for prime contracts to WOSBs. However, critics have asserted that until recently, the SBA's Office of Women's Business Ownership, established in 1979, has received second-tier priority by the SBA and has only started reporting directly to the SBA Administrator in 2022 (Carrazana, 2021).

### **Rationale for WOSB Set-Asides**

Critics argue that the creation of set-aside or special treatment policies for women-owned businesses is both unfair and ineffective use of public funds. However, proponents and the federal government retort that the preservation and expansion of free competition is essential for the economic well-being and security of the nation (BPC, 2021). Furthermore, in the "Anatomy of a Helping Hand: Women-Owned Small Businesses and Federal Contract Procurement," the author asserts the importance of WOSBs to the U.S. economy by stating that if "U.S based women-owned businesses were their own country, they would have the 5th largest GDP in the world" (McManus, 2012). Additionally, according to the SBA, women-owned firms for which the majority can be categorized as small businesses, employed 10.1 million workers, and generated \$1.8 trillion for the U.S. economy in 2019 (SBA, 2021). Despite the gender-gap in business ownership, women-owned enterprises greatly contribute to the U.S. economy and supporting their participation in federal contracting is sound public policy.

Furthermore, the justification provided by the federal government for set-asides for small businesses and, by extension, WOSBs can be found in 15 U.S Code § 631 Declaration of policy, which expresses the following:

Small businesses demonstrate reduced capability to compete in a free-market economy due to several micro-economic or contract level factors including lack of access to capital, under-representation for trade negotiations, lack of access to information to compete successfully in international markets, increased discrimination (both because of their small size and because they are frequently owned by minorities) and suffering a disadvantage to compete against imports. (Hawkins et al., 2018)

Set-aside initiatives used to increase the participation of small businesses and WOSBs provide great benefits for the federal government. Increasing the number of qualified firms promotes competitive bidding to the government's benefit. Research that studied the effects of affirmative action in the procurement process at the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) found that set-asides promoted intra and intergroup competitions among bidders and increased the government's revenue by more than 12% or nearly \$45 million (Ayres & Cramton, 1996).

### **SBA WOSB Key Initiatives**

#### **Sole Source and Set-Asides**

Implementing successful policies to increase the participation of qualified women-owned small businesses in federal procurement remains an unresolved issue. Existing recommendations by the SBA recommend that federal agencies utilize two procurement methods to meet the 5% target goal: set-asides and sole source purchasing in 646 industries (SBA, n.d). A sole source purchase is a method of procurement that allows for a contract to be awarded on the belief that "only one known source exists or that only one single supplier can fulfill the requirements" (NASPO, 2015). Sole source contracts allow small business suppliers to bypass conventional standards that typically restrict their participation in the public procurement process (Cantwell,

2014). Set-aside and sole-source contracts can be awarded to WOSBs under the following conditions.

Federal agencies may award sole source contracts to WOSBs and EDWOSBs in eligible industries under the following conditions: the contracting officer does not have a reasonable expectation that offers would be received by two or more eligible WOSBs and EDWOSBs; the award can be made at a fair and reasonable price; and the anticipated total value of the contract, including any options, does not exceed \$4.5 million (\$7 million for manufacturing contracts). (Dilger & Blackford 2022)

Furthermore, federal contracting officers can award sole source and set-aside contracts to WOSBs that operate in 646 industries established by the NAICS, where the federal government has identified that WOSBs are underrepresented in federal procurement. To be eligible to apply for contracting opportunities set aside for women-owned small businesses, firms must be certified as WOSBs. Applying for certification is done through the SBA website or approved Third Party Certifiers (TPCs) (SBA, n.d). The eligibility criteria for certification are the following, according to the SBA:

- Be a small business according to SBA size standards
- Be at least 51% owned and controlled by women who are U.S. citizens
- Have women manage day-to-day operations and make long-term decisions (SBA, n.d)

### Training

Women entrepreneurs can benefit from resources such as the Women's Business Center (WBC), an SBA national network of business centers that provides business education and counseling to women-owned and operated firms (Carranza, 2020). The WBC offers training in management, finance, and marketing. The SBA also offers webinar training and training through its local chapters regarding the federal contracting and WOSB certification process.

### Key Issues

### Parameters for Targets

In the 2020 fiscal year (FY), several notable agencies failed to meet the 5% threshold, such as the Department of Defense (4.1%), the Department of Veterans Affairs (2.4%), and the Department of Energy (3%) (McSwigan, 2022). In *Shut-Out: The Dearth of Opportunity for Minority Contracting*, McSwigan further highlights that numbers are also misleading and over-inflated since “awards can count towards more than one categorization (McSwigan, 2022). For instance, an awarded contract can meet both small, disadvantaged business (SDBs) targets as well as women-owned small businesses (WOSBs) (BPC, 2021). A contract can be used to concurrently meet multiple awarded contract classification targets, such as Veteran Owned Small Businesses, Women-Owned Small Businesses, and HubZone Small Businesses.

### Transparency & Access

Accessibility and clarity of information is another factor that requires greater scrutiny in assessing the U.S. federal procurement system. According to the United Nations Office of Project Services many practices keep a public procurement system, such as: “publishing procurement policies; advance publication of procurement plans; advertisement of tender notices; disclosure of evaluation criteria in solicitation documents; publication of contract awards and prices paid; establishing appropriate and timely complaint/ protest/dispute mechanisms; implementing financial and conflict of interest disclosure requirements for public procurement officials; and publishing supplier sanction lists” (UNOPS, 2012). However, while federal agencies offer information and resources regarding government procurement needs, qualifications, and awards electronically and through paper documents, McSwigan asserts the following with respect to WOSBs:

And while agencies may hold info sessions for contractors on doing business with the federal government, that information tends to be more general and doesn't always

provide specifics on applying to particular projects. These difficulties are often even harder to overcome for minority- and women-owned businesses. From the get-go, they experience greater challenges in simply obtaining information about these opportunities, understanding how the bidding process works, and the details involved in securing a government contract. Minority-owned businesses can often find themselves excluded from the informal networks of information that influence how businesses learn about and successfully obtain federal contracting opportunities. (McSwigan, 2022)

### **Methodology**

In order to provide historical background on the research topic, peer-reviewed papers and reports were gathered through the George Washington University Law School's (GW Law) online publication. Articles and papers obtained include: "The Centrality of Military Procurement: Explaining the Exceptionalist Character of United States Federal Public Procurement Law" by Schwartz as well as Yukin's "The U.S Federal Procurement System: An Introduction". These articles were consulted for their historical and legal analysis concerning U.S federal public procurement. In conjunction with GW Law's scholarly commons, the University of Wisconsin-Platteville's Karmann Library provided an important source for scholarly articles and government reports. The two online libraries were utilized due to research access, a large collection of faculty scholarships on U.S procurement law and the causal relationship between the military and federal procurement as a system. In addition, government websites and databases provided a great source to search for information regarding federal procurement laws and regulations, and the policies enacted to support the participation of women-owned small businesses as federal suppliers. Government websites used included the Small Business Administration (SBA), USAspending.gov, the U.S Government Accountability Office, and the Office of the United States Trade Representative. For instance, the electronic Code of Federal Regulations provided the greatest source of information regarding the qualifications used by the federal government to qualify a business as "small" by industry. Furthermore, the federal government databases were utilized to gather the following information:

- Laws, regulations, and policies associated with women-owned small businesses (WOSB).
- Government agencies in charge of implementing and monitoring WOSB policies by the federal government.
- Barriers to entry for WOSB determined by the federal government.
- Program (s)/policy goals and targets.
- Agencies/institutions targeted by policies.
- Historical performance data of federal initiatives supporting WOSB.

The World's Bank Intergovernmental Public-Private Legal Resource Center, which assesses public procurement regulations and practices in 180 countries, was consulted to examine common barriers faced by women-owned businesses in public-private partnerships and the recommended tools offered to address these problems. Other data and statistics were obtained from independent advocacy organizations such as the Open Contracting Partnership, which provides information regarding the implementation and progress of public procurement reform initiatives in 50 countries.

### **Evaluation of Sources**

Sources were evaluated based on the following criteria: reference type, relevance to the topic, and author's credentials. Articles written by legal scholars and U.S. federal government historians, government periodicals, and sources in academic journals and law reviews were preferred for the introductory exposition of the research topic. Sources written by professionals in the field and by legal or academic publications were chosen due to credibility and reliability. In searching for information through published government sources, preference was given to reports written within the last ten years for time relevance.

Lastly, books such as *The Pattern of Federal Procurement from Minority and Women-Owned Small Businesses* by Skolnik & Chmelynski were consulted to assess the history of federal initiatives for women-owned small businesses and their successes and failures to recommend best practices and courses of action. These books were obtained and read

electronically through the Karrmann Library due to accessibility. Books selected were evaluated based on the subject matter expertise of the author(s) and the credibility of the publisher.

### **Keyword Descriptors**

Descriptive terms such as: federal public procurement, government purchasing, public procurement history, public procurement theory, procurement and transparency, public procurement laws, federal contracting, small business procurement, WOSBs and federal procurement, and minority-owned small business were used during online research.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

Studies providing data on how women entrepreneurs perceive the ease of navigating the federal procurement process are limited. This impacts the ability to conclude in this research paper if a lack of training or access to information is a limiting factor in the participation of WOSBs as federal suppliers. Nonetheless, ample research has shown that government purchasing can play an important role in boosting the viability of women-owned and operated enterprises that face additional barriers and gender biases to create a more inclusive economy. Remedying gender-based disparities in public procurement will require government intervention and studying strategies that have proven successful that can be adjusted or implemented at the federal level.

### **Recommendations**

#### **Address Funding Disparities**

Despite the government acknowledging funding disparities as one of the justifications for set-asides for WOSBs, the SBA does not offer loans or funding opportunities specifically for WOSBs (new or existing). Financing is a key resource in helping women entrepreneurs launch or expand businesses that can successfully compete for government contracts. While the SBA



offers general small business loans to qualified applicants, there aren't any funding opportunities created to target gender disparities in access to capital for women-owned enterprises. A WOSBs loan program linked to mandatory WOSBs certification and federal procurement training can help bridge the funding and information gap for women entrepreneurs.

### **Mentor-Protégé Program (MPP) Modification**

The SBA provides a mentorship program where small businesses can partner with experienced government contractors to obtain guidance on the federal contract bidding process and general business management assistance. The program is open to all businesses, and proteges can be paired with two experienced mentors in a range of industries for up to six years from approval (SBA, n.d). It would prove beneficial for the SBA to modify policy and require that WOSBs are paired with at least 1 WOSBs supplier/contractor mentor. This will enable WOSBs seeking support and guidance to receive better-targeted information and counsel.

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