

# ACCESS TO PUBLIC PROCUREMENT FOR WOMEN-OWNED BUSINESSES IN AFRICAN COUNTRIES: ANALYSIS OF FACTORS TO FAILURE AND INNOVATIVE PRACTICES IN MALI

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## Abstract

This article examines the barriers and catalysts for female entrepreneurship in public procurement. The study is based on resource-based view (RBV) theory and gendered entrepreneurship theory. Using a methodology that combines qualitative and quantitative approaches, data was collected from women-owned businesses eligible for public procurement and from key informants in organisations and structures promoting reform and the advancement of women. The results reveal multiple obstacles, three of which are particularly significant in the Malian context: lack of knowledge about public procurement strategies and rules, socio-cultural biases, and lack of financial resources and skilled human resources. The results also reveal innovative practices such as gender-responsive public procurement. It should be noted, however, that these practices remain limited. This article is aimed at women entrepreneurs and public decision-makers, with the aim of creating a more inclusive entrepreneurial environment in Mali and around the world. It is unique in the context of African countries, as it highlights the influential role of women entrepreneurs in shaping the local and even global public procurement ecosystem. It proposes relevant solutions at both the local and global levels.

## Research Paper

**Keywords:** Women's enterprises, Women entrepreneurs, Small and medium-sized enterprises, Public procurement, Gender-sensitive public procurement, Mali

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## **Introduction**

Public procurement accounts for a significant proportion of government spending (OECD, 2021; Loader, 2015). It represents around 12% of global annual GDP (ITC and UN Women, 2024). Indeed, public procurement accounts for between 10% and 15% of GDP in developed countries (ITC, 2020) and 30% to 40% of GDP in less developed countries (ITC, 2014; Kirton, 2013). It is an important lever for sustainable development (Baptista et al., 2025; Stuijts et al., 2025), strategic socio-economic development (Orser, et al. 2021), and a significant source of economic activity for SMEs (UN Women, 2023, 2022; AfDB, 2021).

However, SMEs, particularly those run or owned by women, remain largely excluded from public procurement. It could be said that they are not the main beneficiaries of government programmes (Gochhayat and Rout, 2025). They account for only 1% of public procurement (ITC and UN Women, 2024; AfDB, 2021; ITC, 2020). Yet, female entrepreneurship has become a rapidly growing global phenomenon (Nayak et al., 2025; Chrysostome et al., 2023). It is essential in the general field of entrepreneurship (Maurya et al., 2025). It is a path to women's empowerment (Agrawal et al., 2023) and a driver of economic growth, poverty reduction and socio-economic development for countries (Hossain et al., 2025; Gochhayat and Rout, 2025; Turley et al., 2025; Nielsen et al., 2021; Abrar ul Haq et al., 2021).

Faced with the low representation of women in entrepreneurship in general (GEM Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, 2023) and in public procurement in particular (UN Women, 2022), decision-makers and their contracting entities, international institutions and organisations are working to

develop mechanisms to promote the promotion of female entrepreneurship (Gochhayat and Rout, 2025), the inclusion of women-owned businesses in public procurement processes (UNOPS, 2023), and contribute to achieving several United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (ITC, 2020).

In Mali, the government, keen to support SMEs' access to public procurement, has adopted a number of measures, such as Decree No. 2018-0473/PM-RM of 28 May 2018 on the adoption of measures to direct public procurement towards small and medium-sized enterprises and domestic production. However, despite the initiatives taken by the Malian government, access to public procurement for SMEs, particularly those run by women, remains a major challenge.

There are numerous studies on female entrepreneurship in Africa (Chrysostome *et al.*, 2023; Naguib, 2022; Ojong *et al.*, 2021; Ogundana *et al.*, 2021; Ogundana, 2020; Omeihe *et al.*, 2020; Ogundana *et al.*, 2018). Despite these contributions, research on female entrepreneurship focused on public procurement is under-explored (Orser *et al.*, 2021) and has been conducted largely in the context of developed countries (Rashid and Ratten, 2020). It is rare in the context of African countries in general, and Mali in particular, a West African country with complex socio-cultural characteristics and an institutional environment marked by multiple challenges (Ogundana *et al.*, 2021).

This article aims to fill these gaps by examining the factors that hinder women-owned businesses from accessing public procurement markets, as well as innovative practices that could promote such access. The research will therefore focus on the following questions: What are the barriers or obstacles

preventing women-owned or women-led businesses from accessing public procurement markets? What innovative practices can promote this access? To answer these questions, after the introduction, this article is structured in four parts. The first part presents a review of the literature. The second part presents the research methodology. The third part is devoted to the main results. Finally, the fourth part addresses the discussion and conclusion.

## **Literature review**

### ***Overview of women's enterprises***

The term ‘women's enterprise’ is subject to multiple interpretations and definitions. Its definition may vary from one country to another (ITC, 2020). That said, the literature mainly distinguishes between two categories of women's enterprises: enterprises owned by women and enterprises managed by women.

A women-owned enterprise refers to a legal entity that is both owned by at least 51% by one or more women, unconditionally controlled by one or more women in terms of long-term decision-making and day-to-day management and administration of business activities, and independent from other enterprises that are not owned by women (UN Women, 2022; IFC, 2020). It represents a business that has been created or taken over by one or more women. Women in this type of business are referred to as entrepreneurial leaders (Chabaud and Lebègue, 2013). Unlike women-owned businesses, women-led businesses refer to legal entities in which women account for at least 50% of senior management with strategic decision-making powers in

any field (UN Women, 2022). It is led by a female executive (Chabaud and Lebègue, 2013).

Women-led businesses generally operate in the education, health, social work, or personal services sectors (Bel, 2009), while they are less active in industry, construction, and innovative sectors (Chasseroio *et al.*, 2016). More often than not, they join forces with male-owned businesses to operate in other sectors such as industry in order to escape the negative consequences of stereotypes (Godwin *et al.*, 2006). They are smaller than male-owned businesses in terms of employment and turnover (Amin, 2010).

### ***Factors related to female-owned enterprises' access to public procurement***

The success or failure of entrepreneurship in general depends on the local context (Constantinidis, 2017). This is the case for female entrepreneurship, where the barriers and obstacles vary from one country to another (Turley *et al.*, 2025; UNOPS, 2023). That said, the literature on women in entrepreneurship in general, and in the field of public procurement in particular, highlights multiple barriers or obstacles (Turley *et al.*, 2025; Hossain *et al.*, 2025; UNOPS, 2023; Machado *et al.*, 2025; Nziku *et al.*, 2024; Agrawal *et al.*, 2023; Metu and Nwogwugwu, 2022; Ghouse *et al.*, 2021; Ahl and Marlow, 2019; ITC, 2020, 2015, 2014). As a significant example, ITC (2020) highlights six barriers to women's access to international markets, namely: (1) inadequate national legislation and policies; (2) inappropriate tender design; (3) excessive requirements; (4) poor government practices; (5) lack of information; and (6) insufficient capacity.

Furthermore, as mentioned above, although barriers vary from one country to another (Turley et al., 2025), it should be noted that there are obstacles common to both developed and developing countries. The ITC (2014, p. xiv) highlights some of these obstacles, which include: "lack of information about tendering opportunities; overly complex and cumbersome tendering procedures; excessive technical and financial qualification criteria; overly large contracts; short deadlines for submitting bids; price competition; lack of information from procuring entities and the inability of these entities to pay women-owned businesses promptly." (ITC, 2014, p. xiv).

### ***Innovative policies promoting access to public procurement for women-owned SMEs***

To promote access to public procurement for SMEs, and women-owned businesses in particular, governments can employ a range of innovative practices. For example, some governments, such as those of the United States and South Africa, have emphasised affirmative action in public procurement, reserving "a share of public contracts for businesses owned by African Americans, women or minorities " (Miranda, 2018, p. 8). In contrast, other governments, such as those in Europe, have favoured alternative policies, such as allotment, which involves dividing contracts into lots, or grouping, which involves developing SME consortia (Glas and Eßig, 2018; Morand, 2002).

In the specific case of women-owned SMEs, governments can implement innovative measures (UN Women, 2022), such as gender-responsive public procurement or gender-responsive public commissioning. This type of

procurement is an innovative practice that involves sustainably selecting services, goods or public works from companies owned or managed by women and/or that have policies and practices that promote gender equality for their employees and supply chains (UN Women, 2022). It enables governments to offer more opportunities to women-owned businesses in order to improve their social and economic outcomes, through positive selection criteria, award and tie-breaking provisions, contract performance conditions, targets and quotas for women-owned businesses (ITC and UN Women, 2024). Its objective is to impact gender equality and women's empowerment (UN Women, 2022).

This new dynamic is being followed in West African countries. For example, since 2024, Senegal has adopted Decree No. 2022-2295, introducing a clear definition of women-owned businesses and a quota system for women-owned businesses in public procurement (UN Women, 2024). More specifically, these provisions were taken to allocate 5% of budgets to public contracts, including 3% for small Senegalese enterprises and 2% for enterprises run or owned by Senegalese women. In Mali, similar measures have been adopted since 2018, but they do not specifically address facilitating access to public procurement for women-owned SMEs.

### ***Access to public procurement for women-owned businesses: the Resource Based View (RBV) theory and the gender theory of entrepreneurship***

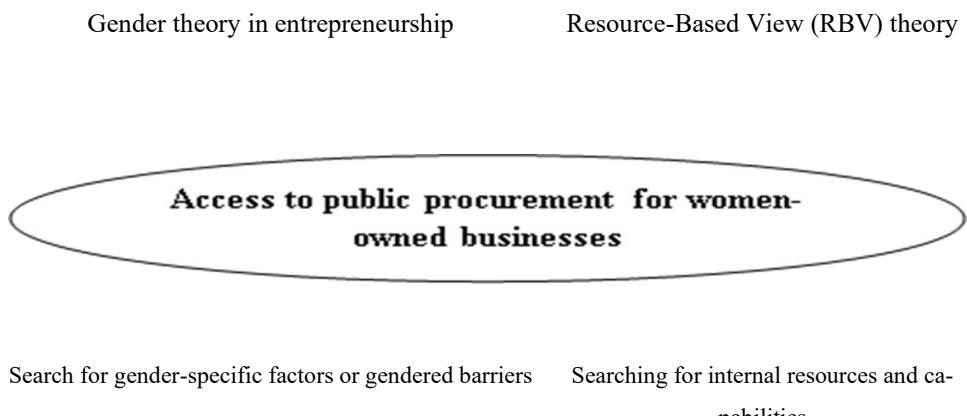
This research is based on the Resource Based View (RBV) theory. This theory focuses on organisational resources and internal capabilities in order to provide companies with sustainable competitive advantages that are

both heterogeneous and immobile in the market (Madhani, 2010; Barney, 1991). It highlights the additional challenges faced by small businesses owned by women compared to men. Consequently, resources are associated with the size and capabilities of the company (Orser et al., 2021; Salamzadeh et al., 2024; Rahman et al., 2024). They enable companies to collect and analyse market information, understand the needs of competitors and customers, and develop products and services (Akenroye et al., 2020). These resources can take different forms. As a significant example, Barney (1991) categorises three forms of resources: (1) organisational resources (formal structure); (2) human resources (training, experience, knowledge); and (3) physical resources (physical, technological, facilities and equipment). However, it should be noted that RBV theory is limited to the analysis of internal resources and capabilities and does not take into account the analysis of the external environment (Porter, 1991).

To fill this gap, the study draws on gender theory in entrepreneurship. This theory, which is constantly evolving (Henry et al., 2016), highlights gender-specific factors in entrepreneurship (Rouse et al., 2013; Ahl and Marlow, 2012; Brush et al., 2009). More specifically, it analyses the socio-demographic and structural factors or gender-based barriers that women entrepreneurs encounter in their business activities (Chassero et al., 2016). It challenges gender neutrality by advocating a nuanced view of women's motivations in terms of entrepreneurship (Turley et al., 2025). The gendered approach to entrepreneurship has given rise to several research activities, such as gender-sensitive public procurement.

To summarise, Table 1 describes the theoretical framework of this research by placing female-owned companies' access to public procurement at the intersection between Resource Based View (RBV) theory and gender theory in entrepreneurship.

**Table 1.** Theoretical research approach



Source: author from the literature

## Research methodology

In this study, our objective is to highlight the barriers to female-owned businesses accessing public procurement markets, as well as innovative practices that could promote this access. To achieve this, we opted for a mixed-method approach in order to increase the validity of the results (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2017) and also reduce the requirements of both qualitative and quantitative methods (Thietart, 2014). This study began in 2024 and ended in September 2025.

## ***Qualitative study***

The qualitative study, using semi-structured interviews, was conducted with managers and leaders in structures and organisations involved in reform and the promotion of women and SMEs (Table 2). Participants were selected using purposive sampling (Creswell, 2009), based in particular on their knowledge of the subject.

**Table 2.** Information about the interviews

<b>Terrain coding</b>	<b>Structures/Organizations</b>	<b>Number of interviews</b>
A	Ministry for the Advancement of Women, Children and Families (MPFEF)	2 Project manager 1 Technical adviser
B	Directorate-General for Public Procurement and Public Service Delegations (DGMP-DSP)	1 Responsible for missions 2 IT and Statistics Unit
C	Network of Women Economic Operators (RFOE)	5 Members of the RFOE in Mali
D	Ministry of National Entrepreneurship, Employment and Vocational Training (MENEFP)	1 Project manager
E	National Directorate for Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (DNPME)	2 Agents
		14 interviews

Source: author based on field study

In total, fourteen (14) semi-structured interviews were conducted based on an interview guide. (See the interview guide in Appendix 1). This guide consisted of two main themes. The first theme concerned the barriers or obstacles to female-owned businesses accessing public procurement. The second theme concerned innovative practices that could promote access to public procurement for women-owned SMEs. The data collected was transcribed in full. We also coded the fieldwork in order to preserve anonymity.

This allowed us to collect objective responses and guarantee the sincerity of the answers. In addition to this primary qualitative data, we used secondary data (official documents, websites). The data underwent qualitative and thematic content analysis following the four steps of Vaismoradi et al. (2016), namely: (1) initialization; (2) construction; (3) rectification; and (4) finalization.

### ***Quantitative study***

For the quantitative methodology, we opted for a survey. This study was conducted among a sample of 500 women-owned businesses eligible for public procurement. We obtained 162 usable responses, representing a response rate of 32.4%. Our objective is to characterise women-owned businesses and understand their perceptions of barriers and innovative practices in public procurement. These companies are located in the district of Bamako and the regions of Ségou, Mopti, and Sikasso. These study areas were chosen using purposive sampling (Creswell, 2009), particularly because of their demographic importance and strategic location. The questionnaire (See the questionnaire in appendix 2), consisted of several sections: the first section focused on general questions, the second section focused on barriers or obstacles related to women-owned businesses' access to public procurement, and the third section focused on innovative practices that could facilitate women's access to public procurement. Other questions were asked in the form of agreement levels assessed using a four-point Likert scale: strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree. We used descriptive statistical

analysis to analyse the data. We used descriptive statistical analysis (frequency distribution and cross-tabulations) to analyze the data.

### ***Declarations of ethics approval and informed consent***

The research process adhered to the ethical standards of the University of Social Sciences and Management of Bamako (USSGB). Procedures involving human participants were approved by the Research Summary Approval Committee of the University Center for Economic and Social Research (CURES)/USSGB in Mali under the approval reference number: 2024\_CURES\_041 dated 11 November 2024. Human participants gave their verbal consent for the use of their information. However, the data from this study can be obtained upon reasonable request from the author.

## **Results**

### ***Results of descriptive statistical analysis: quantitative approach***

#### ***Socio-demographic profile of women entrepreneurs***

The results in Table 3 show that the majority of women entrepreneurs, more than 60%, were between the ages of 30 and 50. This explains the maturity of women engaged in entrepreneurship. Similarly, Table 3 reveals that of the 162 women entrepreneurs, more than 70% were married. The other women are those who have lost their husbands, either through death (12.96% of women entrepreneurs) or divorce (9.88% of women entrepreneurs). This situation can be explained by the importance of family support, particularly that of spouses, in entrepreneurship. Finally, according to the information in Table 3, out of 162 women entrepreneurs, 45.68% had completed higher ed-

ucation, 38.27% had completed secondary education, and 8.64% had completed basic education. These results demonstrate the importance of education in entrepreneurship.

**Table 3.** Socio-demographic characteristics of women entrepreneurs

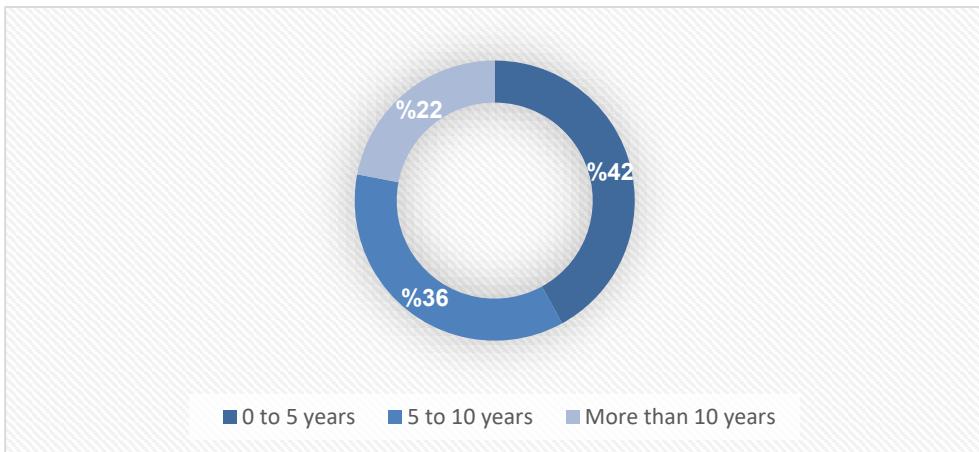
<b>Demographic characteristics</b>	<b>Measures</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
Age (years)	Up to 30	38	23.46
	30-50	108	66.67
	Over 50	16	9.87
	Single	08	4.94
Marital status	Married	117	72.22
	Widow	21	12.96
	Divorced	16	9.88
Level of education	Illiterate	12	7.41
	Fundamental education	14	8.64
	Secondary education	62	38.27
	Higher education	74	45.68

Source: author based on field study

### *Profile of the women-owned businesses studied*

The results show that 78% of women-owned businesses have been in operation for at least 10 years. However, 22% of these businesses have been in operation for more than 10 years (Figure 1). These results highlight the eligibility of the businesses studied for public procurement contracts.

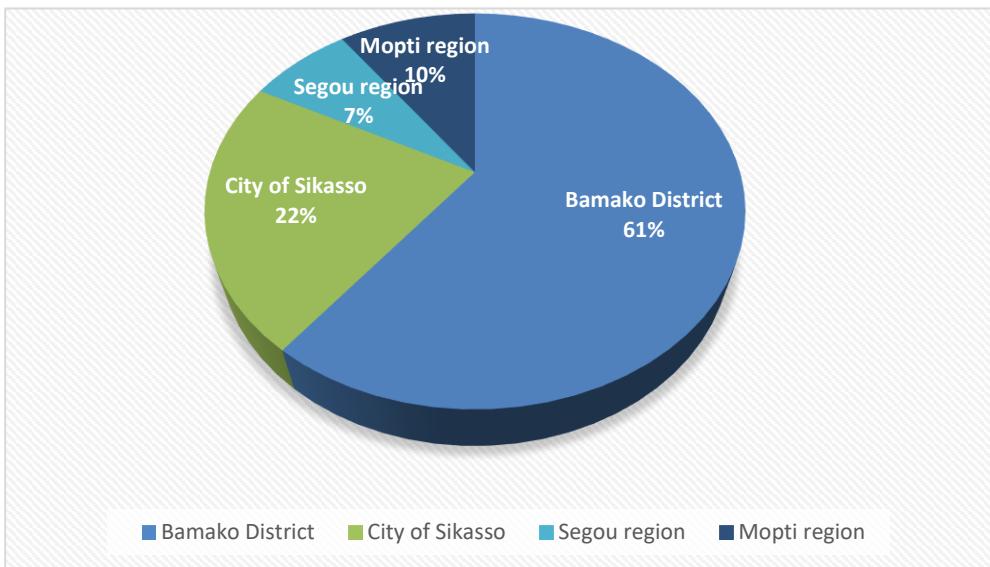
**Figure 1.** Age of the studied female-owned businesses



**Source:** author based on field study

Similarly, analysis of the data shows that 83% of the women-owned businesses studied are concentrated in large urban areas (the district of Bamako and the city of Sikasso). This situation explains the development of urban female entrepreneurship. On the other hand, 17% of the women-owned businesses studied are located in rural areas (Ségou and Mopti regions). This situation explains the importance of female entrepreneurship in rural areas (Figure 2).

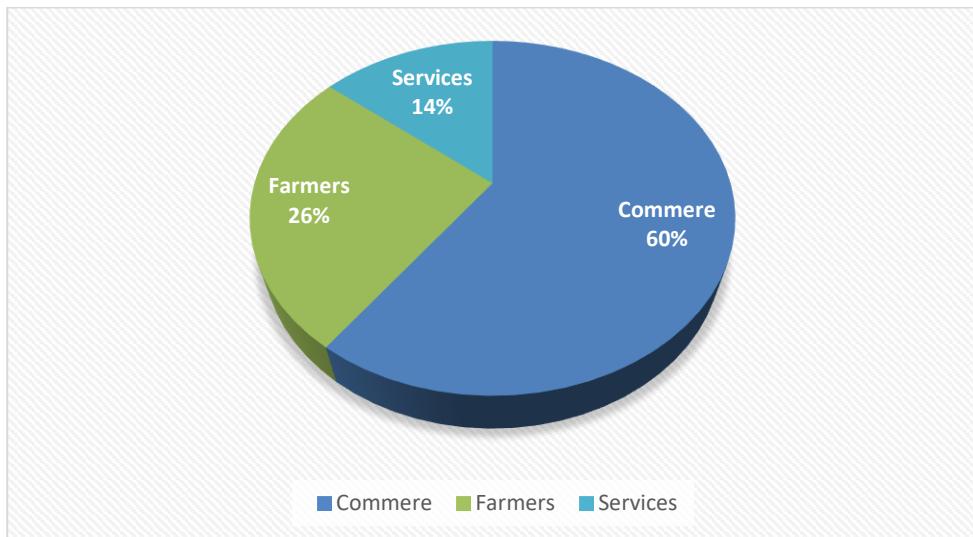
**Figure 2.** Concentration of women-owned businesses



**Source:** author based on field study

Finally, the results show that the majority of women-owned businesses studied operate in the trade sector (60%), followed by agricultural product processing (26%) and services (14%) (Figure 3). This situation can be explained by the fact that in Mali, trade has been a tradition for certain ethnic groups for several decades. Trade has significant potential to contribute to economic development. However, it should be noted that women's participation in trade varies from one city to another.

**Figure 3.**Sectors of activity of the studied women-owned SMEs

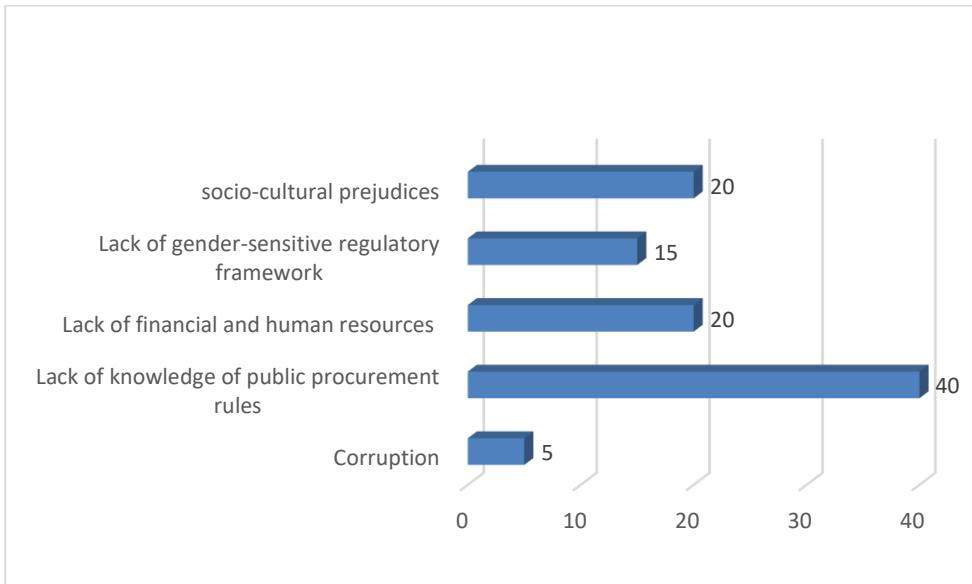


**Source:** author based on field study

*Factors contributing to the failure of women-owned businesses to access public procurement contracts*

The results of our quantitative survey show that the women-owned businesses studied face a variety of barriers or obstacles to accessing public procurement markets. However, three factors stand out as particularly restrictive in the Malian context: lack of knowledge of public procurement rules (40%), socio-cultural prejudices (20%), and lack of financial resources and skilled human resources (20%) (Figure 4).

**Figure 4.** Barriers to female-owned SMEs access to public procurement

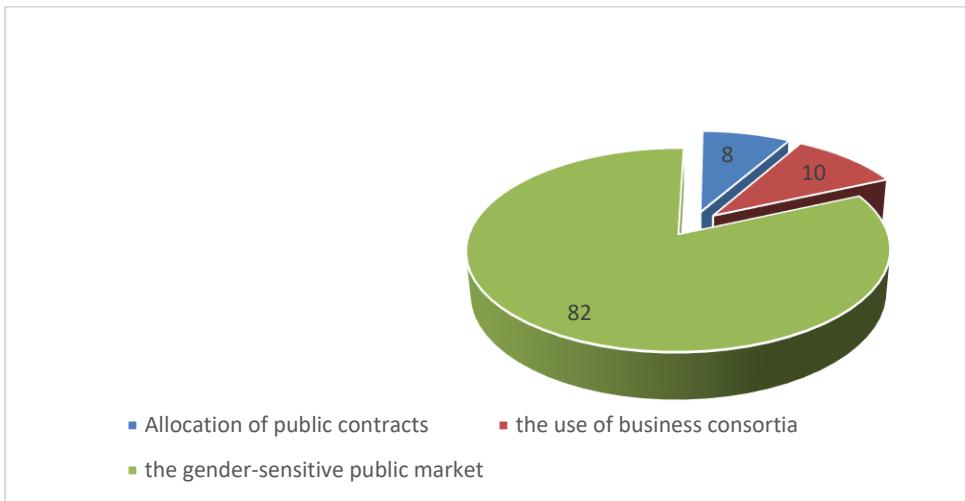


Source: author based on field study

#### *Innovative practices promoting access to public procurement for women-owned SMEs*

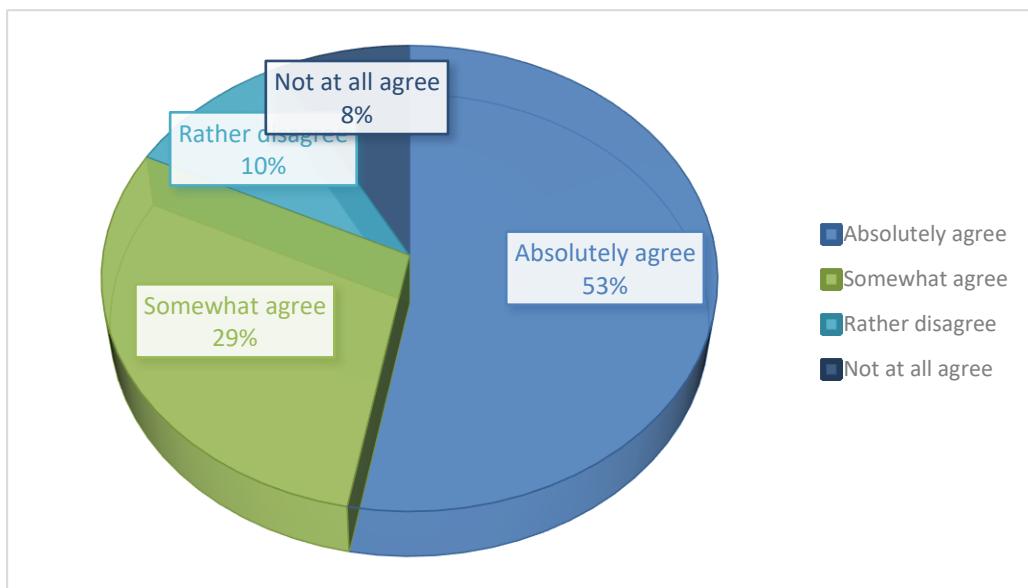
Our results reveal a number of innovative practices that promote access to public procurement for women-owned SMEs (Figure 5). Analysis of the data collected highlights gender-sensitive public procurement (82% of respondents), followed by joint venture contracts (10% of respondents) and the allocation of public procurement contracts (8% of respondents).

**Figure 5.**Innovative practices that promote access to public procurement markets for women-owned SMEs



**Source:** author based on field study

Furthermore, regarding the question of whether gender-responsive public procurement can effectively promote the integration of women-owned businesses into public procurement, the results of the quantitative survey show that 82% of respondents agree somewhat or strongly agree (Figure 6).



**Figure 6.** Percentage of respondents' agreement level

**Source:** author based on field study

### ***Results of the thematic analysis: qualitative approach***

Two main themes emerged from the data

#### *Barriers to female-owned businesses accessing public procurement markets*

Analysis of the interviews revealed several barriers influencing female-owned businesses' access to public procurement markets in Mali.

##### **✓ Lack of knowledge of public procurement rules**

According to respondents, most women-owned businesses do not understand public procurement rules and strategies, or lack information about public procurement opportunities. Respondents highlighted the complexity of

procedures, long payment delays and the difficulties women entrepreneurs face in integrating into networks for social reasons.

‘Women entrepreneurs, especially those in rural areas, are unfamiliar with public procurement rules and lack information, meaning they have limited access to public procurement platforms. They also do not belong to networks for responding to calls for tenders. They lack technical capacity. This situation is largely due to their low level of education’ (Field B).

✓ **Lack of financial resources and qualified human resources**

All respondents highlighted the financial difficulties faced by women entrepreneurs. This situation is due to the fact that women-owned businesses are usually smaller and rarely seek bank loans. Instead, they focus on reinvesting their profits.

‘Women-owned businesses are generally small businesses. Therefore, they do not have sufficient liquidity to pre-finance commitments related to tender contracts. They very often use their savings instead of taking out bank loans’ (Field E).

‘Women-owned SMEs have limited access to financing, which means that they often do not have the collateral to meet the conditions of tenders. They also do not have the capacity to accept long payment terms’ (Field D).

Other respondents lamented the lack of tendering skills within women-owned businesses. These businesses lack expertise.

« Les entreprises dirigées par les femmes souffrent généralement de la mauvaise qualité des ressources humaines, d'où des insuffisances de compétences » (Terrain A).

✓ **Socio-cultural prejudices**

According to respondents, societal prejudices have a huge impact on women-led businesses, as they restrict the activities of women entrepreneurs in the informal sector.

‘Women entrepreneurs are very attached to their cultures. They fear social prejudices that can undermine their confidence and ability as entrepreneurs. Societal prejudices often keep women's SMEs in the informal sector. In addition, these women's religious beliefs conflict with the public procurement system' (Field A).

✓ **Absence of a regulatory framework and corruption**

Respondents emphasised the importance of legal and regulatory frameworks. According to respondents, these frameworks restrict women-owned businesses from accessing public procurement markets.

‘To date, unless I am mistaken, there are no laws, decrees or legal texts specifically facilitating access to public procurement for women-owned businesses. I think this is in the works, but I cannot tell you exactly when it will be done. Otherwise, many African countries already have specific texts for women's SMEs in the area of public procurement' (Field B).

Other respondents mentioned forms of corruption such as sexual harassment, bribery, favouritism or nepotism faced by women entrepreneurs.

‘This is nothing new: women entrepreneurs are most often victims of sexual harassment or acts related to abuse of power for sexual exploitation and nepotism.’ (Field C).

*Success factors related to female SMEs' access to public procurement*

✓ **Contract for the grouping of companies and the allotment of public contracts**

Respondents mentioned factors related to business consortium contracts and the allocation of public contracts, which are already provided for in national legislation. However, they emphasised that these factors remain limited because they take into account all categories of SMEs, regardless of whether they are owned by women or men.

‘The legislation that has been put in place to promote SME access to public procurement does not really protect female-owned SMEs, because they are still competing with male-owned businesses. We really need to find another solution specifically for female-owned SMEs.’ (Field C).

✓ **Gender-sensitive public procurement**

All respondents emphasised the need to implement and promote gender-sensitive public procurement by allocating specific public procurement quotas to women-owned SMEs.

"As part of the promotion of gender-sensitive procurement practices, significant progress has been made towards revising Decree No. 2018-0473/PM-RM of 28 May 2018, and subsequently facilitating access to public procurement for women-owned businesses. We plan to allocate a percentage of public contracts to women-owned businesses" (Field B).

'Sensitive public procurement will be able to protect women-led SMEs by improving transparency. With these new practices, women entrepreneurs will no longer be exposed to harassment or other forms of corruption' (Field C).

According to respondents, while there are currently no preferential or specific provisions in Mali to reserve markets solely for women, programs have been adopted by public authorities and international organizations such as UN Women to strengthen the capacities of women-owned businesses. "Multiple training courses are organized for women entrepreneurs. These courses are organized by the government, or more often by international organizations." (Field A).

## **Discussion and conclusion**

This research yielded two main contributions. The first highlights the factors contributing to the failure of women-owned businesses to access public procurement markets. The second highlights the factors contributing to success or innovative policies likely to facilitate access to public procurement markets for businesses. Overall, these results confirm the theoretical framework presented in Table 1. Below, we present two possible explanations for the results obtained.

Firstly, our findings highlight multiple barriers to female-owned businesses accessing public procurement contracts in Mali: a lack of knowledge about public procurement strategies and rules, socio-cultural prejudices, a lack of financial resources and skilled human resources, the absence of a gender-sensitive regulatory framework, and corruption. These findings are consistent with those of Turley *et al.* (2025), Agrawal *et al.* (2023), and Metu and Nwogwugwu (2022), who argue that lack of access to finance is a major challenge facing women entrepreneurs, and Orser *et al.* (2021), who highlight the complexity of the procurement process and the difficulty in finding public procurement opportunities, or Mashapure *et al.* (2022), who emphasise the lack of market information, or Rashid and Ratten (2020), who highlight distinct socio-cultural challenges affecting women entrepreneurs depending on the country. Our findings also corroborate those of Ghose *et al.* (2021), who highlight geographical barriers. Similarly, our findings are similar to those of Ancarani *et al.* (2019), who highlight tangible (human and financial) and intangible (experience) resources as barriers to SME participation in public procurement, and those of Gochhayat and Rout (2025), who mention political instability and corruption as factors hindering female entrepreneurship.

Secondly, our findings also highlight innovative practices such as gender-sensitive public procurement. However, it should be noted that these innovative practices fall short of expectations or are limited, mainly due to the lack of a legal and regulatory framework that expressly provides for contracts reserved for companies managed or owned by Malian women. These findings appear to corroborate those of UN Women (2022), according to

which measures to promote gender-sensitive public procurement are underway in Mali. These measures include: integrating gender into the methodology for evaluating procurement systems; supporting women-owned businesses by providing them with the tools, capacities and skills they need to participate in public procurement tenders (UNOPS, 2023); facilitating access to information and social networks and awareness-raising programmes (Chin, 2017); promoting strategic networking and connecting women to essential resources (ITC, 2020). Our findings are similar to those of a study conducted by the OECD, which found that only 24% of its member countries have a policy on women-owned businesses (OECD, 2019). On the other hand, other countries such as Tanzania in Africa and the United States in the West have already incorporated the ‘buy from women-owned businesses’ approach into their legislation and policies (UN Women and the ILO, 2021).

### ***Recommendations***

The following recommendations can be drawn from our research:

- In line with new practices in gender-responsive public procurement, the Malian government must adopt a legal and policy framework (ITC, 2020) that clearly defines women-owned businesses and establishes a quota system for these businesses in public procurement (UN Women, 2024). More specifically, this decree must provide for contracts reserved for businesses managed or owned by Malian women.
- Apart from new practices related to gender-sensitive public procurement, women entrepreneurs need to develop strategies to balance work and

private life, focusing on business-related strategies, household-related strategies, and strategies at the interface between business and household (Alsos et al., 2016). They can employ distinct skills-based strategies that emphasise entrepreneurial learning, critical thinking, and the exploitation of social knowledge (Somià, 2025).

- The success of female entrepreneurship focused on public procurement in the Malian context depends not only on the restructuring of the economic landscape (UN Women, 2024), but also on taking into account beliefs and values (Chakraborty and Biswal, 2022), the optimism of those around them (Arasti, 2008), where family support is crucial, financial education and entrepreneurial training (Maharana et al., 2025; Metu and Nwogwugwu, 2022; Abrar ul Haq et al., 2021; Alene, 2020; Roomi and Parrott, 2008), and above all, less corruption in public procurement (Graycar, 2019).

### ***Implications of the research***

This research has multiple implications. First, it identifies the various barriers and catalysts affecting women-owned businesses' access to public procurement markets. In this regard, it provides public procurement actors, SMEs in general, women-owned SMEs in particular, and other stakeholders with a framework for analysing their practices or strategies with a view to improving them. Secondly, from a scientific point of view, research on female entrepreneurship in the field of public procurement, particularly in the context of sub-Saharan African countries, is rare. Our research helps to fill this gap. Finally, our research enriches the body of knowledge on the concept of female entrepreneurship focused on public procurement.

### ***Limitations and prospects for future research***

This research has certain limitations. First, despite the operationalisation of the Integrated Public Procurement Management System (SIGMAP), there is currently no unified database of women-owned businesses eligible for public procurement contracts. Second, the list of contracts awarded on the Malian public procurement portal is not up to date. Finally, despite sending out 500 questionnaires, we were only able to obtain 162 usable responses. This demonstrates the limited representativeness of the sample. Future research could conduct in-depth analyses of women-owned businesses' access to public procurement in the West African Economic and Monetary Union (UEMOA) zone.

## **APPENDIX 1: QUESTIONNAIRE**

- From your perspective, what is a women-owned business?
- In your opinion, do women-owned businesses face any obstacles or barriers??

yes

No

- If so, can you specify the type(s) of barriers or obstacles that women-owned businesses face?
  - Lack of understanding of strategies and rules relating to public procurement
  - Socio-cultural prejudices
  - Lack of financial and qualified human resources
  - Lack of a gender-sensitive regulatory framework
  - Corruption
- Are you aware of any innovative practices that could promote access for women-owned SMEs to public procurement?

Yes

No

- If so, can you specify the type(s) of innovative practices likely to promote access for women-owned SMEs to public procurement?
  - Gender-sensitive public procurement
  - Business grouping agreement
  - Public procurement contracts are divided into lots
- Do you believe that gender-sensitive public procurement can effectively promote the integration of women-owned businesses into public procurement?

1. Completely agree
3. Disagree
- disagree

2. Mostly agree
4. Completely

## **APPENDIX 2: INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR THE 14 SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS**

1. Obstacles to access to public procurement for women-owned SMEs.
  - Lack of awareness of public procurement rules
  - Insufficient information on public procurement
  - Limited access to financing
  - Inadequate regulatory framework for women-owned SMEs
  - Lack of skills
  - Prejudices about the capabilities of women-owned SMEs
  - Not belonging to a network (African Public Procurement Network)
2. Innovative practices promoting access for women-owned SMEs to public procurement in Mali
  - Gender-sensitive public procurement
  - Joint-venture contracts
  - Public procurement lotting

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