

Empowering Women Through Procurement: Moving Beyond the 1%



L-R on panel: Arif Zaman, Joycelyn Taylor, Isabelle Cardinal, Margo Thomas, Meg Jones, and Elizabeth Vazquez

On 24 March 2017, UN Development Business (UNDB), in association with the Commonwealth Businesswomen’s Network (CBW), hosted its third annual panel discussion on procurement and women’s economic empowerment. The event highlighted the opportunities ahead for a more inclusive public procurement market, where women-owned businesses currently win an estimated 1 percent of contracts globally. Representatives from governments, companies, the United Nations and other institutions participated in the discussion in New York, during the 61st session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW61) at the United Nations.

See video of the discussion on UNDB’s [Facebook Page](#).

UNDB’s commitment to work with partners in extending opportunities to women entrepreneurs globally was affirmed in the opening remarks by Sherri Aldis, Chief of Sales and Marketing in the Department of Public Information at the United Nations, which oversees UNDB. Arif Zaman, Executive Director of CBW, moderated the panel and underlined the timeliness of the discussion, given the focus this year on “Women’s Economic Empowerment in the Changing World of Work” at CSW61.

Indeed, the CSW61 Agreed Conclusions, issued on the same day, included a clause to “encourage and facilitate women’s entrepreneurship, including by improving access to financing and investment opportunities, tools of trade, business development, and training, in order to increase the share of trade and procurement from women’s enterprises”.

“Women’s economic empowerment is not just a moral imperative – it is an economic no-brainer”, panellist Margo Thomas, Chief of Secretariat of the UN Secretary-General’s High-Level Panel on Women’s Economic Empowerment, quoted Christine Lagarde, Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), in her remarks about what economic empowerment means in the context of systemic constraints inhibiting women’s ability to participate in the economy. Given the estimated value of \$6 to \$7 trillion per year in the global public procurement market, she said the potential for impact was vast if we were to increase women’s participation beyond 1 percent.

Improving public sector practices in employment and procurement was highlighted as one of the seven drivers of change in women’s economic empowerment, identified by the UN High-Level Panel. According to panellist Meg Jones, Chief of Economic Empowerment at UN Women, the United Nations has committed to acting on this for its Strategic Plan 2017-2020. This will mean, among other things, implementing a baseline survey to determine how much of the Organisation’s annual \$16 billion spend in goods and services currently goes to women-owned businesses. Jones stressed the importance of “demystifying procurement” and sharing information on where to access tenders, as well as building capacity to participate in the market.

See UN Women’s [Guide to Gender-Responsive Procurement](#).

Isabelle Cardinal, Team Leader of Economic Inclusion and Gender at the United Kingdom Department for International Development (DFID), said that DFID’s procurement activities already include collecting data on women suppliers. The next step would be to improve practices along the full supply chain. “Every organisation, all governments, all businesses and institutions should be doing this”, she said.

Joycelyn Taylor, CEO of TaylorMade Contracting and founding member of the NYC Minority and Women-owned Business Enterprise (MWBE) Alliance, spoke at the local level about New York City's 30 percent target for sourcing from minority and women-owned businesses. She said these businesses were underutilised, receiving only 4-5 percent of the City's contracts despite the target and despite the diversity of entrepreneurs in New York. Figuring out how to implement actions to meet the target was still a challenge.

"Women are invisible in global value chains", but there are many ways to address this, said Elizabeth Vazquez, CEO and Co-Founder of WEConnect International. This includes making sure that women have access to money and can own assets, which is difficult in some countries. Government contracting offers so much opportunity, she said, as governments are the largest buyers of products and services in any country. "Are buyers missing out on innovation, pricing, and opportunities to engage communities through suppliers from half the population?" Vazquez said governments also have much to gain from women entrepreneurs.

During the open-floor segment of the discussion, Jennifer Biceglie, CEO of Quantum Leaps, Inc., spoke about the work of a group called Women Impacting Public Policy (WIPP) in the United States, which educates government and advocates for economic opportunities for women entrepreneurs. This is "not just a developing country issue – it's a global issue", she added.

Maiko Nakagaki, Program Officer at the Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE), which has conducted studies on transparency in procurement within regional trade blocs, asked about integrating women-owned business targets in trade blocs. Arif Zaman of CBW, the moderator, commented that the push to transparency was especially relevant for those on the margins to find entry points for business. Open contracting, a system in which anyone can access contracting data anywhere, would not only improve accountability but also allow entrepreneurs to identify business leads.

Panellists also agreed on the importance of taking a "value chain approach", in which women get integrated in the supply chain for projects through subcontracts and can also connect with one another to work in consortia across industries.

Pamela Coke Hamilton, Executive Director of the Caribbean Export Development Agency, further pointed to the necessity of cultural shifts in order to get more women in leadership positions and enable real ownership of assets and equitable access to opportunities.

Agnes Joyce Bailen, Undersecretary of the Department of Budget and Management of the Philippines, recognised the link between gender equality and economic growth and shared an initiative in the Philippines directing government agencies using the government's gender development budget to procure from indigenous women.

In closing the discussion, Margo Thomas, of the UN High-Level Panel, emphasised that everyone had a role in bringing systemic change and advancing women's economic empowerment through procurement. "When you leave this room ... each and every one can act in three capacities: as an individual, within your institutional capacity, and through your networks", she said.

Photos from the discussion can be found [here](#).

See related UN Publications: [Progress of the World's Women 2015-2016](#)
[Unlocking Markets for Women to Trade](#)
[Empowering Women Through Public Procurement](#)

About UN Development Business (UNDB): *UN Development Business is the official source of information on procurement for projects financed by multilateral development banks, as well as governments and UN agencies. It publishes over \$90 billion worth of public procurement contracts every year.*

About the Commonwealth Businesswomen's Network (CBW): *CBW is an accredited organisation focused on women's economic empowerment, recognized by the 52 Commonwealth governments.*

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