EVIDENCE SNAPSHOT: ACCESS TO MARKETS

WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS FINANCE INITIATIVE

What does research say about how to improve access to markets for women-led businesses?

WHAT IS THE WE-FI EVIDENCE PAPER?

This snapshot is part of a series which highlights select research findings and evidence gaps from the We-Fi Evidence Paper: Supporting Women Entrepreneurs in Developing Countries: What Works. It reviews existing evidence on what works and what doesn't in supporting women-owned and led SMEs (WSMEs) in developing countries and maps this evidence along four We-Fi focus areas: Access to finance, access to skills and networks, access to markets and technology, and the enabling environment.

The review also identifies evidence gaps and highlights research opportunities for each focus area. The paper's main contribution is a conceptual and comprehensive mapping of the literature, classifying the strength and direction of evidence across various interventions. It provides a dynamic view of how the literature is evolving, highlights where evidence gaps remain, and is intended as a resource for both researchers and policymakers/practitioners.

For access to the continuously updated searchable database of publications based on the We-Fi evidence paper, click here.

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES WSMEs FACE IN ACCESS TO MARKETS?

Women-led businesses tend to have less access to corporate value chains, public procurement, and digital platforms, limiting their market expansion. Potential WSME suppliers, distributors or retailors lack information about market opportunities, while potential buyers (e.g., corporations or governments) lack systems and sex-disaggregated data to identify women-led businesses that meet their needs. Moreover, women entrepreneurs face significant barriers when entering and growing businesses in male-dominated sectors, which are often shaped by persistent social norms, structural biases, and limited institutional support.

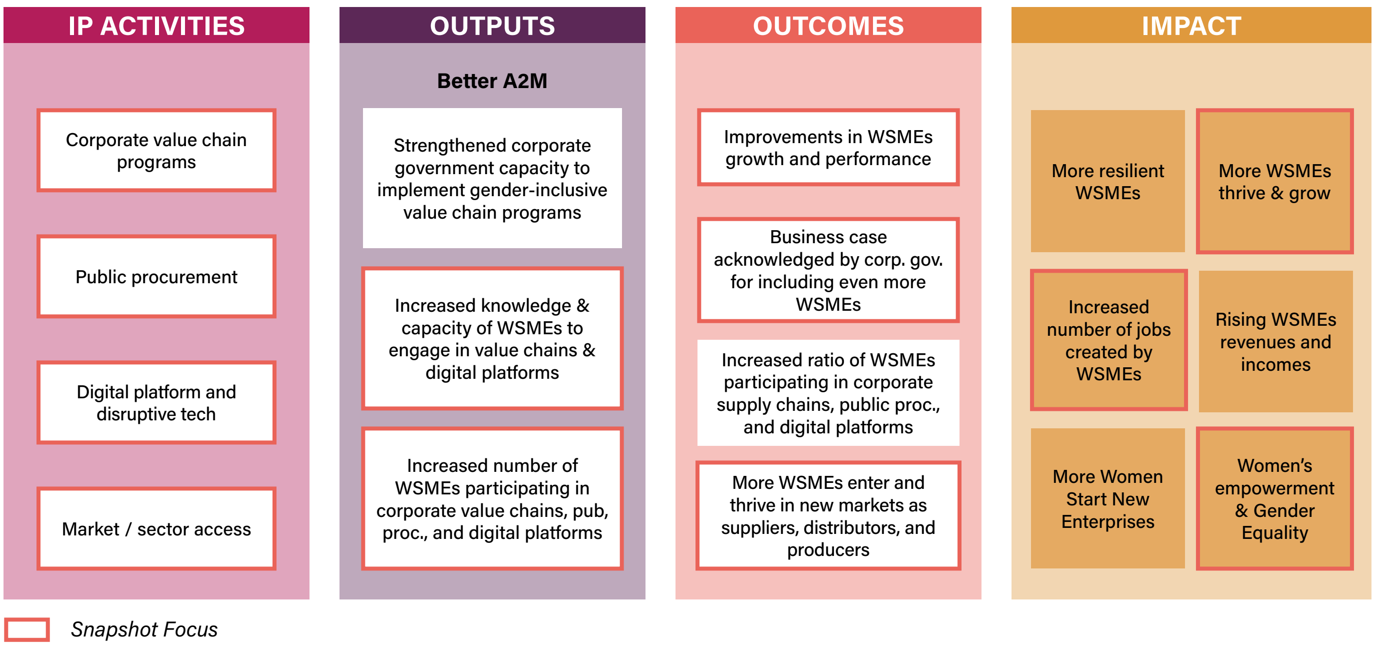
- Women-owned businesses earn less than 2 percent of the money spent on products and services by large corporations and governments.[1]
- There is a 10 percent gender gap in mobile phone ownership and a 26 percent gap in mobile internet access in low and middle-income countries, which limits women-led firms' expansion in e-commerce.[2]
- The clustering of women entrepreneurs in low-margin industries means that profits and productivity hover around 50 percent that of men.[3]

Attribution: Siegrist, Felicia. 2026. "What does research say about how to improve access to markets for women-led businesses?" Women Entrepreneurs Finance Initiative, World Bank, Washington, DC.

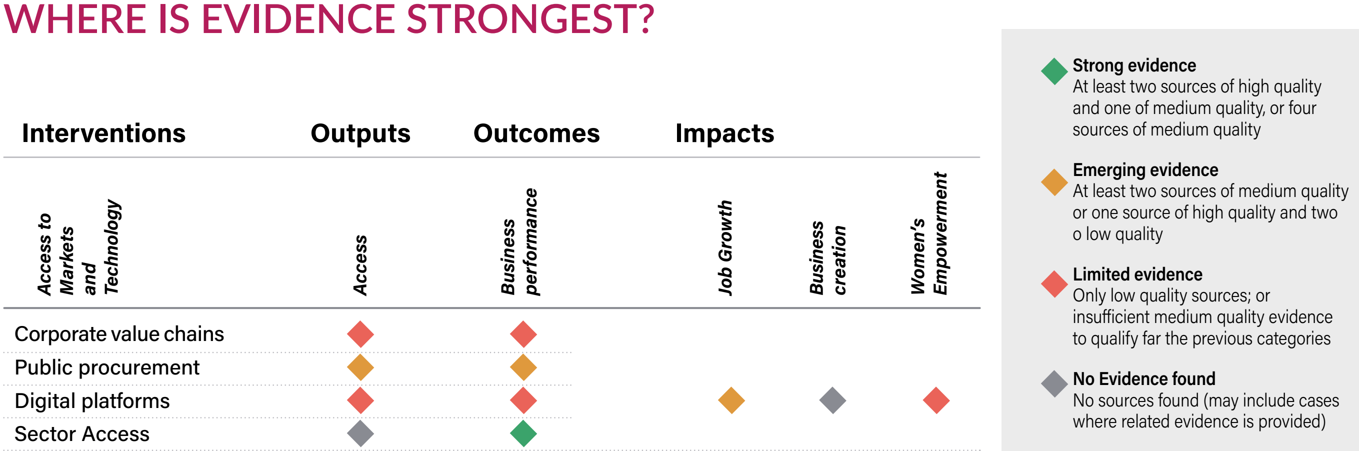
HOW CAN THIS BE CHANGED?

Addressing the complex challenges faced by WSMEs requires multi-dimensional approaches, innovative instruments, and a cross section of stakeholders. This snapshot focuses on the 'Access to Markets' component of We-Fi's Theory of Change. It lays out how different activities (e.g., on corporate value chains, public procurement, digital platforms, or sector access) are intended to stimulate short-term outputs (e.g., increased number of WSMEs engaging in corporate value chains, public procurement, or digital platforms), medium-term outcomes (e.g., improved business performance) and long-term changes (e.g., women's business creation, job growth, and women's economic empowerment).

WE-FI'S ACCESS TO MARKETS THEORY OF CHANGE:



WHERE IS EVIDENCE STRONGEST?



A scale based on the number and quality of studies was used to classify the strength of evidence for specific interventions as strong (green), emerging (yellow), or limited (red)[4]. Overall, evidence on access to markets remains largely descriptive, with few rigorous studies. Most studies identified focused on sector access and public procurement, while evidence on corporate value chains and digital platforms/e-commerce remains scarce.

WHAT ARE SOME RESEARCH FINDINGS AND IDENTIFIED EVIDENCE GAPS?

The following highlights preliminary research findings on access to markets and outlines persistent evidence gaps where more research is needed. While this is not a full overview of all findings and available studies mentioned in the evidence paper, it aims to provide a useful framing of insights.

CORPORATE VALUE CHAINS

How can corporate value chain programs increase access to markets for WSMEs as producers, suppliers, distributors, and retailers and promote business growth?

Anecdotal evidence highlights the importance of training, information-sharing, access to finance, networks, and digital platforms in helping WSMEs secure contracts with large buyers, access new markets, and grow their businesses. For example, a qualitative study by IFC and We-Fi (2021) found that measures such as adapting payment terms and providing working capital solutions, tailoring capacity-building programs to supplier needs and business maturity, expanding outreach and networking opportunities, and leveraging digital platforms can help make procurement processes more transparent and accessible for WSMEs.

Corporate value chain programs may be more effective when market access interventions are combined with access to capital, for example by connecting WSMEs with banks to obtain working capital and trade finance. Kapoor et al. (2017), for instance, examined the effects of expanded credit access on exporting firms in India and found that increased access to credit led to a 22 percent rise in export revenues. Additional evidence also points to the broader benefits of integration into global value chains. Using firm-level data from 154 developing economies, Kalliny and Zaki (2024) found that participation in global value chains significantly increased the likelihood of female business ownership and raised the share of female employees, particularly in production roles. Similarly, Amin and Islam (2021) found that both men- and women-led firms with higher export intensity tend to employ a greater share of women; specifically, for every percentage point increase in the ratio of exports to total sales, the share of women workers increased by 0.16 percentage points. Together, these findings suggest that global value chains can be an important pathway for promoting inclusive job growth and women's economic empowerment.

EVIDENCE GAP #1: SECTOR-SPECIFIC PROGRAMS, TRADE FINANCE, AND BUNDLED SUPPORT

Academic evidence on access to markets interventions for WSMEs remains very limited, particularly studies that disaggregate findings by gender. More research is needed to better understand what makes corporate value chain programs effective and which sector-specific practices and policies most successfully increase sourcing from WSMEs. Important evidence gaps also remain around supply-side interventions, such as new approaches to identifying WSMEs and mapping supplier or distribution networks. In addition, there is limited evidence on how to strengthen women entrepreneurs' ability to export, access international markets, and generate long-term job creation. Further research is also needed on how complementary interventions, particularly access to trade finance and working capital, can enhance the effectiveness of market access programs and support WSMEs' participation in local and global value chains.

PUBLIC PROCUREMENT:

How can public procurement increase access to markets for WSMEs as producers, suppliers, distributors, and retailers and promote business growth?

There is emerging evidence that inclusive public procurement policies and programs can increase WSMEs' participation in public markets and access to business opportunities. These approaches include preferential procurement policies, certification mechanisms, transparent procurement processes, and capacity-building support for procurement officers and WSMEs. A qualitative study by Comotto et al. (2026) documents the growing use of both horizontal measures—such as training, certification, and transparency initiatives—and vertical measures, including quotas and preferential treatment, which have helped increase the visibility and participation of women-owned businesses in public procurement systems. For example, in Chile, Mercado Público provides open access to public procurement tenders and contributed to a 38.5 percent increase in the participation of women-led companies between 2022 and 2023.

Emerging evidence also indicates that better access to markets through government procurement can lead to better business performance for WSMEs. In a randomized control trial involving 772 firms, Hjort et al. (2020) found that public procurement training for small businesses had positive impacts on firm performance. Similarly, an experimental study by Hardy and Kagy (2020) in Ghana found that women-owned firms significantly increased production and profits in response to experimentally introduced demand shocks, while men-owned firms did not. These findings suggest that women entrepreneurs may particularly benefit from interventions that address demand-side constraints, such as public procurement and value chain programs.

EVIDENCE GAP #2: BUSINESS IMPACTS OF PUBLIC PROCUREMENT INTERVENTIONS

Although evidence on inclusive public procurement is growing, significant data and research gaps remain on what makes procurement systems more inclusive for WSMEs. Only a limited number of countries collect and report sex-disaggregated procurement data, making it difficult to track women's participation and assess policy effectiveness. More research is also needed on the effectiveness of supply-side interventions (e.g., training for procurement officers) as well as on which procurement policies and practices most effectively support the business performance and long-term growth of WSMEs. There is also limited evidence on whether these approaches can influence more inclusive procurement practices in the private sector.

DIGITAL PLATFORMS & E-COMMERCE:

How can digital platforms help more WSMEs adopt e-commerce, reach new markets, and grow their businesses?

Several case studies demonstrate how e-commerce companies can increase the participation of women vendors by targeting women entrepreneurs with training programs, developing tailored financial solutions, and collecting sex-disaggregated data. In addition, lessons from a pilot digital mentoring platform in Ethiopia showed that connecting women entrepreneurs to digital platforms for information and resources is feasible even in low-income, low-bandwidth settings. However, the pilot also found that early adoption may depend on traditional, in-person outreach and onboarding efforts (Friedson-Ridenour and Edey 2023).

Emerging evidence further suggests that digital platforms can improve women's business performance. A study by Poole and Volpe (2023) examined how online business platforms can reduce informational barriers for women entrepreneurs engaged in exporting. Using data from firms participating in ConnectAmericas alongside detailed export data from Peru, the study found that women users increased the value of their exports by 40 percent relative to non-users, compared with a 10 percent increase among male users.

EVIDENCE GAP #3: BUSINESS IMPACTS OF E-COMMERCE AND DIGITAL PLATFORMS

More research is needed to identify which interventions are most effective in helping women entrepreneurs join digital platforms and navigate them to reach new customers, including training, technical assistance, and tailored financial solutions. Further evidence is also needed to better understand how participation in digital platforms affects business performance, including sales, exports, productivity, and firm growth. In addition, future studies could examine how digital platforms connect women entrepreneurs to corporate and government buyers, support business digitalization and innovation, and leverage user data, such as sales histories, to expand access to financing.

MARKET ACCESS

How can women entrepreneurs be supported to enter male-dominated sectors and how does this impact their business growth?

Evidence suggests that mentorship, access to information and role models can increase women's likelihood of entering male-dominated sectors. Two studies from Uganda and Ethiopia found that women entrepreneurs who received encouragement from mentors during their youth were more likely to pursue opportunities in male-dominated industries (Goldstein and Delavelle 2020). Moreover, a mixed-methods study from Uganda by Campos et al. (2014) suggests that information gaps about the profitability of these sectors, as well as the influence of role models on girls' career aspirations, play an important role in shaping women's sectoral choices.

There is substantial evidence on the high positive impacts of supporting women entrepreneurs in crossing over to more innovative, productive, mostly male-dominated sectors (e.g., manufacturing, technology, financing). The same study in Uganda found that women entrepreneurs who shifted into male-dominated industries earned as much as men and three times more than women operating in female-dominated sectors. Similarly, results from an experiment in the Republic of Congo showed that providing information on earnings is a low-cost intervention that can encourage women to enter more profitable sectors, thereby reducing gender gaps in earnings (Gassier et al. 2022). In addition, a study in Mexico by Cucagna et al. (2020) found that women entrepreneurs who crossed over into male-dominated sectors achieved higher sales and profits than those who remained in traditionally female-dominated sectors.

EVIDENCE GAP #5: WSMES IN MALE-DOMINATED AND GREEN SECTORS

Important evidence gaps remain on how to support women entrepreneurs in entering and succeeding in male-dominated and emerging green sectors. More sector-specific research is needed to understand how women entrepreneurs can be encouraged to transition into more profitable industries and pursue growth opportunities within them, particularly in green sectors linked to the transition to net zero, such as energy, manufacturing, construction, and transport. WSMEs remain underrepresented in these sectors and are often concentrated in lower-value segments of the value chain. Further research could also examine how role models, soft skills training, networks, and inclusive value chain initiatives influence women's decisions to enter high-growth and male-dominated sectors.

For more detailed information and other evidence of We-Fi's core focus areas refer to ***We-Fi's Evidence Paper***.

For access to the ***searchable database of publications*** used in the evidence paper and this snapshot, click here.

[1] Vazquez and Frankel. 2017. "The Business Case for Global Supplier Diversity and Inclusion: The Critical Contributions of Women and Other Underutilized Suppliers to Corporate Value Chains." Technical Report, WEConnect International.

[2] GSMA. 2019. "The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2019." Technical Report, Groupe Speciale Mobile Association, London.

[3] Goldstein et al. 2019. "Tackling the Global Profitarchy." Policy Research Working Paper 8865, World Bank, Washington, DC.

[4] 189 studies were included in the full review, 55 of which focused on access to skills and networks. This includes experimental studies, quasi experimental, as well as non-experimental studies like systematic reviews or correlational studies. For details on the methodology, please see Annex 3.