

Gender Mainstreaming in Public Procurement: Lessons from three Spanish cities



 Valladolid, Zaragoza and Valencia, Spain

Governance

Public procurement

Introduction

Public procurement isn't just about securing the best deal: it is a powerful tool for advancing social goals. Over the past decade, 'social procurement' has gained traction, particularly as governments recognise that how they spend public funds can directly contribute to reducing inequalities. A major driver of this shift was the 2014 EU Directive on Public Procurement, which highlighted the role of procurement in addressing social concerns and encouraged member states to update their laws to reflect these priorities.

In Spain, this directive led to the adoption of Law 9/2017, which reformed the country's public procurement framework to require that contracts at all levels of government consider gender equality, diversity, work-life balance, and other social considerations. While the national law sets the overall framework, in Spain, regional and municipal governments have significant autonomy to interpret and implement these requirements. This flexibility has created space for innovative, locally tailored strategies that aim to move beyond basic compliance and actively promote gender equality through procurement.

Despite ranking fourth in the EU for gender equality, Spain continues to face challenges, particularly in the area of economic participation. Recent World Bank data reveals that the female labour force participation rate is 52.6%, compared to 62.4% for men, and women's full-time employment rates are 14% lower than men's, according to EIGE. Public procurement represents a huge opportunity to address these gaps. Accounting for around 11.5% of Spain's GDP and nearly a quarter of public spending, public procurement has the potential to significantly influence labour markets. In 2022 alone, more than 91,000 tenders worth over €33 million were issued at the local level, showing the scale of opportunity for gender-responsive procurement in cities.

This report highlights gender mainstreaming strategies for procurement in three Spanish cities – Valladolid, Zaragoza, and Valencia – to illustrate how equality can be better transposed into public contracts and ensure that every Euro spent aligns with social goals.

Valladolid: **Gender Informed Procurement for Local Economic Development**

Valladolid's approach to gender-responsive public procurement builds on a strong foundation of regional legislation. Castile and León, the autonomous community where Valladolid is located, adopted Law 1/2003 on Equal Opportunities established goals of promoting women's social, economic and political participation. Acuerdo 44/2016 transposed the EU directive into regional governance frameworks, particularly promoting hiring obligations which target groups often subject to market exclusion, such as people with disabilities and victims of gender-based violence.

Building on this supportive regional context, the City of Valladolid took a further step in 2018 with the adoption of Instruction 1/2018, titled "socially responsible public procurement – strategic, honest, and sustainable." This comprehensive local policy doesn't just encourage social considerations – it makes them a core part of the procurement process. The instruction specifies that "all bidders must comply

with labor, social, and gender-equality regulations,” regardless of company size. Contractors are also expected to convey numerically the impact of measures taken as they submit a Social Plan explaining how they will promote equality in performing the contract, which may include measures like adopting work-life balance initiatives, elaborated equality plans, and hiring plans for groups facing economic exclusion. These social impact references are not just ‘bonuses’ or symbolic gestures, but contractual obligations which are now fundamental criteria on which tenders can be awarded while weighing offers during the evaluation process.

Understanding the burden that such intensive planning requirements may pose to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), the city has also taken steps to make bidding on public contracts more streamlined and accessible by publishing year-long public procurement needs plans, offering capacity-building trainings for local businesses, and reserving 8-10% of contracts for enterprises engaged in workforce integration for vulnerable groups including people with disabilities and victims of abuse and gender violence.

Valladolid’s procurement strategy was highlighted by the European Commission’s #WeBuySocialEU reports as a case study of good practice, noting its integrated approach to social, environmental, and equality goals. In 2019, the city awarded 215 contracts, of which 159 (74%) were won by SMEs, directly contributing to local economic development but also promoting more significant gender equality considerations within local businesses. In 2020, 82% of all contracts were awarded to businesses with fewer than 250 employees, generating a more circular economy for the city while increasing social responsibility among contracted companies. However, there is room for growth in terms of collecting and analysing gender-disaggregated data to ensure these positive impacts are evenly distributed.

Zaragoza: Universal Gender Clauses in Public Contracts

Law 7/2018 on Equality of Opportunities between Women and Men in the region of Aragon introduced explicit obligations for public contracts to incorporate gender-equality clauses. Before this regional law came into effect, however, Zaragoza had already taken a bold step. In September 2016, the city council approved an instruction to integrate gender-related social clauses specifically into all municipal contracts. This move made Zaragoza the first city in Spain to systematically mandate gender clauses in public procurement, reflecting a strong commitment to advancing equality through municipal purchasing power.

Zaragoza’s model sets out two levels of gender equality requirements. First, general clauses for all contracts oblige contractors to use gender-inclusive language and images, collect sex-disaggregated data, and comply with basic gender-equality norms. An additional set of clauses exist for contracts directly linked to equality goals, including more specific targets. For instance, for contracts related to gender equality services, bidders must commit to reserving at least 40% of new hires for women, with at least 15% of those positions filled by women facing social exclusion. As stated by the city’s equality councillor, *“the goal is to ensure beneficiaries of public funds... actively apply gender-equality criteria in their organisations and projects.”*

The impact of Zaragoza’s approach has been significant. By 2018, 107 companies had been awarded municipal contracts subject to these clauses, and over 48 contracts within city-owned companies and municipal agencies also included mandatory gender-equality commitments. Beyond awarded contracts, however, 687 companies participating in tenders had to analyse and report on their workforce from a gender perspective, helping to shift awareness and practices more broadly. City data showed that contractors were not only implementing equality measures but also being held accountable: all 107 contracted companies had complied with equality commitments, with contract monitoring mechanisms in place to verify actions and enforce penalties if necessary. Zaragoza’s experience has been recognised nationally and internationally, and was highlighted as a best practice by the Spanish Federation of Municipalities and Provinces (FEMP).

Valencia: Embedding Actionable Gender Equality in Public Contracts

The City of Valencia took these commitments head on with its 2019 Responsible Procurement Instruction guidelines. These guidelines are designed to streamline the integration of social clauses in public contracts, with a specific section dedicated to gender equality concerns. Moving beyond a baseline gender balance among employees or equal pay mandates, potential clauses cover minimum hours of equality training for staff executing the contract, inclusive language protocols in communication, gendered impact reporting of the project with sex-disaggregated data and indicators, and mandates for specific gender equality expertise and training for firms awarded contracts relating to education, youth, culture or sports. The guidelines also include examples of indicators which can be used to monitor compliance, for example, requiring companies awarded contracts to submit hiring documentation, employee gender parity information, and reporting on measures taken to improve equality in the workplace.

Contractors must submit evidence of compliance at multiple stages initially after contract award, and annually during execution. They are required to provide proof of the gender composition of their workforce, the implementation of equality plans, training records, and sex-disaggregated data that allow for evaluation of the effectiveness of the applied equality measures. This comprehensive system ensures that gender equality isn't just a stated goal, but a measurable outcome. As the guidance emphasises, "contractors must understand that they are acting as a public service", and social considerations are integral to their role.

[Conclusions]

By embedding gender considerations into procurement processes, these cities have shown how local governments can shape contractor practices, promote accountability, and reinforce the integration of equality objectives into economic activity. Valladolid's focus on social clauses tied to work-life balance and inclusion of vulnerable groups highlights procurement's role in fostering **equitable labour practices**. Zaragoza's dual system of universal and targeted clauses demonstrates how standardised requirements can **normalise equality across diverse sectors**, while Valencia's comprehensive verification system shows the potential for procurement to **generate measurable social outcomes** through rigorous monitoring. They collectively illustrate how procurement policies, when thoughtfully designed and implemented, can drive social change beyond just legal compliance.

[Key Takeaways and Insights for Integrating Gender in the Procurement Process]

❖ **Start with a gender perspective.** Before launching tenders, conduct an analysis of how the project or service may affect women and men differently. Consider the existing gender gaps in that sector or service, and what contract specifications could potentially address them.

❖ **Apply a dual strategy: universal and targeted clauses.** Like Zaragoza's model, consider incorporating general clauses (e.g., gender-inclusive language, equality plans, work-life balance policies) in all contracts, alongside more specific clauses for contracts linked directly to gender equality services (e.g., targeted hiring quotas, specialised gender training requirements).

❖ **Make social impact a key evaluation criterion.** Draw from Valladolid's and Valencia's practices by weighting social and gender equality factors alongside price and technical quality in tender evaluations. Consider developing a numerical system which assigns 'points' to bids based on their equitable best practices to factor into the final decision. Remember, these aren't just add-ons – they're valid reasons to award a contract.

❖ **Establish clear timelines for monitoring and enforcement.** Take a page from Valencia's approach: specify when and how contractors must provide evidence of compliance, such as equality

training certificates, gender-disaggregated workforce data, and copies of adopted gender protocols. Set 'check-in' schedules which monitor compliance throughout the duration of the contract.

- ❖ **Equip procurement teams with the knowledge they need.** Develop clear guidelines for gender clauses and provide training for staff involved in procurement so they are confident in drafting, evaluating, and monitoring gender equality clauses.
- ❖ **Simplify participation for SMEs and social enterprises.** Recognise that smaller businesses may struggle with complex tender requirements. Like Valladolid, offer pre-tender support and guidance to make it easier for them to incorporate gender-responsive elements into their bids.
- ❖ **Collect and analyse gender-disaggregated data to track progress.** Require contractors to report sex-disaggregated employment figures, types of roles held by women, and the specific measures implemented to promote equality. At the city level, consider compiling contract data to monitor overall achievements in how many businesses present equality plans, or how many people were hired for projects in a sector. This will provide a foundation for assessing impact over time.
- ❖ **Collaborate with local stakeholders and service providers.** Partner with organisations like women's networks or social enterprises to help design, monitor, and evaluate gender equality measures, or to communicate tenders to wider audiences.
- ❖ **Pilot targeted projects to showcase success.** Start with sectors where gender equality can make a big difference – such as social services, education, or local infrastructure – and implement ambitious, measurable gender equality clauses. Use these projects as models to scale up across other contracts.

[+] Learn more about this Project

- + [Ayuntamiento de Valencia - Guide for Responsible Public Procurements \(in Spanish\)](#)
- + [Ayuntamiento de Valencia - Good Practice Guide for Gender Mainstreaming \(in Spanish\)](#)
- + [Ayuntamiento de Zaragoza - Guide for Gender Social Clauses in Public Contracts \(in Spanish\)](#)
- + [Contratacion Publica Responsable - Zaragoza Includes Gender Clauses in All Calls for Proposals \(in Spanish\)](#)
- + ["Valladolid's Strategy to boost socially efficient public procurement: strategic, honest and sustainable" in Making Socially Responsible Public Procurement Work: 71 Good Practice Cases](#)