

CALL FOR RESEARCH PROPOSALS

Fostering the Growth of Women-led Businesses in Latin America and the Caribbean



Women-led micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) are a critical but underutilized engine for economic growth. Despite this, research shows that women-led enterprises face dramatic gaps in access to inputs and markets compared to men-led firms (Chiplunkar and Goldberg, 2024). In LAC, women-led firms tend to be smaller and less likely to grow than their male counterparts. On average, the sales of women-led firms represent only 23 percent of those owned by men. Similarly, in firms younger than ten years, women-led businesses employ only two workers for every three hired by men-led firms (Araujo et al., 2024).

These disparities are not merely a consequence of firm characteristics but are deeply rooted in structural barriers. Women-led businesses are more likely to emerge from limited labor market opportunities, and they often remain concentrated in a few sectors. Furthermore, even when they are equally productive, women-led enterprises are disproportionately small and struggle to access highly profitable industries. Addressing these challenges is essential for sustained growth in the region. Policies must ensure that physical and human capital flow equally toward all high-productivity businesses or firms with growth potential, including those owned by women, reducing barriers to entry in certain sectors.

The cost of inaction is significant. Supporting women-led businesses has the potential to increase Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in the region by 9.8 percent (Cuberes and Teignier, 2017). Additionally, bridging the digital divide and fostering resilience can position women entrepreneurs to thrive in emerging markets, further driving regional growth.

Studies such as Chiplunkar and Goldberg (2024) highlight that women-led businesses tend to hire more women, amplifying the impact on female labor force participation. Similarly, research by Hyland, Djankov, and Goldberg (2021) shows that reforming gendered laws significantly enhances women's economic empowerment. Foundational studies such as Hsieh et al. (2019) demonstrate that enabling women to access high-productivity sectors can significantly boost long-term growth and innovation.

Through this call for proposals, co-funded by the IDB Group's [Gender and Diversity Knowledge Initiative](#) (GDLab) and the [Women Entrepreneurs and Finance Initiative](#) (We-Fi), we aim to catalyze evidence-based interventions that empower women entrepreneurs. By addressing knowledge gaps, this initiative aims to generate rigorous, actionable evidence to inform the design of programs that unlock the untapped potential of women-led businesses, fostering sustainable growth across the region.



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Objectives of the Call

With this call for research proposals, the IDB Group's [Gender and Diversity Knowledge Initiative](#) (GDLab) seeks to fund **rigorous academic studies that provide actionable insights** to address structural barriers, enhance access to resources and markets, and unlock the growth potential of women-led businesses, driving economic development in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Proposals that analyze one or more of the [26 IDB borrowing member countries](#) will be considered. The proposals must apply **rigorous quantitative methods that establish causal relationships using structural models, experimental or quasi-experimental evaluations**. Proposals that include qualitative analysis will

be considered only to the extent that they serve as input for the implementation of quantitative methods. Proposals that generate actionable insights and recommendations for the public sector, private sector, and multilateral organizations are especially welcome.

The studies funded through this call for proposals will be considered for publication as IDB and IDB Invest knowledge products. This publication will require an external peer review process prior to publication in the IDB working paper series or IDB Invest technical notes series. The studies that receive funding are expected to be published in academic journals.

Priority Areas

This call seeks research **proposals that provide quantitative and rigorous evidence** in the following thematic areas:



Access to Markets and Inclusive Procurement. Women-led MSMEs face barriers in accessing markets due to procurement challenges, limited supply chain integration, and weak market

linkages. Public procurement offers a stable revenue opportunity, yet entry barriers persist. Research projects in this area should focus on solutions that promote connections with private and public sector buyers, enhance value chain access, and advance inclusive procurement. Examples include platforms linking MSMEs with buyers, procurement quotas, incentives for sourcing from women-led busines-

ses, and technical assistance to navigate procurement processes. Research could also explore the role of trade finance in expanding market access for women-led MSMEs. This includes examining partnerships between corporations, financial intermediaries, and fintech's to advance value chain financing options and integrating these with corporate-led training programs.



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Access to Training, Mentoring, and Networks.

Capacity-building initiatives are essential to support entrepreneurs in navigating market demands, scaling their businesses, and increasing their competitiveness. Research in this area should focus on the design, implementation, and evaluation of training programs tailored to women entrepreneurs, focusing on leadership, financial management, and digital transformation. Research projects may assess the impact of mentorship programs, peer networks, or business or social networks in expanding market access and financing opportunities for women-led businesses, increasing women's participation in male-dominated sectors, supporting faster business recovery from macroeconomic shocks, and facilitating knowledge exchange and business growth. Of particular interest is understanding what works best in training larger firms, how bespoke support services can be delivered cost-effectively and at scale, the effectiveness of accelerators and incubators, and the optimal integration of training components—such as mentoring and networking—to maximize the growth and sustainability of women-led enterprises.



Access to Finance.

Despite their potential, women-led MSMEs face disproportionate barriers in accessing financial resources, including limited availability of tailored financial products. Research projects in this area should work with financial institutions, including public development banks, to design and implement innovative products and services for women entrepreneurs. These could include alternative equity financing options (such as venture capital funds, angel investing, crowdfunding, or revenue-based financing), microfinancing schemes, alternative credit scoring models, or new financial products that better align with the specific needs of women-led businesses, including performance-based financing mechanisms. Research in this area could also examine strategies to drive

behavioral change within financial intermediaries to better serve women-led MSMEs. This includes identifying effective mechanisms to foster gender-lens organizational change and ensure sustainable capital flows to MSMEs, assessing the impact of blended finance and the role of performance-based incentives and risk-sharing mechanisms in expanding access to finance, and examining how financial intermediaries can best leverage sex-disaggregated data to inform their business decisions.



Improving the Enabling Environment.

Legal, regulatory, and cultural barriers can constrain the growth of women-led MSMEs. Addressing these challenges requires collaboration with policymakers and stakeholders to foster an inclusive business ecosystem. Research projects in this area should develop evidence-based recommendations for legal and policy reforms, such as simplifying business registration processes. Efforts could also include advocacy campaigns to shift societal norms and address cultural barriers or create direct incentives for women entrepreneurs.



Firm Growth and Graduation.

Many women-led enterprises remain micro or small-scale due to a lack of resources and support to achieve significant growth. Research projects under this area should focus on identifying women-led businesses with high growth potential and support their transition to small, medium or large-scale operations. Programs may include targeted funding, capacity-building initiatives, and strategic partnerships to enable businesses to scale sustainably. Findings from Chiplunkar and Goldberg (2024) suggest that supporting women entrepreneurs in scaling their businesses can have multiplier effects on job creation for other women.



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Digital Skills and Technology Adoption.

Women-led MSMEs often face significant challenges in adopting digital technologies, which are critical for accessing broader markets, improving efficiency, and scaling operations. Research in this area could focus on providing access to affordable digital tools, training programs for technology adoption, and initiatives to close the digital gender divide. This could include partnerships with tech companies to create accessible platforms tailored to women entrepreneurs.



Climate Resilience and Sustainable Practices.

As the effects of climate change intensify, MSMEs need support to adopt sustainable practices and build resilience, especially in sectors where women entrepreneurs are heavily represented. Projects that provide training and resources to help women-led businesses transition to environmentally sustainable practices, enter into green and blue sectors of the future, adopt circular economy principles, and access green financing opportunities are encouraged.



Firm growth and the role of care.

According to research, the challenge of balancing work and household responsibilities has been identified as a key factor limiting the growth of women's businesses. Studies in this area could explore ways to address this barrier both within the home (private sphere) and in external work environments (public sphere), while also considering differences between rural and urban contexts. Potential areas of study include evaluating interventions that integrate care support into value chains, analyzing the impact of care provision on business growth, and examining the broader non-economic benefits of reducing women's care burden—such as improved mental health and greater empowerment.

****Intersectionality:** Proposals that consider the intersectionality of identities are strongly encouraged. Women entrepreneurs belonging to diverse population groups—such as Indigenous peoples, Afro-descendants, people with disabilities, or LGBTQ+ persons—, often face compounded barriers to starting and growing their businesses. Initiatives should target the specific needs of these groups, such as language-appropriate training, access to culturally relevant resources, and targeted financing mechanisms that consider intersectional vulnerabilities.



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Who Can Submit Proposals

Both independent researchers and research teams comprised of entities from the public sector, private sector, universities, or research centers may apply. Applicants must meet the following requirements: be a citizen of one of the [48 IDB member countries](#) and not have family members who currently work at the Inter-American Development Bank, IDB Lab or IDB Invest (jointly, "IDB Group") (to the fourth degree of consanguinity and second degree of affinity, including husband or wife).¹ **Participation of IDB Group specialists in the research teams is encouraged.** It should be noted that while the specialists may collaborate on the project, they will not be eligible to receive compensation for their contribution. The funds will be given exclusively to the members of the research team who are not part of the IDB Group.

Proposal Content

- **Objective and research question.** Clearly define the overall objective of the research proposal and specify the research question(s) that will guide the study. Additionally, identify the country or countries that will be the focus of the research, as well as the specific thematic area to which the proposal is linked.
- **Relevance in terms of public policy and innovation.** Clearly specify the knowledge gaps the study aims to address. The proposal should also demonstrate how the research will con-

tribute to closing these gaps, the innovations it introduces to tackle the identified problem, and its **potential for direct application in policy-making.** The study should combine high technical rigor with actionable insights that can inform policies and programs.

- **Scalability and replicability.** The proposal should explain the feasibility of wider implementation and the scalability of the proposed study, identifying possible barriers to scaling up the study and whether the results and approaches could be applied in other contexts.
- **Information sources.** Provide a detailed description of the data to be used, indicating whether it is available to the public or access is restricted. For restricted data, the feasibility of access to such data by the research group must be demonstrated. Additionally, specify whether the databases and source code (e.g. *do-files*) can be shared with the IDB at the end of the study or whether there are valid restrictions that prevent them from being shared.
- **Methodology.** Detailed description of the proposed quantitative methodology. The proposals must apply rigorous **quantitative methods that establish causal relationships using structural models or experimental or quasi-experimental evaluations.** Proposals that include qualitative analysis will be considered only to the extent that they serve as input for the implementation of quantitative methods. For studies based on experimental or quasi-experimental methods, the proposal must include a discussion of the identification strategy that will make it possible to estimate causal effects. Ideally, proposals should include tests of the validity of the identification strategy (for example, balance tests, common trend tests, placebo tests, etc.).

¹ Pursuant to IDB policies, additional ineligibility criteria may apply; for example, certain categories of former IDB Group employees or individuals sanctioned by the United Nations and other international organizations will be ineligible.



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- **Execution period and work plan.** Submit a work plan detailing the main tasks and the estimated time for execution. Depending on the type of study, the maximum period to complete the research is 12 to 18 months.
- **Budget.** The budget should detail the resources to be used in the context of the research work plan, distinguishing between sums allocated for professional fees, data collection, activity implementation, and other main categories of research spending.
- **Ethics committee.** Indicate the name of the institutional review board (IRB) where the research proposal will be presented if selected.
- **Composition of the research team.** The research team should include the names of all the researchers and evidence of their ability to meet the objectives of the investigation (including previous relevant experience) and the curriculum vitae (CV) of each participant (maximum 3 pages per person). The CV should highlight experience and publications on the subject of this call. All members of the research team must be citizens of one of the [48 IDB member countries](#) and must not have family members currently working at the IDB Group up to the fourth degree of consanguinity and second degree of affinity, including spouse. It should be noted that research teams may include specialists from the IDB Group. It is crucial to note that any change in the composition of the research team after proposal selection must be approved by GDLab. Unauthorized changes to the team may be grounds for termination of the agreement.

Note: Proposals must be submitted in **English**.

Selection Process

The Scientific Committee of this call for proposals will evaluate them based on relevance, innovation, scalability, replicability, quality of the methodology, and ability of the team to carry out the research project. The Scientific Committee is made up of [Christopher Woodruff](#) (University of Oxford), [Silvia Prina](#) (Northeastern University), Felicia Siegrist (We-Fi), and specialists from the IDB Group, including Patricia Yañez-Pagans, María Paula Gerardino, Carlos Scartascini, Monserrat Bustelo, Karen Martinez T, Rodolfo Stucchi, Yuri Soares, and Edwin Goñi Pacchioni. The decisions of the Scientific Committee will be final and unappealable.

The selected teams must be willing to receive and respond to comments from the advisors of the call for proposals and from IDB Group specialists throughout the execution of the study, as well as to participate in discussion seminars held during the consultancy period.



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Evaluation Criteria

The following questions will guide the evaluation in the following four areas:

- **Relevance and innovation.** Does the proposal address a knowledge gap? How would the study contribute to closing these knowledge gaps? What is the innovation proposed by the study to address the problem? What is the study's relevance in terms of its impact on policy design in the region? How well does this study align with the priority areas outlined in this call? Does the proposed study will generate findings that are actionable?

- **Data and methodology.** Does the proposal present a clear and rigorous research design and methodology? Is the approach to the research question explained in detail and does it justify why the selected methodology is the most appropriate to achieve the objectives of the study? Is the data collection process described in detail, including how potential challenges will be met and overcome? Is the estimation strategy well-articulated, justifying its ability to identify causal relationships and the robustness of the expected results? Are quantitative methods clearly presented and is there adequate justification for their choice over other methodological alternatives?

- **Implementation capacity.** What is the demonstrated experience of the research team in relation to the subject matter and methodologies of the proposed project? How does the team exhibit its capacity to effectively execute the proposed project? Does the proposal include a detailed and realistic implementation plan that aligns with the proposed activities? Is the budget justified and consistent with the project objectives and scope?

- **Scalability and replicability.** How can the results of the project be applied to other contexts or environments? What strategies have been considered to ensure project scalability? Have barriers been identified that could impact the replicability and expansion of the project? What mechanisms are included in the proposal to overcome these barriers and enhance the study's adaptability?



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Financing Categories

Subject to the decision of the Scientific Committee and the signing of a consulting contract with the IDB or IDB Invest, participants may apply for one of the following funding categories based on the scope of the work proposed:

CATEGORY I – Quantitative diagnoses that establish causal relationships.

Studies in this category require resources to complement existing funds or to cover research activities without data collection. Proposals in this category can access a maximum of **\$20 thousand** and have a maximum of **12 months** to complete the study starting in September 2025.

CATEGORY II – Pilot interventions.

Studies in this category require resources to rigorously evaluate the impact of an intervention or pilot program. Proposals in this category can access a maximum of **\$100 thousand** and have a maximum of **18 months** to complete the study starting in September 2025.

To access funding through this call, the winning research team (or a designated member of the team or their institution) must sign a consulting contract with the IDB or IDB Invest. Disbursement of funds for both categories will be contingent upon the submission and approval of the deliverables outlined in the consulting contract, in accordance with the terms of individual or firm agreements.

The IDB or IDB Invest reserves the right to revoke this call for proposals at any time prior to the signing of the consulting contract.



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Activities

During the execution of the research proposals, two closed discussion seminars (conducted in English) will be held to present preliminary versions of the studies and receive feedback from external advisors and IDB Group specialists. These seminars are designed to foster ideas for coordination and exchange among the participating researchers or research teams.

Depending on the funding category applied for, the studies will have a maximum of **12 to 18 months to deliver the final draft of the working document, starting in September 2025**. The intermediate and final drafts of the working paper will be submitted to a peer review process by the external advisors of this call for proposals. The final product of this agreement will be the presentation and approval of the publishable version of the working paper, along with a response letter to all comments received in the various peer reviews, with the aim of publication in the IDB working paper series and IDB Invest technical notes series. All research outputs must be submitted in English.

The general timeline is as follows:

Deadline for proposal submissions	May 12, 2025
Announcement of selected proposals	July 2025
Participation in the first (virtual) discussion seminar, marking the start of research activities	September 10, 2025
Submission of revised proposals and responses to feedback received during the first seminar	October 2025
Submission of the first draft of the working paper for peer review by external advisors	May 2026
Submission of the revised first draft of the working paper and responses to advisors' feedback	June-July 2026
Participation in the second (virtual) discussion seminar	September 2026
Submission of the final draft of the working paper and responses to advisors' feedback	For Category I Studies (12 months duration): September 2026 For Category II Studies (18 months duration): March 2027
Peer review, revisions, and submission of the publishable version of the working paper	Category I Studies: October 2026 – January 2027 Category II Studies: April – July 2027



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Use of Funding

The resources provided must be used **exclusively** for financing research activities, collecting primary data, accessing secondary data sources, and certification of the research proposal by an IRB. The amount of funding requested must be clearly justified.

The funds from this call for proposals **cannot** be used to cover the costs of materials for disseminating the study (dissemination of the outputs of this call for proposals will be the responsibility of the IDB), travel, or acquisition of goods and services (except when they are shown to be essential to achieving the research objectives). Additionally, overhead can account for a maximum of 15 percent of direct costs.

The payment schedule is as follows:

CATEGORY I – Quantitative diagnoses that establish causal relationships.

- 30 percent 30 days after participation in the first discussion seminar and upon presentation of the revised proposal and response to comments received at the workshop for approval by the IDB Group.
- 25 percent upon submission of an IRB and submission and approval by the IDB Group of the revised version of the first draft of the working paper and response to the comments received during this stage of the review process.
- 25 percent upon participation in the follow-up seminar and submission and approval by the IDB Group of the revised version of the final draft of the working paper and response to the comments received during the review process at this stage.
- 20 percent upon delivery of the publishable version of the working paper and response to comments received during the final review process.

CATEGORY II – Pilot interventions.

- 30 percent 30 days after participation in the first discussion seminar and upon presentation of the revised proposal and response to comments received at the workshop for approval by the IDB Group.
- 20 percent upon submission of an IRB, pre-analysis plan (PAP), and submission and approval by the IDB Group of the revised version of the first draft of the working paper and response to the comments received during this stage of the review process.
- 20 percent upon participation in the follow-up seminar and written response to comments received at the workshop.
- 15 percent upon submission and approval by the IDB Group of the final draft of the revised version of the working paper and response to the comments received during the review process at this stage.
- 15 percent upon delivery of the publishable version of the working paper and response to comments received during the final review process.



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Deadline For Submitting Proposals

This call for research proposals will be open until **May 12, 2025, at 11:59 p.m. ET**. To ensure proper processing of all proposals, it is strongly recommended that you submit your proposals well in advance of the deadline. GDLab is not responsible for any last-minute difficulties encountered in submitting the proposal through the system.

The results of this call for proposals will be announced in July 2025. Due to the high volume of proposals received, GDLab will provide feedback only on proposals that are selected as finalists.

How to Apply

To apply, teams must download and complete the application form (**in English**) and submit the duly completed form through GDLab's [call for proposals website](#). **Applications sent by email or those that do not follow the format of the form will not be accepted.**

For any questions or comments regarding the call, please do not hesitate to contact the GDLab team at gdlab@iadb.org

Arbitration, applicable law, and privileges and immunities of the IDB

All questions, matters, or disputes related to this call for proposals shall be governed by the laws of the District of Columbia, although no part of this clause or the conditions and rules of the call for proposals may restrict, limit, or impede any right, privilege, or immunity granted to the Bank or Bank personnel under any national or international treaty or law.

Should any dispute arise related to the call for proposals that cannot be resolved through a friendly settlement, then once one of the parties gives notice of the disagreement or dispute to the other, it shall be submitted for arbitration and final resolution before a single arbiter. The arbitration will be administered by the American Arbitration Association, in accordance with the Commercial Arbitration Rules of the American Arbitration Association. The location of the arbitration proceeding shall be Washington, D.C. The costs of any arbitration proceeding shall be borne by the Participant and the Bank in equal parts.

 www.iadb.org/gdlab

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