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Female Parliamentary Representation and Product Export Performance: A Cross-Country Study

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Abstract: *Empowering women politically is a vital social process for development and progress, yet its potential impact on economic development remains underexplored. This paper investigates the relationship between the proportion of female members of parliament and export growth, with a focus on the influence of women's political participation on export activities. The study identifies a significant positive correlation between female political participation and export growth in exporting countries. This conclusion holds after a series of robustness tests, suggesting that the findings offer valuable insights for understanding the economic effects of women's political participation from an international perspective.*

Keywords: *Women's Political Participation, Export Growth, International Trade*

1. Introduction

With the continuous advancement of the women's liberation movement, women's political empowerment has received growing attention and has been recognized as a key development goal by organizations such as the United Nations. An increasing number of women are serving as members of parliament or as managers in government agencies[1], contributing their expertise to the political arena and systematically shaping human society[2]. At the same time, scholars have begun to examine this social phenomenon and investigate the effects of women's political participation (WPP) [1] on specific socioeconomic outcomes[3]. Research in this field can enhance our understanding of the intrinsic value of WPP and further promote women's political empowerment. Existing studies have predominantly adopted a domestic perspective, focusing on the effects of WPP on national GDP growth, social welfare spending, and the share of military expenditure[4]. However, only a limited number of studies have taken an international perspective to explore how WPP influences countries' foreign trade activities.

This paper examines the effect of WPP in exporting countries on product-level export growth using a country–product–time panel dataset. After controlling for a wide range of socioeconomic factors, the analysis shows that WPP in exporting countries has a significant positive impact on product export growth. Specifically, for every 0.1 unit increase in the proportion of female parliamentarians (that is, a 10% increase),[2] the export growth rate will increase by 5.14%. This result remains robust across a series of robustness checks.

This paper contributes to the literature on the relationship between women's empowerment and international trade. As the trend toward greater gender equality intensifies, a growing number of studies have examined its implications for international trade, yet the findings remain inconclusive. Some research suggests that gender inequality may, under certain conditions, promote export performance. For example, Seguino (2000)[5] shows in a cross-country analysis that gender inequality in several countries stimulated export growth between 1975 and 1995, while Busse and Spielmann (2006)[6] argue that gender wage inequality can strengthen the comparative advantage of labor-intensive exports. In contrast, other studies contend that enhancing women's empowerment supports the expansion of a country's foreign trade. For instance, Carbonero et al. (2021)[7] find that introducing gender-balanced board quotas increases the likelihood that listed firms engage in export activities, and Ryu and Nam (2024)[8] report that gender inequality negatively affects international trade in ASEAN countries. A key reason for these divergent conclusions may be differences in the specific dimensions of empowerment examined across

[1] The abbreviation WPP will be used hereafter to refer to women's political participation.
[2] In this paper, the variable representing the percentage of female members of parliament ranges from 0 to 1; therefore, a change of 0.1 units corresponds to a change of 10%.

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studies. This paper supports the view that strengthening women's empowerment in the public sector facilitates export growth, thereby extending the scope of existing research.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: Section 2 presents the theoretical analysis, Section 3 describes the data and variables, Section 4 reports the empirical results, and Section 5 concludes.

2. Theoretical Analysis

The strengthening of WPP implies that a greater number of women can influence lawmaking and policy formulation by serving as legislators or government officials (Clayton and Tang, 2018[9]; Sundström et al., 2017[10]). Existing research shows that gender differences constitute an important determinant of politicians' behavioral choices, particularly those of legislators (Chattopadhyay and Duflo, 2004[11]; Clots-Figueras, 2012[12]), suggesting that increased WPP is likely to exert substantial influence on domestic laws and policies. Such changes may further affect a country's factor endowments or external relations, thereby having meaningful implications for product exports. Given that the literature generally finds that WPP generates beneficial effects in areas such as employment, social welfare, and technological innovation (Clots-Figueras, 2011[13]; Dahlum et al., 2022[14]; Holman, 2014[15]), we argue that it may likewise have a positive effect on export growth. Accordingly, this paper hypothesizes that higher levels of WPP in exporting countries promote the growth of their product exports.

3. Data

3.1 Export growth

Following Besedeš and Prusa (2011)[16] and Serletis (1992)[17], this paper employs export growth as the core dependent variable. After matching the relevant datasets, we obtain a sample of 52 exporting countries, consisting of 29 developing and 23 developed economies. To approximate a normal distribution of the export growth measure, we follow Cohn et al. (2022)[18] and take the logarithm of the export growth rate, defined as $Export_{imt} = \log\frac{Export\_value_{imt}}{Export\_value_{im,t-1}}$. Here, $Export_{imt}$ represents the export growth rate, $Export\_value_{imt}$ is the export value, i is the exporting country, m is the product, and t is the year.

3.2 Women's political participation

This paper examines product-level export growth at the national level and therefore focuses on the effect of WPP in exporting countries. Specifically, we use the share of female members of parliament as a proxy for WPP ($Female_{it}$). This indicator is not only widely employed in the literature (Avom and Kamguia, 2024[19]; Clayton and Tang, 2018[9]; Dahlum et al., 2022[14]; Hessami and Fonseca, 2020[1]), but also well suited to the research needs of this study. First, an increase in the proportion of female legislators reflects women's rising political power, particularly in the legislative arena, and thus constitutes a key manifestation of WPP. Second, members of parliament are generally less susceptible to external public opinion and possess greater autonomy in their decision-making, enabling gender-specific characteristics to be more clearly expressed. Finally, female legislators do not merely follow government directives; they can exert substantial influence on policy outcomes, such as by introducing bills. Therefore, in a multi-country context, the share of female members of parliament serves as an effective indicator of national-level WPP.

3.3 Control variables

In the empirical analysis, this study also controls for a set of product-level and country-level variables. At the product level, the controls include the exporting country's export value of a specific product ($Export\_value_{imt}$) and the total global export value of that product by all other countries ($World\_value_{mt}$). $Export\_value_{imt}$ captures the influence of the absolute size of exports on export growth, whereas $World\_value_{mt}$ accounts for external trends in global demand for the product. At the country level, the control variables include the exporting country's GDP, local currency exchange rate against the U.S. dollar, urbanization rate, level of democracy, quality of government officials, external conflict intensity, employment rate of disadvantaged women, number of women employed in the industrial sector, and female life expectancy at birth. GDP, the exchange rate, and the urbanization

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rate capture aspects of the exporting country's economic development. The level of democracy and the quality of government officials are included because they may exert social effects similar to those of women's political participation. Since global conflict intensified during the sample period and may have affected export performance, external conflict is also controlled for. The remaining variables reflect country-level characteristics of women's empowerment in the labor market and in health, and controlling for them helps better isolate the effect of women's political empowerment.

4. Empirical analysis

4.1 Baseline regression

The empirical analysis in this section aims to statistically examine whether increased WPP can promote export growth. The baseline regression model is specified as follows:

$$Export_{imt} = \alpha + \beta \cdot Female_{i,t-1} + \gamma \cdot X_{im,t-1} + \nu_i + \xi_m + \lambda_t + \varepsilon \quad (1)$$

In this model, $Export_{imt}$ denotes the export growth of country i for product m in year t; $Female_{i,t-1}$ represents the level of WPP in the exporting country, measured as the share of female members of parliament; $X_{im,t-1}$ is a vector of control variables; ν_i, ξ_m, and λ_t represent fixed effects for the exporting country, product, and year, respectively; and ε is a random error term. To mitigate potential endogeneity concerns, the WPP variable is lagged following Dahlum et al. (2022)[14]; in the baseline specification, it is lagged by one period. A significantly positive coefficient β indicates that, after accounting for relevant socioeconomic factors, higher WPP in the exporting country is associated with increased product export growth. Since $Female_{i,t-1}$ takes values in the range [0,1], its logarithm is not applied. Given that the key independent variables vary primarily across exporting countries, robust standard errors are clustered at the exporting country level in the baseline regressions.

Table 1 presents the regression results for equation (1), where column (1) reports the baseline specification, and columns (2)–(6) show results after clustering robust standard errors by product, year, country–year, country–product, and product–year, respectively. The coefficient on $Female_{i,t-1}$ is 0.514 and is statistically significant at the 1% or 5% level. After controlling for relevant socioeconomic factors, a 0.1-unit increase in the share of female members of parliament in an exporting country is associated with a 5.14% increase in export growth. If the share of female parliamentarians rises from 1% to the long-term target of 30% recommended by the United Nations and other organizations, the country's export growth could increase by 15.42%.

Table 1: Baseline Results

	(1) Export	(2) Export	(3) Export	(4) Export	(5) Export	(6) Export
Female	0.514***	0.514***	0.514**	0.514***	0.514***	0.514***
	(0.162)	(0.055)	(0.208)	(0.163)	(0.059)	(0.092)
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Country FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Product FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	482,281	482,281	482,281	482,281	482,281	482,281
R2	0.073	0.073	0.073	0.073	0.073	0.073

Notes: Table 1 presents the baseline results from equation (1). Significance levels: * p < 0.10, ** p < 0.05, *** p < 0.01. The robust standard errors in columns (1) to (6) are clustered into the exporting country, product, year, country-year, country-product, and product-year dimensions, respectively.

Thus, the hypothesis proposed in this paper is supported. This result, together with evidence from the international trade perspective, further corroborates the core findings of Dahlum et al. (2022)[14], Holman (2014)[15], and Mirziyoyeva and Salahodjaev (2023)[20], namely, that WPP can effectively enhance a country's socioeconomic development. Since export growth is a key driver of economic growth, the findings of this study also extend the mechanisms through which WPP promotes economic development, as discussed by Dahlum et al. (2022)[14] and Mirziyoyeva and Salahodjaev (2023)[20]. In the context of increasingly volatile global trade (Zhou et al., 2024[21]), countries should, alongside the implementation of effective economic and trade policies, substantially strengthen WPP to foster export growth.

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4.2 Robustness checks

This paper conducts several robustness checks, including the addition of product–year and country–product fixed effects, the use of alternative proxies for the independent and dependent variables, and the exclusion of potentially influential country samples. All tests confirm the baseline results, and the corresponding estimates are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Robustness Checks

	(1) Export	(2) Export	(3) Export_V	(4) Export	(5) Export	(6) Export
Female	0.504***	0.501***	0.515***			
	(0.161)	(0.160)	(0.162)			
Female_Average				0.514***		
				(0.162)		
Female_Change					0.421**	0.482**
					(0.209)	(0.192)
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Country FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Product FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Product-Year FE	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No
Country-Product FE	No	Yes	No	No	No	No
Observations	482,272	482,272	482,281	482,281	482,281	466,702
R2	0.071	0.080	0.74	0.073	0.073	0.072

Notes: Robust standard errors were clustered at the exporting country level and are given in parentheses. Significance levels: * p < 0.10, ** p < 0.05, *** p < 0.01. *Export_V* represents the absolute scale of exports, *Female_Average* represents the difference between the proportion of female legislators in the exporting country's parliament and the average proportion of female legislators across all sample countries in that year, and *Female_Change* represents the change in the proportion of female legislators in the exporting country compared to the previous year. Column 6 excludes the sample of OPEC countries.

5. Conclusion

Does WPP generate significant and beneficial economic effects? This paper answers this question affirmatively by focusing on product export growth. Using a dataset covering 52 major exporting countries and 1,205 specific products, the study conducts empirical analyses and finds that WPP has a significant positive impact on product export growth. These results are robust and consistent across a variety of robustness checks.

The findings of this paper carry important policy implications. In the context of globalization, countries—particularly developing economies—should strategically recognize the trade-enhancing effects of WPP. In accordance with the objectives outlined by the United Nations and considering their own national circumstances, countries should reasonably increase the share of female members of parliament, thereby providing a strong foundation for WPP to stimulate export growth through a higher representation of women in legislative bodies.

One possible direction for future research is to explore the mechanism and heterogeneity of the impact of female political participation on export growth. Additionally, examining other dimensions of female political participation, such as the economic effects brought about by female participation in grassroots organizations, is also a very worthy area of focus. Research on these issues not only enriches our understanding of the social and economic impacts of female political participation, but also provides useful guidance for the practice of empowering women politically.

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