



Women, International Trade, and the Law: Breaking Barriers for Gender Equality in Export-Related Activities

Lolita Laperle-Forget and Alev Gürbüz Cuneo*†

Women are a powerful engine for international trade and economic growth. As workers, small-scale traders, entrepreneurs, and producers, their engagement in export activities has the potential not only to elevate overall productivity and competitiveness in the international market but also to reduce poverty. However, women encounter multiple obstacles and legal barriers when participating in trade, hindering the full realization of economic gains that can be achieved through trade liberalization. This Brief analyzes women's participation in international trade and impediments to gender equality in national laws measured in the Women, Business and the Law index. Specifically, in 2024, 504 legal provisions across 145 economies are identified as creating unequal conditions between men and women to take part in international trade. Drawing from examples around the world, the Brief further discusses the role of trade instruments, especially preferential trade agreements, in eliminating legal barriers that discriminate against women, and enhancing their involvement in export-related activities to reap the benefits of trade on global welfare.

Why including women is good for international trade

Women's participation in international trade plays a pivotal role in driving economic growth. As entrepreneurs, producers, and workers, women are involved at every stage of global value chains (GVCs), fostering productivity, innovation, and competitiveness in global markets (World Bank and WTO 2020). This involvement includes selling direct exports, supplying goods and services to exporting or GVC firms at the domestic level, and participating in the labor force of export-oriented industries (Korinek et al. 2021; Slaughter 2013). The potential economic benefits of including women in export-related trade activities are highlighted in various research papers. For example, a study based on a sample of 9,000 exporting micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) in 80 developing economies found that businesses run by women were 3.56 percent more productive than their counterparts that do not export, and this productivity premium was more than twice that of firms run by men (Davis and Makhikev 2021). Research across 64 developing economies suggests that exporting firms depend on female workers to a greater extent; the female employment rate for exporting firms is 9 percentage points higher than for firms that do not export (Rocha and Winkler 2019). Other empirical evidence demonstrates a positive association between the participation of women in the labor force and economic and export diversification in developing economies, which promotes economic resilience (Kazandjian et al. 2016). This finding also aligns with the potential economic gains of integrating women into the workforce of

exporting firms, as captured by a higher GDP per capita generally observed in developing economies with a higher share of female employment in exporting firms (Figure 1).

Conversely, economic growth and trade liberalization can also promote gender equality (UNCTAD 2017). The hypothesis underlying this research is that open trade makes discrimination—including through the gender wage gap—more costly for firms as they are facing intensified international competition (Becker 1957). Thus, trade strategies promoting competitiveness can result in a virtuous cycle, reducing the gender wage gap and improving working conditions in export-oriented industries with a high share of female workers. On the other hand, a lack of openness to trade can contribute to a negative feedback loop, where gender income gaps are more likely to persist in less open economies, and such gaps are likely to curtail economic growth in the long term (Fontana 2014).

How international trade affects men and women differently

Occupation segregation by gender places women at a disadvantage in reaping the benefits of international trade. For instance, women entrepreneurs are concentrated in sectors that are less trade-intensive or are more subject to high tariffs, such as services, or in low-value-added segments of value chains (World Bank and WTO 2020). Gender disparities are also present in the labor force of export-oriented industries, with women concentrated in labor-intensive production and low-skilled jobs (World Bank 2019).

*Affiliations: World Bank, Development Economics, Women, Business and the Law. For correspondence: llaperleforget@worldbank.org; agurbuz@worldbank.org.

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Objective and disclaimer: This series of Global Indicators Briefs synthesizes existing research and data to shed light on a useful and interesting question for policy debate. Data for this Brief are extracted from the Women, Business and the Law (WBL) database and supplemented by desk research. This Brief carries the names of the authors and should be cited accordingly. The findings, interpretations, and conclusions are entirely those of the authors. They do not necessarily represent the views of the World Bank Group, its Executive Directors, or the governments they represent. All Briefs in the series can be accessed via: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/research/brief/global-indicators-briefs-series>.

Figure 1

Developing economies with a higher representation of women in the workforce of exporting firms are more likely to have higher GDP per capita



Source: World Development Indicators and World Bank Enterprise Surveys.

Note: The share of female workers in the x-axis represents the proportion of permanent full-time female workers in firms exporting at least 10 percent of sales. Data on the share of female workers come from the most recent Enterprise Survey between 2009 and 2022 for low- and lower-middle-income economies (N=62). Each point represents a single economy, where the y-axis coordinates plot the corresponding year's GDP per capita in USD. The fitted line shows the statistically significant positive relation between the two variables ($\beta=26.8$; $t\text{-stat}=3.22$). The coefficient's significance is retained in alternative specifications using log of GDP and log of share of female workers. This statistical relationship should not be interpreted as causal.

The way international trade affects men and women differently is rooted in the gendered structure of the economy influenced by gender norms (Berik 2011). This complex interrelationship underscores the importance of paying close attention to the gender-specific challenges in international trade perpetuated by legal discrimination against women. In this regard, the World Bank Group *Women, Business and the Law* (WBL) project is a valuable resource to identify legal impediments holding women back in international trade. The WBL index regularly measures how laws and regulations affect women's economic opportunities in 190 economies across 8 indicators.

Using the WBL index, this Brief sheds light on the various forms of legal discrimination restricting women's participation in export activities and demonstrates strategies that can narrow gender gaps in trade, notably through legislation. The contribution of the Brief lies in the importance of considering legal discrimination against women as governments adopt trade policies and negotiate trade agreements. The Brief first presents data from the WBL index to highlight the legal barriers exacerbating gender gaps in trade worldwide. Data points across five indicators (Entrepreneurship, Assets, Workplace, Pay, and Mobility) are selected because of their relevance to the common challenges reported in the literature as inhibiting women's participation in international trade. The Brief then displays examples of legal reforms that have alleviated obstacles to women's participation in international trade. It concludes with a discussion on the potential of preferential trade agreements (PTAs) in promoting women's economic rights and stresses the need for more research on the relationship between legal impediments faced by women and international trade outcomes.

How legal barriers hinder women's full participation in trade

Legal discrimination hindering women's participation in trade do not arise from the letter of multilateral and regional trade agreements. Trade rules are generally phrased with gender-neutral language and may include a few provisions explicitly prohibiting gender-based discrimination. Moreover, domestic trade regulations and procedures do not apply different treatment between men and women, apart from rare exceptions. Rather, the legal barriers faced by women in trade arise from domestic laws that establish discriminatory treatment between genders in terms of accessing economic opportunities (Davis and Mazhikeyev 2021; Gonzales et al. 2015).

Certain legal impediments in domestic law can be particularly challenging for women seeking to engage in trade activities—particularly laws restricting women's legal capacity, freedom of movement, ability to access productive resources, and job prospects. While these laws are not likely to explicitly restrict women's engagement in export-related activities, they can prevent women from accessing economic opportunities brought by international trade or create conditions that are not conducive to engaging women in international trade (Korinek et al. 2021; World Bank and WTO 2020). For instance, the ability to travel without hindrance to conduct business, trade across the border, or work outside the home, as well as to sign contracts, build assets, and access credit, is fundamental for women entrepreneurs to participate in international trade. Equally important is the capacity to integrate women into the labor force of export-oriented industries without gender-based restrictions.

Figure 2

Women, Business and the Law identifies 504 legal impediments across 145 economies in 2024 that are likely to create unequal conditions for women to participate in international trade



Source: *Women, Business and the Law 2024*.

Note: The number of economies corresponds to the total of economies identified in the *Women, Business and the Law* (WBL) 2024 index with at least one legal provision imposing a restriction on women or discriminating against women, or economies that do not have a law in force protecting against gender-based discrimination in a given area (wage, employment, and credit) (collectively referred as “legal impediments”). Some WBL data points are combined in the figure for conciseness. The WBL data set is available at <https://wbl.worldbank.org/en/wbl-data>.

The WBL indicators on Entrepreneurship, Assets, Workplace, Pay, and Mobility precisely measure these legal impediments (Figure 2). Across these five indicators, the WBL index for 2024 (WBL 2024 index) identifies 504 legal barriers in 145 economies that are likely to create unequal conditions for women to participate in international trade compared to men. The most frequent barrier is the lack of legal protection against gender discrimination. The absence of such legal protection can exacerbate challenges for women to participate in international trade activities, such as difficulties in accessing credit (Bertrand and Perrin 2022; Islam et al. 2019). The second most frequent barrier is in labor provisions that restrict the range of jobs women can hold. This in turn limits women’s capacity to access the same employment opportunities as men in export-oriented industries.

Entrepreneurship and Assets indicators

Legal discrimination against women in terms of access to assets and ability to conduct business activities presents important challenges for women seeking to engage in international trade. Women tend to participate in the ownership of exporting firms to a greater extent in economies where they enjoy equal rights, as gender-disaggregated data from the World Bank Enterprise Surveys on the ownership of exporting firms suggest. The difference between the share of exporting firms with female ownership is found to be significant and around 7.5 percentage points when economies are compared in terms of existence of impediments to women’s entrepreneurship (Figure 3, Panel a).

The share of exporting firms with female owners is around 14 percentage points significantly greater in economies where men and women have equal inheritance and property rights than in economies with legal discriminations as measured in the Assets indicator (Figure 3, Panel b). This finding aligns with other research demonstrating that unequal access to assets and credit diminishes women’s likelihood of owning exporting firms (Demirgüç-Kunt et al. 2013; World Bank 2019).

The prevalence of exporting firms with female ownership in economies where legislation provides equal access to assets for all

highlights the significance of access to productive resources for women’s participation in international trade. Gender-based discrimination in inheritance and property rights make it harder for women than for men to provide collateral to obtain credit, which is critical for a firm’s ability to export (Bin Humam et al. 2023; UNCTAD 2022). Specifically, investment is often needed to increase firms’ productivity and growth or to improve the competitiveness of their goods or services in order to integrate into foreign markets and profitable value chains (Muravyev et al. 2009; Stupnytska et al. 2014). Furthermore, complying with requirements tied to export regulations and procedures or protections of intellectual property in international markets entails additional costs, which are particularly burdensome for MSMEs and women (World Bank and WTO 2020). Despite increased global efforts to promote inclusive trade and the evidence of gender-specific obstacles limiting women’s participation in international trade, legal discrimination persists in the national laws of numerous economies (Table 1).

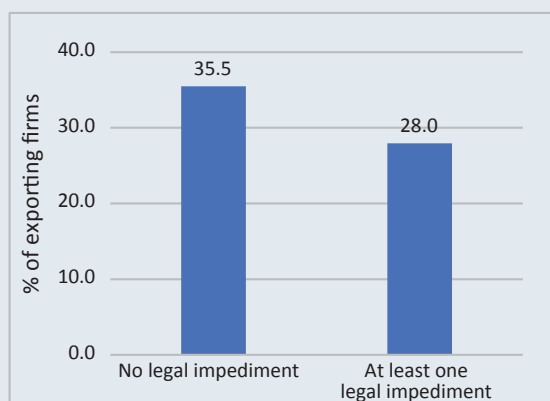
Workplace and Pay indicators

Gender-based discrimination in employment perpetuates gender-differentiated impacts of international trade. Job segregation drives men and women into different industries, often guiding female workers toward certain economic sectors that are less trade-intensive or in the lower-added value part of value chains that yield minimal gains (World Bank 2019; World Bank and WTO 2020).

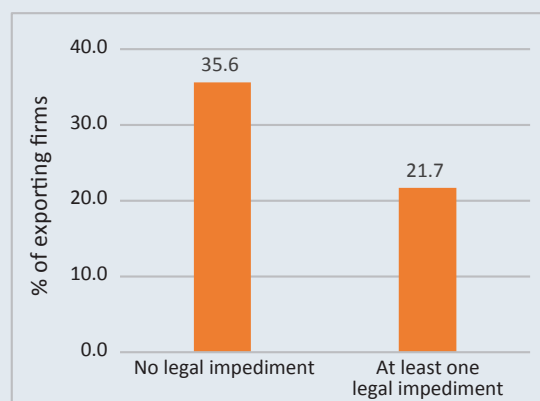
According to data from the World Bank’s Enterprise Surveys (from 2009 to 2022), women account for about one-third of the workforce in exporting firms at the global level. There is little difference in terms of the overall female employment rate in exporting firms between economies as to whether women face legal impediments in the workplace. However, there is a higher share of female-owned exporting firms in economies without such impediments. The difference is around 11.2 percentage points and found to be significant between economies with and those without the legal impediments measured in the Workplace indicator (Figure 4, Panel a).

Figure 3 More exporting firms have female owners in economies that do not restrict female entrepreneurship or women’s access to assets in their laws

a. Share of exporting firms with female owners in economies with and without legal impediments to female entrepreneurship



b. Share of exporting firms with female owners in economies with and without legal impediments to women’s access to assets



Source: *Women, Business and the Law* data set, and World Bank Enterprise Surveys.

Note: Firms exporting at least 10 percent of sales are defined as “exporting firms”. The index is measured for the year of the most recent World Bank Enterprise Survey between 2013 and 2022 and the *Women, Business and the Law* (WBL) scores for the Entrepreneurship and Assets indicators at that time in 116 economies. The share of exporting firms on the y-axis corresponds to the average of the share of exporting firms in economies that do or do not have legal impediments to female entrepreneurship (panel a) and women’s access to assets (panel b) in their laws. The estimated coefficients for the difference between two subgroups (no legal impediment versus at least one legal impediment) are found to be statistically significant (panel a: $\beta = 7.5$, $t\text{-stat} = 2.34$; panel b: $\beta = 13.9$, $t\text{-stat} = 3.95$). See Table 1 for the specific legal impediments measured in the Entrepreneurship and Assets indicators. Information about the Enterprise Surveys methodology is available at <http://www.enterprisesurveys.org>. The WBL data set is available at <https://wbl.worldbank.org/en/wbl-data>.

Table 1 Legal barriers to women entrepreneurs’ participation in export activities measured in the Entrepreneurship and Assets indicators

WBL data point	Number of economies scoring “No”	Examples
Does the law prohibit discrimination in access to credit based on gender?	96	In Equatorial Guinea and Eswatini , married women do not enjoy legal capacity, as per family laws. This restriction prevents them from signing contracts on their own, including export contracts with foreign firms and for the supply of services or goods with GVCs.
Can a woman undertake entrepreneurial activities in the same way as a man?	8	In Guinea-Bissau , married women must obtain the consent of their husbands before engaging in economic activities, including when registering a business. This can affect women’s capacity to trade formally, as a business registration number is usually required on customs forms to export in foreign markets.
Do a woman and a man have equal administrative power and ownership rights to immovable property, including land?	21	In Djibouti , the succession provisions in the Family Code grant women half of men’s inheritance rights, hence creating unequal conditions to build assets and provide collateral to obtain financial services. In Cameroon , the Civil Code revokes the administrative rights of married women over their property, transferring those rights to the husband. Women require their husband’s consent to use marital property as collateral, whereas husbands can do so without needing their wife’s permission. Such discrimination restricts women’s financial inclusion and the opportunities to invest in their businesses to integrate foreign markets and overcome competition.
Do sons and daughters have equal rights to inherit assets from their parents?	41	
Do female and male surviving spouses have equal rights to inherit assets?	43	

Sources: *Women, Business and the Law* 2024.

Note: This selection of questions for the Entrepreneurship and Assets indicators in the *Women, Business and the Law* index features the most relevant questions regarding women’s participation in international trade.

The share of exporting firms with female owners is also 8.3 percentage points significantly greater in economies where laws do not restrict women from working in specific sectors, at night or in jobs deemed dangerous (Figure 4, Panel b). Such restrictions contribute to job segregation and gender pay gap in specific segments and sectors, and prevent women from participating in the workforce of lucrative export-oriented sectors in the same way as men. This is the case in economies that prevent women’s

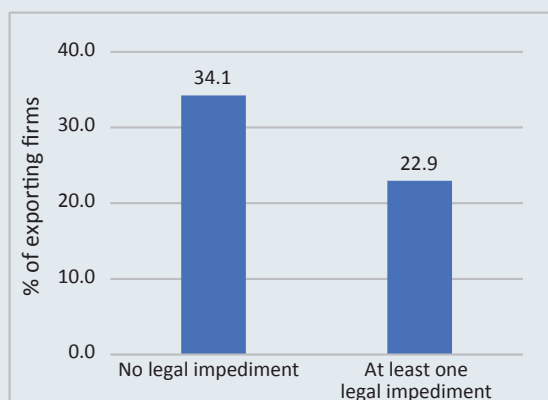
employment in manufacturing, energy, and mining, all being trade-intensive sectors (WTO 2022) (Table 2).

Mobility indicator

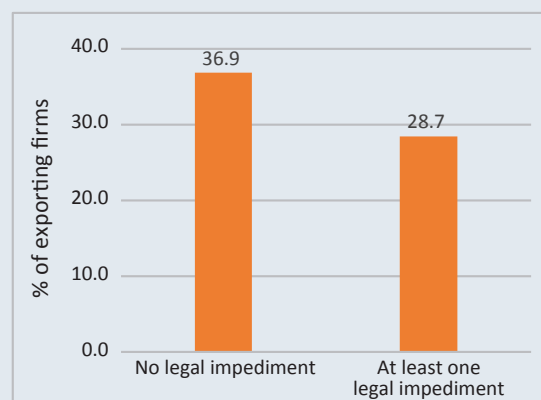
Mobility plays an important role for women to be able to leverage trade opportunities, yet women face many critical barriers that restrict their access to market and trade-related employment

Figure 4 More exporting firms have female owners in economies that have more gender equal rights in employment

a. Share of exporting firms with female owners in economies with and without legal impediments measured in the Workplace indicator



b. Share of exporting firms with female owners in economies with and without legal impediments measured in the Pay indicator



Source: *Women, Business and the Law* data set, and World Bank Enterprise Surveys.

Note: Firms exporting at least 10 percent of sales are defined as “exporting firms”. The index is measured for the year of the most recent World Bank Enterprise Survey between 2013 and 2022 and the *Women, Business and the Law* (WBL) scores for the Workplace and Pay indicators at that time in 116 economies. The share of exporting firms on the y-axis corresponds to the average of the share of exporting firms in economies that do or do not have legal impediments measured under Workplace (panel a) and measured under Pay (panel b) indicators. The estimated coefficients for the difference between two subgroups (no legal impediment versus at least one legal impediment) are found to be statistically significant (panel a: $\beta=11.2$, $t\text{-stat}=2.65$; panel b: $\beta=8.3$, $t\text{-stat}=2.47$). See Table 2 for the list of legal impediments considered in the Workplace and Pay indicators. Information about the Enterprise Surveys methodology is available at <http://www.enterprisesurveys.org>. The WBL data set is available at <https://wbl.worldbank.org/en/wbl-data>

Table 2 Legal barriers to women’s access to employment opportunities in export-oriented industries measured in the Workplace and Pay indicators

WBL data point	Number of economies scoring “No”	Examples
Can a woman get a job in the same way as a man?	19	<p>In Cameroon and Jordan, women can be denied the right to work outside the home by their husband under family laws. These provisions can severely limit women’s ability to seek employment in exporting and global value chain firms and confine them to unpaid domestic work, hindering their financial autonomy.</p> <p>In China, women are not allowed to work underground. This restriction limits job opportunities for women in the ores and minerals markets, whose exports are worth more than \$2.8 trillion (WITS 2020). In the Russian Federation, one of the major petroleum exporters worldwide, women cannot work in oil production, excluding them from a wide range of jobs in an industry with an export value exceeding \$7.3 trillion and accounting for 42 percent of total Russian exports (WITS 2020).</p>
Does the law prohibit discrimination in employment based on gender?	28	
Does the law mandate equal remuneration for work of equal value?	92	
Can a woman work at night in the same way as a man?	20	
Can a woman work in a job deemed dangerous in the same way as a man?	45	
Can a woman work in an industrial job in the same way as a man?	59	

Sources: *Women, Business and the Law* 2024.

Note: This selection of questions for the Workplace and Pay indicators in the *Women, Business and the Law* (WBL) index features the most relevant questions regarding women’s participation in international trade.

(World Bank and WTO 2020). Housework and caregiving obligations and related time constraints present a particular obstacle for female business owners to network with suppliers, partners, and buyers; to attend trade fairs; or to travel outside the country to sell their products in foreign markets (Brenton et al. 2013). While in most parts of the world mobility constraints for women primarily result from household responsibilities influenced by social norms, several countries place explicit legal restrictions on women’s freedom of movement. Such legal impediments restrict women’s capacity to exploit market opportunities boosted by trade liberalization, including employment outside the home in

exporting firms or engaging in small-scale cross-border trade (Table 3). A recent research paper shows a positive and significant relationship between exports and female employment in economies where no legal provisions impose mobility restrictions on women (Amin and Islam 2022). Our analysis using the most recent Enterprise Survey on female full-time employment and matching year’s WBL data supported this finding, suggesting a difference of about 6 percentage points (significant at 10% level) between economies with no legal impediments to women’s mobility and those with at least some of these restrictions.

Table 3 Legal barriers to women’s participation in cross-border trade measured in the Mobility indicator

WBL data point	Number of economies scoring “No”	Examples
Can a woman travel outside her home in the same way as a man?	14	In Qatar , family law grants the husband the right to expel his wife from the household without providing maintenance if she leaves home or the country without his permission. This provision excludes women from freely engaging in cross-border trade or joining the labor force of exporting firms, among others.
Can a woman travel internationally in the same way as a man?	18	In the Islamic Republic of Iran , the Passport Act requires married women to provide the written consent of their husbands to apply for a passport. This gender-specific requirement creates an additional burden for female cross-border traders to obtain the travel documents usually requested by customs officials.

Sources: *Women, Business and the Law* 2024.

Note: This selection of questions for the Mobility indicator in the *Women, Business and the Law* index features the most relevant questions regarding women’s participation in international trade.

Furthermore, laws restricting women from freely leaving home or the country prevent them from taking advantage of agreements concluded by international trading partners aimed at increasing market access. In such instances, women are de facto excluded from economic opportunities brought by PTAs and agreements promoting the free movement of persons. This is particularly evident in the Gulf Cooperation Council, where four out of six member states impose restrictions on women’s mobility in their domestic legislation while having committed to providing free circulation of people to facilitate intraregional trade.

Shaping a legal ecosystem that supports trade growth

The economic benefits of integrating women into trade argue in favor of removing the various forms of legal barriers faced by women discussed in this Brief. Some countries are adopting legal reforms that align with women’s participation in export activities. For example, several developing economies, including Azerbaijan, Malaysia, and Sierra Leone have removed job restrictions for women within their legal frameworks (WBL 2024). This can encourage women’s inclusion in export-oriented industries on equal terms with men. Some reforms were motivated by trade concerns, such as in the Philippines, where the ban on women working at night was lifted in 2011 in response to complaints from call centers, a key industry oriented toward export services. The service providers claimed that the restriction for women to work at night was too burdensome and affected their competitiveness in the international market (Staritz and Reis 2013).

Furthermore, in 2009, Sierra Leone implemented a series of legal reforms to enhance women’s rights, such as granting married women legal capacity, hence allowing them to sign contracts, register businesses, and open bank accounts on their own. The share of female-owned exporting firms in Sierra Leone has increased from 1.7 to 16.9 percent since these reforms were enacted, World Bank Enterprise Surveys data reveal. This trend aligns with the broader observations derived from the WBL and World Bank Enterprise Surveys data suggesting that economies with more gender equal rights (as reflected in a high WBL index score) are associated with a greater presence of women as owners and top managers in exporting firms than economies with a lower WBL index score (Figure 5).

A different approach to promote gender equality in international trade lies in the emerging practice of including specific provisions promoting gender equality within the legal framework of special economic zones (SEZs) (Cotula and Mouan 2021). Although the practice remains limited, some economies have included obligations related to fair and decent working

conditions for women engaged in exporting and GVC firms in SEZs. For example, a regulation on gender equality promotion was adopted in 2012 in the Shenzhen SEZ in Guangdong, China (Regulation 479). Under this regulation, public entities and private enterprises must implement measures to eliminate gender-based discrimination and guarantee access to opportunities, resources, and development for both men and women. Similarly, the Bangladesh Export Processing Zone Labour Act includes favorable provisions for women, such as equal pay, paid maternity leave, and a representation of at least 30 percent of female employees in the executive council of the Workers’ Welfare Association. These initiatives are consistent with the broader objective of fostering economic growth by promoting gender-equal opportunities in international trade.

How preferential trade agreements can encourage gender equality in national laws

Another strategy to encourage women’s inclusion in international trade is evident in the increasing number of PTAs negotiated across the regions containing binding obligations to ensure that laws guarantee equal rights between men and women, especially in terms of wages and employment (Kuhlmann 2023; Laperle-Forget 2022). As such, trade agreements can serve as catalysts for positive reforms in the domestic legislation of the economies party to these agreements (state parties). In this regard, research conducted by the International Labour Organization (ILO) on more than one hundred PTAs demonstrates positive associations between provisions on minimum labor standards or gender-equal rights in PTAs and the reduction of gender-based discrimination in employment and the gender wage gap, and higher female employment rate in economies that have signed these agreements (ILO 2016).

A few examples highlight how labor-related PTA commitments have encouraged positive legal reforms that can support women’s inclusion in international trade. In the context of the *Dominican Republic-Central America-United States Free Trade Agreement*, the United States and Costa Rica agreed on a cooperation roadmap targeting the elimination of gender-based discrimination in employment. The United States often uses this strategy to support its trade partners in enacting legal reforms aimed at improving working conditions in export-oriented industries before signing a PTA. During this process, and with the financial support of the United States, Costa Rica reformed its labor code to include greater protection against the dismissal of pregnant female workers (ILO 2016). Viet Nam reformed its labor code and lifted restrictions for women in the workplace to comply with the obligations to eliminate legal discrimination in employment, as provided in Article 19.3 of the *Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for*

Figure 5

Economies with fewer gender-based discriminating laws are more likely to have a higher share of women-owned and women-led exporting firms

a. Share of exporting firms with a female owner in the economy



b. Share of exporting firms with a female top manager in the economy



Legend for both plots:

- East Asia and Pacific
- Europe and Central Asia
- OECD High Income
- Latin America and the Caribbean
- Middle East and North Africa
- South Asia
- Sub-Saharan Africa

Source: *Women, Business and the Law* data set and World Bank Enterprise Surveys.

Note: Firms exporting at least 10 percent of sales are defined as “exporting firms.” The data uses an economy’s most recent Enterprise Survey and the *Women, Business and the Law* (WBL) score from the same year. Higher WBL scores indicate greater gender equality. Each point represents a single economy surveyed between 2013 and 2022. The estimated coefficient between WBL score and the share of exporting firms with female owners (panel a: $\beta=0.39$, $t\text{-stat}=6.03$) and between WBL score and the share of exporting firms with a female top manager (panel b: $\beta=0.21$, $t\text{-stat}=4.62$) are found to be statistically significant ($N=116$ and $N=118$, respectively). These coefficients remain significant when additional controls, such as the corresponding year’s GDP per capita in USD, regions, and income groups, are added in the specifications. These statistical relationships should not be interpreted as causal. Information about the Enterprise Surveys methodology is available at <http://www.enterprisesurveys.org>. The WBL data set and methodology are available at <https://wbl.worldbank.org/en/wbl-data>. OECD = Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

Trans-Pacific Partnership (ILO 2016). Moldova reformed its labor code to lift restrictions on women’s ability to hold jobs deemed dangerous and to work in certain industries, after concluding an association agreement with the European Union (EU) in 2014, paving the way for a potential EU accession. This reform is aligned with the PTA commitment of Moldova to harmonize its legislation with the European Union directives addressing, among others, gender-equal opportunities and treatment in the workplace (2006/54/EC).

PTA negotiations not only influence how women’s rights are guaranteed in legislation but can also promote gender-equal opportunities. This is notably the case for the recent provisions concerning the liberalization of trade in services that explicitly prohibit gender-discriminatory treatment regarding the authorization to supply services. In particular, the PTAs concluded by the United Kingdom with Australia, Japan, New Zealand, Iceland, Liechtenstein, and Norway provide for the obligation of state parties to ensure that domestic regulations on trade in services do not discriminate between men and women. A similar provision was included in the Reference Paper on Services Domestic Regulation adopted by 71 Members of the World Trade Organization (WTO) to promote men’s and women’s equal access to the services market. Considering the importance of the services sector for MSMEs owned by women, such provisions are particularly relevant.

Even though the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Services Trade Restrictiveness Index does

not identify any gender-specific requirements or explicit discrimination against women in services domestic regulations, other forms of legal discrimination can restrict women’s access to the services markets (OECD 2023). For instance, women may face restrictions in obtaining work permits to supply services in an economy where employment restrictions for women are in force. Such legal discrimination could prevent female foreign workers from supplying services in the mining industry in a country with laws prohibiting women from working underground. Gender disparities like these call for increased attention to the potential of PTAs in encouraging the removal of gender-based discrimination in laws.

Empowering women in trade: a multifaceted strategy

The significant gender disparities observed in export activities underscore the imperative of providing enhanced support for women in the realm of international trade. Securing gender equality in domestic legislation is consistent with providing equal conditions for men and women to access economic opportunities brought by international trade. Conversely, women’s inclusion in international trade can foster economic gains in the long term. As shown in this Brief, the WBL index can serve as a valuable tool to identify legal barriers holding women back from trade opportunities. Future research could further examine the relationship between legal impediments identified in this Brief and trade outcomes, as well as the impact of trade agreements on women’s rights.

The persistent challenges faced by women in export-related activities, stemming from both *de jure* and *de facto* discrimination, highlight the need for an integrated and holistic approach to addressing the barriers that hinder women's participation in international trade. In addition to securing gender equality in legislation, policies should further tackle a number of issues, such as women's access to information on trade rules and procedures, networking and financing opportunities, gender-differentiated

impacts of tariff and nontariff barriers, safety issues at the borders, and the wide range of social norms that place women at a disadvantage in international trade activities (Korinek and van Lieshout 2023; Niesten and Laperle-Forget 2023; World Bank and WTO 2020). Such a multifaceted strategy could help unlock the positive socioeconomic outcomes that trade liberalization has the potential to deliver.

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