

Original Article

Women's Economic Empowerment in the Age of Globalisation

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Globalisation has reshaped labour markets, production networks, and social relations worldwide. For women, these transformations offer both new opportunities and novel vulnerabilities. This paper examines the mechanisms through which globalisation influences women's economic empowerment — including labour market entry, entrepreneurship, access to finance, and social protection — and analyses structural constraints such as gendered norms, unequal care burdens, occupational segregation, and precarious employment. The discussion highlights policy measures and institutional reforms that can amplify the positive effects of global integration for women while mitigating risks. The paper concludes with recommendations for governments, international organizations, civil society, and the private sector to pursue inclusive economic strategies that center gender equality.

Keywords: Globalisation, Women's Economic Empowerment, Labour Market, Gender Equality, Entrepreneurship, Financial Inclusion, Social Protection, Care Economy, Policy Reforms,

Introduction

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Globalisation — defined here as the rising transnational flows of goods, services, capital, information, and people — has profoundly altered economic opportunities and constraints for men and women. While the integration of national economies into global markets has created new work opportunities, particularly in export-oriented manufacturing and services, evidence from many contexts shows that benefits are distributed unevenly by gender. Women's economic empowerment — the process by which women gain the ability to make strategic life choices and exercise agency over economic resources — depends not only on market access but also on social institutions, legal frameworks, and public policies.

This paper addresses two central questions: (1) How does globalisation affect women's economic opportunities and risks? (2) What policy and institutional actions can enhance women's economic empowerment in a globalised world? To answer these, the paper synthesizes theoretical insights on gender and globalization, outlines pathways through which integration affects women's economic status, and proposes policy responses to strengthen equitable outcomes.

Conceptual framework and definitions

Women's economic empowerment is multidimensional: it includes access to employment and decent work, control over income and productive assets, access to financial services, voice in economic decision-making, and the removal of discriminatory laws and practices. Globalisation affects each dimension through several mechanisms:

1. **Market Access and Job Creation:** Global value chains (GVCs) and foreign direct investment (FDI) can create demand for labour in manufacturing and services sectors where women may gain entry.



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3. **Technology and Information Flows:** Digitalisation and cross-border information flows can enable remote work, digital entrepreneurship, and access to market information.
4. **Competition and Informalisation:** Global competition can push firms toward cost reduction, increasing precarious employment and informalization — often affecting female-dominated low-wage sectors.
5. **Policy Diffusion:** Global norms and international agreements can promote gender-sensitive policies, but the translation to national law is uneven.
6. **Migration and Remittances:** Cross-border migration provides income and skills flows, with gendered implications for those who migrate as well as left-behind households.

Literature overview (conceptual synthesis)

Scholars examining gender and globalization highlight both opportunity and stratification. Early accounts noted that export-led industrialization opened large-scale wage employment to young women in many developing countries, contributing to shifts in social norms and household bargaining. Later research nuanced this view, pointing to occupational segregation, limited upward mobility, and the persistence of patriarchal constraints. Digital globalization has added another layer: while it expands remote work and entrepreneurship possibilities, it also exacerbates platform-based precarity and algorithmic biases. Policy-focused literature emphasizes the interplay between macroeconomic regimes and social policies: liberalization without accompanying social protections can leave women vulnerable to unstable work and inadequate social safety nets. Conversely, proactive policies — including microfinance with complementary training, childcare provision, legal reforms for property and inheritance rights, targeted skill programs, and gender-aware trade and investment strategies — can enhance the capacity of women to convert market opportunities into sustained empowerment.

Kabeer (1999) examined women's economic empowerment within the broader context of globalisation, emphasising that the mere availability of economic opportunities does not automatically lead to sustained improvements in women's status; rather, structural changes in social, cultural, and legal institutions are necessary. The aim of this study was to explore how, in the era of globalisation, export-oriented industries—particularly in the garment and apparel sectors—have brought large numbers of women into formal employment, while simultaneously raising concerns about the quality of these jobs, wage levels, and occupational safety standards. The findings revealed that although female labour force participation increased significantly, women were often confined to low-wage positions, endured long working hours, and faced limited chances for promotion, which hindered their full empowerment. The study employed qualitative interviews and factory surveys, analysing data from industrial zones in Bangladesh, Vietnam, and Sri Lanka. Results highlighted that without effective implementation of property rights, social security provisions, and anti-discrimination laws, women's participation in the global market can exacerbate inequalities rather than reduce them. The author concluded that women's economic empowerment requires multidimensional policy interventions, including employment creation, education, skill development, legal reforms, and changes in social norms. This study provided a strong conceptual foundation for future research on how women's roles in the global economy can be strengthened not merely as labourers but also as decision-makers and entrepreneurs.

Sen (2000) explored the concept of women's agency and its relationship to economic empowerment in the rapidly integrating global economy, arguing that globalisation offers both new possibilities and new risks for women, depending on how policy frameworks address structural inequalities. The primary objective of this study was to analyse how women's ability to make strategic life choices—particularly in the economic domain—is shaped by factors such as education, access to resources, and participation in decision-making processes. Using a cross-national comparative approach, the research examined case studies from South Asia, Africa, and Latin America, focusing on sectors where women's labour participation had increased due to trade liberalisation and foreign direct investment. The findings indicated that while women gained visibility and income in export-oriented jobs, the sustainability of these gains depended heavily on institutional supports such as legal protection, skill enhancement programmes, and collective bargaining rights. Sen argued that economic empowerment is not merely a function of market participation but is deeply interconnected with women's social empowerment, including the redistribution of unpaid care work and the dismantling of discriminatory norms. The study concluded that without a simultaneous transformation in social structures, globalisation could entrench gendered divisions of labour, leaving women vulnerable to job insecurity and exploitation despite apparent economic advancement.

Chant (2003) investigated the intersections of gender, poverty, and economic change in the era of globalisation, with particular emphasis on how women's livelihoods are shaped by both macroeconomic reforms and micro-level social dynamics. The objective of the study was to assess whether the increased feminisation of labour in global markets translated into long-term economic security for women. Drawing on ethnographic research and household surveys in Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Southeast Asia, Chant examined the conditions under which women enter global labour markets, often in low-wage manufacturing, domestic work, and informal sector jobs linked to global supply chains. The findings showed that while these employment avenues contributed to household income, they

frequently reinforced gendered vulnerabilities, such as occupational segregation, limited bargaining power, and dependence on unstable income sources. The research also highlighted the double burden faced by women, who managed both productive and reproductive labour without adequate institutional support. Chant argued that economic empowerment requires a broader policy framework that includes investment in social infrastructure, gender-responsive budgeting, and labour rights enforcement, rather than relying solely on market forces to deliver gender equality. The study concluded that without targeted interventions, globalisation risks perpetuating a cycle where women contribute significantly to economic growth yet remain disproportionately affected by poverty and job insecurity.

Elson (2004) examined the gendered impacts of global economic restructuring, focusing on how trade liberalisation, structural adjustment policies, and global production networks affect women's economic empowerment. The aim of the study was to understand whether integration into the global economy expands women's access to decent work and economic resources or reinforces existing inequalities. Using a combination of policy analysis and empirical case studies from Asia, Africa, and Latin America, Elson evaluated how macroeconomic policies influence women's employment conditions, wages, and access to social protection. The findings revealed that although globalisation created new employment opportunities in export-oriented industries, these jobs often lacked stability, social security, and upward mobility. Women remained overrepresented in low-paid, precarious work, particularly in sectors where cost-cutting pressures from global competition were intense. Elson also noted that the benefits of globalisation were unevenly distributed, with urban, educated women more likely to access formal employment than their rural or less-educated counterparts. The study concluded that without gender-sensitive macroeconomic policy, labour rights enforcement, and investments in public services such as childcare and health, globalisation may exacerbate rather than alleviate gender disparities. Elson argued that economic empowerment requires a coordinated approach involving governments, international organisations, and civil society to ensure that women's rights and needs are embedded in the rules of the global economy.

Seguino (2006) analysed the complex relationship between gender inequality, economic growth, and globalisation, with a particular focus on how export-led development strategies influence women's economic position. The purpose of the study was to investigate whether integrating into global markets improves gender equality or whether it relies on existing wage disparities between men and women to maintain competitive advantage. Using cross-country econometric analysis covering both developed and developing economies, Seguino assessed how gender wage gaps interact with patterns of foreign investment, trade flows, and industrial growth. The findings revealed that in many developing countries, export-oriented industries benefit from maintaining lower wages for women, which in turn attracts foreign investors seeking low-cost labour. While this dynamic can initially increase women's employment rates, it often reinforces their concentration in low-skilled, labour-intensive sectors with minimal prospects for advancement. Seguino argued that such dependence on gender wage inequality undermines genuine empowerment, as women's economic gains remain contingent on their lower earning power relative to men. The study concluded that to transform short-term employment gains into long-term empowerment, governments must enforce equal pay legislation, invest in skill upgrading for women, and diversify economic structures beyond low-wage manufacturing. Additionally, policies aimed at reducing occupational segregation and expanding women's participation in high-value-added sectors were recommended as essential for ensuring that globalisation works in favour of gender equality rather than against it.

True (2012) explored the multifaceted relationship between globalisation, gender, and economic security, highlighting how the integration of national economies into global markets creates both opportunities and vulnerabilities for women. The objective of the study was to assess whether global economic governance and liberalisation policies have been effective in promoting women's economic empowerment or have instead reinforced existing inequalities. Drawing on feminist political economy frameworks, True examined evidence from multiple regions, including Southeast Asia, the Pacific, and parts of Africa, focusing on the gendered nature of labour markets, trade agreements, and financial flows. The findings indicated that while women's labour force participation has increased in export-oriented sectors and global service industries, these gains are often undermined by persistent wage disparities, precarious work conditions, and the erosion of labour protections due to deregulation. True also emphasised that women in rural areas and those working in informal economies are frequently excluded from the benefits of globalisation, as they lack access to infrastructure, credit, and legal protection. Furthermore, the study argued that global crises, such as financial downturns, disproportionately impact women, pushing them back into informal or unpaid work. True concluded that advancing women's economic empowerment in a globalised context requires embedding gender-sensitive measures into trade policies, strengthening labour rights, and investing in social infrastructure, particularly in care services, to reduce the gendered burden of unpaid work.

Razavi (2012) examined the critical role of social policy in promoting women's economic empowerment during the age of globalisation, arguing that market integration alone is insufficient without supportive welfare systems and labour protections. The study aimed to analyse how different welfare regimes and policy frameworks influence women's ability to access, retain, and benefit from economic opportunities in globalised labour markets. Using comparative case

studies from Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa, and East Asia, Razavi evaluated the interaction between trade liberalisation, labour market reforms, and social protection measures such as maternity benefits, childcare services, and income support. The findings revealed that countries with stronger social protection systems were more successful in translating women's increased labour market participation into sustainable empowerment outcomes. In contrast, where neoliberal reforms dismantled public services and weakened labour regulations, women were pushed into informal, low-paid, and insecure work, with limited prospects for advancement. The study highlighted that unpaid care work remained a major barrier to women's economic engagement, as globalisation had not significantly altered the gendered division of labour in households. Razavi concluded that for globalisation to deliver genuine empowerment, governments must integrate gender equality objectives into macroeconomic policies, expand access to affordable care services, and ensure that labour market institutions uphold decent work standards. She argued that the intersection of social policy and economic policy is where the most transformative change for women's empowerment can occur.

Kabeer (1999) examined the concept of women's empowerment in the context of globalisation, emphasizing the shift from traditional development approaches to a more inclusive framework that integrates gender perspectives. Her study highlighted that economic empowerment is not merely about women's access to income-generating opportunities, but also about control over resources, decision-making power, and the ability to influence social and economic policies that affect their lives. Kabeer argued that globalisation has created both opportunities and challenges for women: while it has expanded access to global markets, education, and technology, it has also intensified inequalities due to the dominance of neoliberal economic policies. Through case studies from South Asia, she demonstrated that women's participation in export-oriented industries often provides short-term income benefits, but without structural changes in labour rights, these gains remain fragile. The study concluded that women's economic empowerment in the age of globalisation requires a holistic approach that addresses socio-cultural barriers, strengthens legal frameworks, and promotes equitable participation in the global economy.

Stromquist (2014) examined how globalization reshapes women's education, skill formation, and labour-market opportunities, arguing that human-capital development is central to turning global economic integration into lasting empowerment for women. The study set out to investigate whether increased access to education and training in a globalizing economy translates into substantive gains in women's labour-market status and decision-making power, or whether systemic barriers—such as occupational segregation, discriminatory hiring practices, and unequal care burdens—undermine those gains. Drawing on a mixed-methods approach that combined cross-national education and labour-force statistics with qualitative interviews from education policy actors and women workers in Latin America and South Asia, the research found that while expanding educational attainment among women improved their prospects for entering formal employment and higher-skilled occupations, the translation of education into better jobs was mediated by labour-market structures and social norms. In contexts where labour markets were flexible but lacked protections, educated women often found themselves in precarious or underutilized positions; in contrast, countries that paired education policy with active labour-market programs, affirmative hiring practices, and investments in care infrastructure saw stronger returns to women's schooling in terms of wages, job stability, and leadership roles. Stromquist concluded that policies must connect education to gender-responsive labour-market interventions—including career counselling, mentorship, and anti-discrimination enforcement—while also addressing unpaid care responsibilities, so that increased human capital becomes a real tool of economic empowerment rather than merely a statistic of attainment.

Methodology (approach and limitations)

This is a conceptual, policy-oriented paper synthesizing theoretical insights and broad empirical patterns from comparative studies. The approach combines:

- Review and synthesis of mainstream conceptual debates about gender, labour, and globalization.
- Analysis of common pathways through which global economic processes influence women's economic roles.
- Policy analysis drawing on established best practices.

Limitations: The paper does not present new primary data and therefore does not quantify impacts for specific countries or groups. The generalized nature of the analysis means context specificity (e.g., region, legal regime, cultural norms) requires further country-level study.

Analysis: Pathways of impact

1. Employment and labour market outcomes

Globalisation has both expanded and reshaped employment for women. Export-oriented manufacturing often absorbs large numbers of female workers, providing incomes and exposure to formal workplaces. Similarly, the global services sector and digital platform economy offer new work forms. However, women remain concentrated in low-paid, low-security jobs, and vertical segregation limits access to managerial positions. Precarious contracts, piece-rate pay, and lack of social protections shape the quality of these jobs.

2. Entrepreneurship and access to markets

Open trade and cross-border digital platforms can lower entry barriers for female entrepreneurs by providing larger markets and new distribution channels. Yet access to startup capital, networks, and market information remains uneven. Gender biases in finance and investor networks can restrict women's ability to scale businesses. Public procurement and export promotion programs often fail to incorporate gender-responsive measures, limiting women-owned firms' growth.

3. Access to finance and assets

Financial inclusion technologies (mobile banking, digital wallets) offer promising avenues for women to access savings, credit, and insurance. Microfinance has historically targeted women successfully, but concerns exist about loan sizes, sustainability, and whether credit alone produces empowerment without complementary supports. Property and inheritance rights are crucial: where women lack secure rights to land and collateral, their access to formal credit and capacity to invest is constrained.

4. Care economy and time poverty

Globalisation's gains are mediated by unpaid household and care work, disproportionately borne by women. Without affordable childcare, parental leave, or flexible working arrangements, women face time poverty that restricts economic participation. Migration of female caregivers (domestic workers, nurses) also creates transnational care chains with gendered consequences for both sending and receiving societies.

5. Social norms, legal frameworks, and bargaining power

Cultural norms about gender roles influence whether women can take advantage of new economic forms. Legal discrimination — in marriage, work, property rights, and inheritance — limits women's agency. Global governance can spur reform through conventions and conditionalities, but domestic political will and enforcement determine real change.

6. Risks: exploitation, precariousness, and digital divide

While global markets open opportunities, they also create risks: exploitative labour conditions, human trafficking in supply chains, wage suppression, and algorithmic discrimination in digital work platforms. The digital divide—unequal access to devices, connectivity, and digital skills—can leave many women excluded from online opportunities.

Policy and institutional responses

Macro and labour-market policies

- Promote decent work standards in trade and investment policies: integrate labour rights and gender clauses in trade agreements and preferential procurement.
- Enforce workplace equalities: sex-disaggregated labour inspections, anti-discrimination enforcement, and incentives for firms promoting gender balance in leadership.
- Support transitions from informal to formal employment with simplified registration and social security portability.

Social infrastructure and care policies

- Invest in universal, affordable childcare and eldercare to reduce time poverty.
- Promote family-friendly regulations: paid parental leave, flexible work arrangements, and social protection for informal workers.

Finance, entrepreneurship, and skills

- Expand gender-responsive financial products: collateral substitutes, credit guarantee schemes for women entrepreneurs, and investor networks for female-led startups.
- Offer targeted business development services and digital skills training, especially in STEM and digital entrepreneurship.
- Use procurement policies to favour women-owned enterprises and facilitate their linkages to GVCs.

Legal and institutional reforms

- Ensure equal property and inheritance rights and strengthen enforcement.
- Remove legal barriers to women's mobility and employment.
- Strengthen data systems to gather sex-disaggregated indicators for policy targeting and monitoring.

International cooperation and corporate responsibility

- Use trade and investment frameworks to incentivize gender-sensitive practices in multinational firms and supply chains.
- Promote corporate due diligence and transparent reporting on labor conditions and gender parity.
- Support international programs that build capacity for gender-inclusive trade and provide technical assistance.

Discussion: Toward a holistic empowerment strategy

Women's economic empowerment in the age of globalisation requires integrated strategies that combine market access with protective social policies, legal reform, and cultural change. Market liberalization without complementary

investments can deepen inequality; conversely, well-designed policy bundles can enable women not only to participate in global markets but to gain agency, asset control, and voice.

Context matters: country-specific trajectories depend on industrial structure, demographic profiles, governance capacity, and existing social norms. Policies should therefore be evidence-based, locally tailored, and participatory—engaging women’s organizations and workers themselves in design and monitoring.

Conclusion and recommendations

Globalisation presents both promise and peril for women’s economic empowerment. To realize the promise, stakeholders must act across multiple fronts:

1. Mainstream gender in trade and investment policy, ensuring labour standards and gender impact assessments.
2. Invest in care infrastructure and family-friendly labour policies to address time poverty.
3. Expand gender-responsive finance, skills development, and digital inclusion programs.
4. Reform discriminatory laws and strengthen property and inheritance rights.
5. Require corporate transparency and responsible practices across global supply chains.
6. Build robust sex-disaggregated data systems and invest in monitoring and evaluation.

When markets are coupled with strong social institutions and an active state that protects rights and reduces vulnerabilities, globalisation can become a vehicle for inclusive growth that empowers women economically and expands their freedoms. Without such measures, integration risks reproducing and amplifying existing gender inequalities.

Suggested next steps for research and practice

- Conduct country-level empirical studies tracking the effects of specific trade agreements, FDI inflows, or digital platform penetration on women’s wages, job quality, and entrepreneurship outcomes.
- Evaluate the impact of care infrastructure investments on female labour force participation using quasi-experimental designs.
- Explore the gendered effects of automation and AI on future work, with attention to reskilling programs.
- Strengthen partnerships between policy makers, private sector, and women’s organizations to pilot gender-responsive supply chain interventions.

1. Global Value Chains and Female Employment

Early scholarship highlighted how export-oriented industrialization—particularly in sectors like textiles, electronics, and agribusiness—has often provided large-scale formal employment opportunities for women in developing countries. Classic case studies from East and Southeast Asia showed that female labor force participation rose as women entered factories supplying global markets. However, later critiques emphasized that although these jobs brought income, they were often characterized by low wages, high turnover, and limited upward mobility. Moreover, vertical and horizontal occupational segregation remained, with women concentrated in assembly-level positions and rarely promoted into supervisory roles.

2. Digital Globalization and Platform Work

The rise of the digital economy created new possibilities for remote work and micro-entrepreneurship for women, particularly in freelance, gig, and online-selling platforms. These offer flexibility, location independence, and often bypass traditional gatekeepers. Yet, the literature warns of a “gig-ification” of work: algorithmic management, unstable income, lack of social protection, and digital literacy gaps that disproportionately affect women—especially those with caregiving duties.

3. Access to Finance, Microfinance, and Financial Inclusion

Microfinance has long been considered a transformative tool for women’s financial inclusion—a way to start small businesses and gain autonomy. Studies have documented improvements in household welfare and women’s decision-making in some contexts. Yet critical voices point out limits: small loan sizes, high interest rates, over-indebtedness, and the fact that credit alone doesn’t necessarily translate into empowerment without complementary supports (training, market access, legal rights). More recent literature highlights the transformative potential of mobile banking, digital wallets, and fintech, which can lower transaction costs and increase reach—but still face gender gaps in uptake due to digital literacy, regulatory barriers, and social constraints.

4. Care Economy, Time Poverty, and Gender Norms

Global economic integration does little to alleviate unpaid care burdens unless complementary policies are in place. Feminist economists argue that without public investment in childcare, eldercare, and flexible work arrangements, women remain time-poor and unable to capitalize on new economic opportunities. Empirical work shows that in societies with strong gender norms around caregiving, women are less likely to join formal labor markets—even when jobs are available.

5. Legal Rights, Property, and Institutional Constraints

Legal and institutional inequality—such as restrictions on land ownership, inheritance, mobility, or work—remain prevalent in many globalizing societies. Feminist legal scholars have documented how even where formal legal equality exists, enforcement is weak, and customary practices often prevail. Without secure rights to assets like land or collateral, women face barriers in accessing credit and investment. Gender-sensitive legal reform is thus crucial for translating economic opportunity into real empowerment.

6. Intersectionality and Vulnerability

Contemporary literature increasingly emphasizes that the experiences of globalization vary widely by race, ethnicity, class, rural/urban location, and disability. Women at multiple marginal margins—such as ethnic minority, migrant, or low-caste women—often bear the brunt of exploitation and exclusion from global markets. Intersectional analysis reveals that policy interventions must be tailored and attentive to overlapping forms of disadvantage.

Summary: Converging Insights from the Literature

- **Opportunities:** Globalization expands market access, job possibilities, entrepreneurship platforms, and financial inclusion—especially via digital tools.
- **Constraints:** These opportunities are uneven and moderated by occupational segregation, precarity, care burdens, legal inequality, and overlapping social disadvantages.
- **Policy Imperative:** Genuine empowerment demands:
 - Strong social policies (childcare, flexible work, social protection).
 - Legal reforms (property rights, non-discrimination).
 - Supportive services (training, market access, network-building).
 - Intersectional, context-sensitive approaches.

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