

Economic Development and Women's Empowerment: Theory from the Comparison of Two Case Studies in China and Its Application in the Middle East and North Africa

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Abstract

It is well known that women are in a subordinate and inferior position compared to men in many aspects of social life, and “women’s empowerment” is one of the most concerning issues in the current international society. From a worldwide point of view, the statuses of women are quite different across various areas, but regions with good economic conditions seem to do better in women’s empowerment. Therefore, the main purpose of this article is to explore the relationship between economic development and women’s progress. By comparing two individual Chinese provinces, this article finds that economic development plays a central role in improving women’s status. This argument could also be applied to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) context.

Keywords: women’s empowerment in China, economic development, Middle East and North Africa

1. Introduction

Women’s empowerment is a theme that many scholars and policymakers are interested in and attach importance to. According to the UN Women (2023), economic empowerment is central to achieving gender equality. Hence regions with better records on the status of women are likely to be regions that are doing better economically, and economic development may play an important role in the progress of women’s rights. This essay will explore this hypothesis about the relationship between economic factors and women’s empowerment by comparing two provinces in China (Shanxi and Zhejiang) and extend the findings drawn by this comparison to the context of the MENA. But before beginning, this paper will first define what we mean by “women’s empowerment” and briefly introduce the status quo of women in China.

The European Institute for Gender Equality (2023) has defined “women’s empowerment” as the process by which women gain the power to determine their own choices and lives. In other words, “women’s empowerment” requires the improvement of the status of women in every aspect of social life, such as economic, political, and cultural. Since the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, China has made significant progress in women’s empowerment: Economically, the number of women employed in China in 2017 reached 340 million, doubled that of 1978 (Information Office of the State Council of China, 2019). Politically, female members of the Chinese Communist Party (the ruling party of China) in 2018 accounted for 27.2% of total party members, which increased by 16.7% over 1956 (ibid.). Educationally, the illiteracy rate of Chinese women over 15 dropped from

90% before 1949 to 7.3% in 2017, a historic achievement (ibid.). However, there are also still many unsolved problems in the empowerment of women in China: Firstly, the gender income gap in China is getting wider in both urban and rural areas (Liu, Li & Yang, 2014). The average income of urban women decreased from 77.5% of men’s in 1990 to 67.3% in 2010, while this is more serious in rural areas, where the average income of women decreased from 79% of men’s in 1990 to 56% in 2010 (ibid.). Secondly, the level of Chinese women’s political participation is still low.

On the one hand, the proportion of women at all levels of leadership is far lower than that of men; on the other hand, female political officials hold fewer principal posts and more deputy posts (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2019). Thirdly, the time Chinese women spend on unpaid work such as housework per week is about three times more than that of men. Hence they have far less free time than men (Liu, Li & Yang, 2014).

It should be noted that although the current literature on women’s empowerment in China provides many insightful general points, few pay attention to the differences in women’s status between regions within the country. There are great differences in the status of women between different Chinese provinces. This is why this essay will take a provincial or sub-national level.

The paper will proceed as follows. In the sections entitled “The Case Study A: Shanxi Province” and “The Case Study B: Zhejiang Province,” this paper will describe the economic conditions and development of women’s status in these two provinces, respectively, to show their similarities and differences. In the “Case Studies Analysis”

section, this paper will present the data by comparing the different variables to prove the importance of economic factors in women's empowerment. Hence, this section lays out the logic and mechanism of the central argument, which underlies the relationship between economic development and women's progress. In the argument, this paper will comprehensively explain how economics could help women's progress. Then in the section entitled "Application of the Argument in MENA," this paper will apply the theory drawn by the comparison into the context of MENA. Therefore, the main purpose of this paper is to learn what role economics plays in women's progress in the context of China by examining and comparing what is going on in two individual provinces so that it helps us better understand women's empowerment in other parts of the world, such as MENA.

The Case Study A: Shanxi Province:

Shanxi is an inland province located in the middle of northern China. The economy of Shanxi is often at the lower-middle level among 31 provinces and municipalities in China's mainland. In 2021, its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) ranked 20th, and its Per Capita GDP ranked 17th (Statista, 2022). For industrial structure although Shanxi's industrial structure has been continuously optimized and adjusted – its tertiary industry (service industry) has developed steadily, the economy of Shanxi is still mainly based on the secondary industry (manufacturing industry) (Shanxi Provincial Bureau of Statistics, 2022). In 2021, the proportions of the primary (agriculture), secondary and tertiary industries in Shanxi's GDP were 5.7%, 49.6%, and 44.7%, respectively (*ibid.*). For educational conditions, although the educational level of Shanxi's population is increasing, it is one of the few provinces in China whose primary school enrolment rate has not reached 100% (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2019). In addition, China is a country with a long traditional history. Shanxi was a main developed area of economy, politics, and culture in the north of ancient China. But due to the later southward shift of China's economic center and the closeness of Shanxi's topography and geographical location, the people in Shanxi are relatively conservative and tend to be more influenced by traditional culture (Jia, 2014).

For women's empowerment, although the status of women in Shanxi is continuously improving, the progress is relatively slow compared with most other Chinese provinces. Firstly, women in Shanxi have a relatively low level of political participation. For example, women accounted for only 32.5% of all people who have or have held political positions in Shanxi (Jia, 2014). Secondly, there is a clear income gap between men and women in Shanxi; the average income of working women in urban and rural areas was 73.3% and 45% of that of men, respectively (*ibid.*). Thirdly, gender inequality in

education in Shanxi is also obvious. The illiteracy rate of its men over 15 years old was 1.48%, while that of women was 3.72% (Jia, 2014). Finally, as mentioned before, Shanxi is a province where people are relatively more influenced by traditional culture. Hence the majority of people in Shanxi have deep-rooted patriarchal thoughts. For instance, more than 63% of people agreed that "the husband's career development is more important than the wife's" (Jia, 2014).

The Case Study B: Zhejiang Province:

Zhejiang is a coastal province located in the south-eastern China. The economy of Zhejiang has always been at the top level among all Chinese provinces. In 2021, its GDP ranked 4th and its Per Capita GDP ranked 6th (Statista, 2022). For industrial structure, before the 1980s, Zhejiang was an underdeveloped province with agriculture as its main industry (Zhao, 2002). But since China's economic reform and opening up in 1978, Zhejiang has completed economic restructuring by vigorously developing a non-public and market economy, and then a large number of non-agricultural corporate enterprises have emerged; all of these have led to the rapid development of Zhejiang's economy from an underdeveloped agricultural province to an economically developed province. This surprising rapid development of the Zhejiang economy has been called the "Zhejiang Phenomenon" (Zhao, 2002). In 2021, the proportions of the primary, secondary, and tertiary industries in Zhejiang's GDP were 3.0%, 42.4%, and 54.6%, respectively (Zhejiang Provincial Bureau of Statistics, 2022). For educational conditions, the educational level of Zhejiang's population is also in the top class among all Chinese provinces. In 2020, the population with primary education and above accounted for 90.64% of the total population, which clearly shows the high educational level of Zhejiang (Zhejiang Provincial Bureau of Statistics, 2022).

The status of women in Zhejiang has also made great progress in improving its economic condition. Firstly, in 2020, 60% of the political departments in Zhejiang had women in their leadership (Zhejiang Provincial Bureau of Statistics, 2021). Secondly, the proportion of female senior technical personnel in public economic enterprises of Zhejiang increased from 39.5% in 2010 to 46.1% in 2020 (*ibid.*). Thirdly, female students in colleges and universities in Zhejiang accounted for more than half in 2020, reaching 52.8% (*ibid.*). Finally, although Zhejiang was also a province where people were highly influenced by traditional patriarchal thoughts in the past, with the progress of the economy and education, the people of Zhejiang are becoming more open-minded. For example, more than 83% of Zhejiang women disagreed that the "husband should have a higher social position than the wife" (Gao, 2004).

Case Studies Analysis:

These two case studies show that both the economic conditions and women's empowerment in Zhejiang are better than those in Shanxi. Hence economic development of one region seems to play a significant role in promoting the status of its women. In this section, this paper will demonstrate this hypothesis by comparing the data of different variables in the two provinces and explaining the mechanism of how economic development could lead to women's progress.

Regarding "economic development," this includes not only the growth of total economic output but also the transformation and optimization of industrial structure and the improvement of social life, which usually refers to the popularization and development of education (He & Wu, 2015). Therefore, GDP (and Per Capita GDP), industrial structure, and educational level are the three main indicators of economic development. Then this paper will compare these three indicators in Zhejiang and Shanxi and further explain how each promotes women's progress.

Economic Variable 1: GDP and Per Capita GDP

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Shanxi	1448.43 billion	1595.81 billion	1696.16 billion	1783.56 billion	2287.04 billion
Zhejiang	5240.31 billion	5800.28 billion	6246.20 billion	6468.91 billion	7404.08 billion

Figure 1: GDP of Shanxi and Zhejiang between 2017 and 2021 in CNY

(Source: <https://ceidata.cei.cn/>)

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Shanxi	41242	45517	48469	51051	64821
Zhejiang	85612	93230	98770	100738	113032

Figure 2: Per Capita GDP of Shanxi and Zhejiang between 2017 and 2021 in CNY

(Source: <https://www.ceidata.com/en>)

Economic Variable 2: Industrial Structure

As mentioned before, economic development is always accompanied by upgrading industrial structure, which mainly refers to the development of the tertiary industry. Women often tend to have comparative advantages in the tertiary industries, such as the service industry, and the remuneration of the tertiary industry is generally higher than that of the primary and secondary industries (He & Wu, 2015). Hence the transformation of industrial structure could increase women's income by promoting their participation in non-agricultural employment with better returns. Moreover, the primary industry is characterized by strong dependence, small scope of activities, and a slow flow of information (Jia, 2014). Therefore, female workers engaged in the primary industry are likely to be restricted by many factors, such as few opportunities to get in touch with the outside world and difficulty adapting to the new societal changes. The secondary industry could narrow the gap between men and women. Engaging in the highly socialized secondary industry could help women broaden their horizons and

The first step in the improvement of the status of women is to liberate women from the family and return to the economic field (Jia, 2014). Suppose women are always in a marginal position in the economic field because of the poor economic condition of their living areas. In that case, they can't improve their social status, and gender equality is just empty talk. Economic development is hence a prerequisite for the promotion of the economic status of its women. At the same time, GDP and Per Capita GDP are the most important indicators to measure the economic condition and developmental level. GDP represents a country or region's economic size and affluence level, and Per Capita GDP reflects the living and income conditions of the people within the country or region.

From Figure 1 and Figure 2, we can see that Zhejiang's GDP and Per Capita GDP were always higher than Shanxi's from 2017 to 2021; Zhejiang thus has better basic conditions than Shanxi to promote the status of women.

achieve economic independence, and it also positively impacts establishing social relations for women (Jia, 2014). The service nature of the tertiary industry requires workers to interact with more different groups of people and information (ibid.) Thus women can be exposed to more open-minded gender attitudes and thoughts. In addition, the development of tertiary industries, such as the scientific, technological, and communication industries, is an inevitable trend today. Engaging in this highly professional industry can better help improve women's economic status, achieve economic independence and enhance their self-confidence and self-worth. Therefore, it can be seen that if the industrial structure of a region is mainly based on the tertiary industry, then the region has a greater advantage in improving women's rights and status. From Figure 3, we can see that the proportion of tertiary industry in the GDP of Zhejiang in 2021 was nearly 10% higher than that of Shanxi. Hence it is easier for Zhejiang to progress in women's empowerment than Shanxi.

	Primary Industry	Secondary Industry	Tertiary Industry
Shanxi	5.7%	49.6%	44.7%
Zhejiang	3.0%	42.4%	54.6%

Figure 3: Proportions of Primary Industry, Secondary Industry, and Tertiary Industry in GDP of Shanxi and Zhejiang in 2021

Source: http://tjj.shanxi.gov.cn/sjjd/sjxx/202210/t20221008_7230245.shtml
http://tjj.zj.gov.cn/art/2022/2/24/art_1229129205_4883213.html

Economic Variable 3: Educational Level

As the main way to acquire knowledge, increase ability and improve cognitive level, education is the most important method to improve the overall quality of women (Jia, 2014). The higher the level of education in a region, the more opportunities for its women to accept the advanced culture, and the less they are influenced by traditional culture (such as the traditional idea that men are superior to women), which could greatly help women to establish independent personality and equal gender concept. Women who have received higher education have the quality of self-reliance, self-confidence, and self-strength; they can devote themselves to their careers and are less dependent on men. The improvement of female educational level because of economic development could also greatly increase women's chances of finding decent jobs and thus reduce the gender gap between men and women in the labor market (He & Wu, 2015). Finally, the better economic status of women will also give them more confidence to participate in political activities (Jia, 2014). All of these show the importance of education.

Although the population of Zhejiang is nearly twice that of Shanxi, Zhejiang has achieved 100% primary school enrollment, and Shanxi has not yet (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2019). This reflects that Zhejiang has done better than Shanxi in popularizing basic education.

Therefore, it can be seen from the above comparisons that Zhejiang is better than Shanxi in the three main indicators of economic development. Then this paper will compare two important indicators of women's empowerment in the two provinces to finally prove the significant effect of economic development on the promotion of the status of women.

Outcome Variable 1: Social Security for Women

Women's social security reflects women's living standards (Jia, 2014). Nearly half of the people who receive basic endowment insurance in Zhejiang were women (49.2%), compared with less than 40% in Shanxi (35.1%) (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2019). This shows that Zhejiang is better than Shanxi in women's social security.

Outcome Variable 2: Attitudes Towards Women

In 2010, 62.5% of women in Shanxi agreed with the

idea that "making money is the responsibility of men and housework is the responsibility of women" (Jia, 2014). But in Zhejiang, as early as 2000, this number was 53% (Gao, 2004). This shows that traditional thoughts influence women in Zhejiang more than in Shanxi.

After comparing the two provinces' economic development and women's empowerment indicators, we can now conclude that **"The economic conditions of a region determine the status of its women. Regions with good GDP and Per Capita GDP growth, the rapid development of the tertiary industry, and high educational level tend to have great records on women's empowerment"**.

Application of the Argument in MENA:

MENA has serious gender inequality; men generally do not treat women equally. Firstly, almost all MENA countries have a gap between men and women in labor force participation. For example, in Tunisia, which is always recognized as the most progressive country in MENA, only 25% of women participate in the labor force, while this number for men is 71% (Masoud, Jamal & Nugent, 2016). Secondly, the political participation of women in MENA is also very low. On average, only 18% of legislative seats are occupied by women in MENA (Masoud, Jamal & Nugent, 2016). Thirdly, gender discrimination is reflected in the attitudes of most people in MENA countries towards women. For example, 71% of people in Sudan believe that "men are better than women at political leadership" (Arab Barometer, 2022).

Above is a brief introduction to women's status in MENA. It can be seen that there are differences in women's empowerment between individual countries in MENA. Moreover, according to the current literature about the empowerment of women in MENA, there are two main explanations in terms of why the status of women is serious in this region: One is about the cultural barrier; the most common religion in MENA is Islam, which is often seen as the main source of the subordination of women. Another explanation is the structural barrier, mainly related to economic developments such as income, transportation, and healthcare. The previous comparison of 2 Chinese provinces has demonstrated the importance of economic factors on women's progress. Therefore,

it is suggested to study women's empowerment in the context of MENA by focusing on economic development and comparing countries doing good economically with countries that are not doing good economically to try to explain the variations in the status of women.

2. Conclusion:

This paper has explored the relationship between economic development and women's empowerment by comparing two Chinese provinces (Shanxi and Zhejiang). The central finding is: Regions with better economic conditions on GDP growth, industrial structure, and educational level tend to promote women's status. Then this paper applies this argument in the context of MENA. But there is a limitation: this paper has not deeply analyzed the condition of women in MENA. It has briefly introduced what is happening in MENA and suggested that others study the status of women in this region. Hopefully, the finding and arguments in this paper could help MENA scholars and policymakers to better investigate and understand the issue of women's empowerment.

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