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The role of women in empowering economic prosperity through domestic credit in the Southern African Development Community (SADC)

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Abstract

Purpose — This study examines the symbiotic relationship between women's representation in parliament and domestic credit, and the direct and indirect pathways by which these factors influence economic prosperity in Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries.

Methods — Panel data from 16 SADC countries over the period 1997 -2022 are analysed using Generalised Method of Moments (GMM) and Generalised Structural Equation Modelling (GSEM), with a focus on the examination of interaction effects and diminishing returns of women's parliamentary representation and domestic credit on economic prosperity.

Findings — The results indicate that women's representation in parliament has a significant positive effect on economic prosperity, with the effect strengthened by domestic credit. Domestic credit also contributes indirectly to economic growth by enhancing women's economic influence.

Implication — These findings provide important insights for policymakers, highlighting the need for a balanced strategy that promotes both women's political participation and financial inclusion while avoiding potential economic imbalances.

Originality — This study contributes to the literature by integrating gender, finance, and economic growth within the SADC context and by uncovering indirect pathways through which domestic credit affects economic prosperity via women's political empowerment.

Keywords — Women in Parliament; Domestic Credit; Economic Prosperity; Financial Inclusion; SADC

Introduction

The symbiotic relationship between women and credit has been a key factor in the longevity and prosperity of societies and empires throughout history (De Nicola, 2022; De Soto, 2019; Harris, 2019; Hudson, 2020; Keller, 2022; Ma et al., 2023). Perhaps one of the most vivid historical examples of the intertwining of the two elements is Queen Isabella's support of Christopher Columbus's voyage, which contributed to the expansion of the Spanish Empire, among other factors (Milam, 2019). When credit and women work in unison, it is possible to achieve a fair and balanced allocation of power, resources and opportunities in society (Perunovic, 2023; Wee, 2021; Yadav, 2023). It might seem easy to bring women and credit together, but certain countries around

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the world face obstacles in advancing gender equality and financial inclusion. This issue has multiple dimensions and impacts both developed and developing countries in diverse ways (Fernández et al., 2021; Ojo, 2023). Even though credit and women have greatly influenced the prosperity of ancient empires, modern African societies have not yet fully utilised these elements to their full potential. Furthermore, although women in Africa make up the vast majority of the population, their contribution to the continent's gross domestic product accounts for only 33% (Moodley et al., 2019).

Despite their little contribution towards GDP, women achieve that level of contribution while facing obstacles in the financial infrastructure. Research has shown that African women lack adequate access to credit, leaving them with limited financing options (Adewusi, 2021; Vandi et al., 2022). Lack of adequate access to credit hinders women's effective participation in enhancing the economic prosperity of the societies they live in. At this juncture, it seems quite plausible to ponder that African economic prosperity can be enhanced by improving women's access to credit and promoting their empowerment across all facets of daily undertakings in society. Improvement of women's access to credit could be essential for harnessing their economic potential (Agarwala et al., 2022). Women can use money obtained through domestic credit to invest in businesses, education, and healthcare, ultimately fostering broader economic growth and stability.

Perhaps one of the key strategies for promoting women is to increase their representation in decision-making roles within the legislative branch of government (Bency, 2018; Gao & Mahutga, 2023). Scholars have shown that higher female representation in parliament improves governance and reduces corruption, both of which are beneficial for economic growth (Gao & Mahutga, 2023; Tusalem, 2022). This idea is particularly relevant in African economies since some of the studies have shown that women in parliament are more likely to advocate for policies that promote financial inclusion, reduce income inequality, and support female entrepreneurship, which are critical for unlocking the economic potential of any society (Goltz et al., 2015; Wang & Naveed, 2021). By encouraging women to take leadership roles, a country can foster creativity in decision-making through diversity of viewpoints and leadership abilities, which may affect economic growth (Arnold & Gammage, 2019; Khushk et al., 2023). Africa is making significant strides in empowering women, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, where the number of women in parliaments has increased in recent years. However, the progress of women legislators varies significantly across the continent (Adams & Wylie, 2020; Mojapelo & Faku, 2020).

Economic prosperity refers to the degree of material economic well-being of the local population (Mueller, 2021). In this study, per capita GDP was used to gauge economic prosperity. GDP per capita was selected as a measure of economic prosperity due to its ability to reflect economic growth, living standards, productivity, and group well-being (Bhide & Khanolkar, 2020; Kaminitz, 2023; Rodriguez-Avi, 2022). Per capita GDP as a measure of economic prosperity has certain drawbacks. There are studies that point out its shortcomings due of factors such as income inequality, variations in the cost of living, and the effects of exchange rates, which are not fully reflected in per capita GDP (Dědeček & Dudzich, 2022; Mohanty, 2019; Tasnim, 2021). Despite its shortcomings, the ultimatum was reached to use it as a measure of economic prosperity due to its ease of data availability and its indirect relationship to living standards, thus providing a dependable indicator of economic progress and material well-being.

Gender development theory is an important framework for understanding economic development, with a specific emphasis on how gender dynamics shape economic outcomes and opportunities (Dow, 2020). For a society to achieve its full economic potential, women must be included in economic activities (Guerrero et al., 2023). However, in many societies, women are not fully utilised in economic activities, thus limiting the potential of economies (Buterin et al., 2023). With gender-based analysis, it is possible to facilitate the creation of economic policies that are better tailored to address the distinct requirements and obstacles faced by women, thereby fostering their utilisation in economic growth (Onaran et al., 2022). Conversely, financial inclusion theory argues that by increasing access to financial services for all members of society, a nation can reduce poverty, boost socio-economic development, and, in turn, stimulate economic growth (Ahmad & Yadav, 2022). Inclusive economic growth and sustainable development are thought to be

influenced by financial inclusion (Van et al., 2021). The integration offers a comprehensive framework for analysing the effect of women's empowerment, through politics, on economic prosperity and how that effect can be enhanced by domestic credit (Tripathi & Rajeev, 2023). Increased domestic credit will enable women to consume goods and invest in businesses, thereby contributing to economic growth (Fadil El-Turkey, 2021).

Some of the inconsistencies highlight the regional variations in the effect of women's representation in parliament towards economic growth, such as Mirziyoyeva and Salahodjaev (2023), and Altuzarra et al. (2021), while the former found that female empowerment in the public sector has a positive effect on economic growth, the latter discovered that it boosted economic growth in all developing nations but adversely affected countries in sub-Saharan Africa. Khan et al. (2020) and Murari (2017) found that domestic financing boosts economic growth, whereas Cecchetti and Kharroubi (2019) concluded that increased domestic credit may encourage riskier, less productive investments, ultimately lowering worker productivity and negatively affecting economic growth. Ozili et al. (2023) found that an increase in domestic credit to the private sector in Nigeria increases GDP per capita when the legal system is strong, but not during crises, further suggesting that financial policies, no matter how good, can still be affected by legal frameworks and economic stability. Lastly, prior research highlighted the possibility of the presence of conflicting outputs regarding short-term vs long-term effects. Mohamed (2022) noted that women's participation in parliament boosted Sudan's economy in the short term, but argued that the long-term effect may require additional scrutiny. Given these developments, it was necessary to assess the effect of women's political representation on the economic prosperity of Southern African Development Community (SADC) member states.

This paper contributes to the current body of knowledge by examining a mechanism that has received limited attention in prior research. Previous studies have generally examined the separate impacts of women's empowerment and domestic credit on economic outcomes; however, our methodology integrates both perspectives to capture their inherent interdependence across various areas and time frames. It incorporates gender and development Theory, financial Inclusion Theory, and the principles of diminishing marginal utility into a cohesive analytical framework. This integrated approach enhances value by connecting the literature on gender studies, financial inclusion, and economic development, while providing context-specific insights for SADC economies that have not been thoroughly examined previously.

Methods

An investigation of the connection between women legislators, domestic credit, and economic prosperity was conducted across 16 SADC countries. SADC was established in 1992 to advance sustainable development and economic integration throughout Southern Africa (SADC, 2022). Its main goals include facilitating commerce, advancing infrastructure development, promoting economic integration, and enhancing peace and security among its member states. The community consists of 16 members: Angola, Botswana, Comoros, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eswatini, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. The structure of the organisation consists of the SADC Secretariat, the Council of Ministers, the Summit of Heads of State or Government, and standing committees. SADC offers fertile ground for exploring and addressing socio-economic concerns, owing to its dynamic economic integration initiatives and the distinct challenges and opportunities it presents (Muntschick, 2020).

The study period covered the years from 1997 to 2022; these years were selected due to the limited availability of data on the percentage of women in parliament prior to 1997. The data used in this study were obtained from the World Bank database. The annual GDP per capita in current US dollars, used as a proxy for economic prosperity, was the dependent variable. The proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments and domestic credit was an independent variable. The selection of these variables aligns with previous research by various authors (Baskaran et al., 2024; Cecchetti & Kharroubi, 2019; Khan et al., 2020; Mohamed, 2022). A vector of control variables was incorporated to isolate the independent variables and mitigate potential bias from

omitted-variable effects, thereby enhancing the coherence of the analysis of the effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable. Inflation rate and the percentage of the rural population with access to electricity were included as control variables in our analysis, given compelling evidence of significant relationships between these variables and gross domestic product, as reported by other researchers (Edward, 2023; Mwale & Allexander, 2022).

Theoretically, economic prosperity as proxied by GDP per capita can be expressed as a function of several main factors, namely:

$$GDPpercapita_{it} = f(perlwomen_{it}, domcred_{it}, ruralelectrper_{it}, inflation_{it}) \quad (1)$$

Based on the discussion presented in this paper and the theoretical framework outlined in Equation 1, and to capture the dynamic nature of the relationship, the following empirical model is specified and estimated using the Generalised Method of Moments (GMM).

$$GDPpercapita_{it} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 L.GDPpercapita_{it-1} + \beta_2 perlwomen_{it} + \beta_3 domcred_{it} + \beta_4 ruralelectrper_{it} + \beta_5 inflation_{it} + \gamma_i + \varepsilon_{it} \quad (2)$$

Equation (2) captures the relationship between economic prosperity, proxied by $GDPpercapita_{it}$, and the key explanatory variables, namely women's representation ($perlwomen_{it}$) and domestic credit ($domcred_{it}$), along with control variables including rural electrification ($ruralelectrper_{it}$) and inflation ($inflation_{it}$). The term $L.GDPpercapita_{it-1}$ represents the one-period lag of GDP per capita, which is incorporated to account for the dynamic models. The parameters β are to be estimated; i denotes the country, t denotes time, represents unobserved effects unique to each country and reflect traits that do not change over time, and ε represents the error term. A detailed description of all variables and their measurements is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Variable Description

Variable name	Symbol	Measurement	Units
Gross Domestic Product per Capita.	$GDPpercapita$	Natural logarithm of GDP per capita.	US dollars
Proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments.	$perlwomen$	Quotient of the total number of seats occupied by women divided by the total number of seats in parliament.	Percentage
Domestic credit to the private sector.	$domcred$	Quotient of the total value of domestic credit divided by the country's GDP.	Percentage
Percentage of Rural populations with access to electricity.	$ruralelectrper$	A quotient of the number of rural households with electricity divided by the total number of rural households.	Percentage
Inflation	$inflation$	Percentage change in the Consumer Price Index (CPI) over a period of one year, measured via the Laspeyres formula.	Index

The missing data were determined to be missing at random and thus the multiple imputation regression technique was used to create missing values, this technique was used due to its ability to preserve correlations between variables by using observed data to forecast missing values, it conform with maximum likelihood estimate techniques and manage several forms of missing data patterns (Si et al., 2023; Young & Johnson, 2015; Yu et al., 2020). The one-step Generalised Method of Moments estimator and Generalised Structural Equation Modelling (GSEM) were employed to obtain reliable empirical results and address endogeneity in panel data. These techniques were selected for their proven ability to handle endogeneity and multilevel panel data analysis (Carrasco & Nayihouba, 2024; Joo et al., 2022). For the purpose of direct and indirect estimation effects, the GSEM framework presented in Figure 1 was used. This framework sought to determine whether it is women in parliament that indirectly influence GDP per capita through domestic credit, or domestic Credit that indirectly influences GDP per capita through women in parliament.

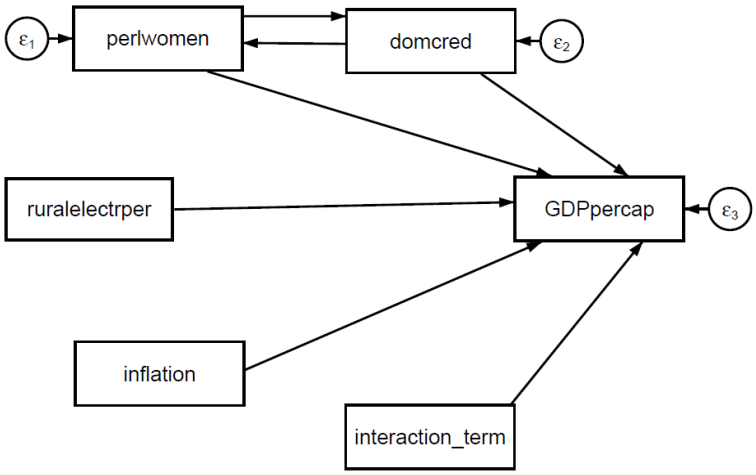

Figure 1. Generalised Structural Equation Model pathways

Results and Discussion

Descriptive statistics of all variables used in this study are presented in Table 2. These statistics provide an initial overview of the data distribution, including the mean, standard deviation, minimum, and maximum. This result indicates the characteristics and variations of the data before further empirical analysis is carried out.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
GDPpercapita	393	3053.56	3481.37	187.86	16851.12
perlwomen	393	20.19	11.92	0.00	46.75
domcred	393	28.37	31.39	1.10	142.42
ruralelectrper	393	30.93	34.30	0.00	100.00
inflation	393	13.96	41.78	-72.00	557.20

From Table 2, it can be observed that the average inflation rate in SADC during the period of the study was approximately 14%, with a standard deviation of 41.776, indicating a large variation in inflation rates across periods. Such a huge variation is a result of certain countries observing an abnormal rate of inflation, such as Zimbabwe. The summary also indicates that some countries experienced a period of deflation, with the lowest inflation rate of -72%. This rate of deflation can be as problematic as high inflation, since it signals economic contraction or depression in certain countries at certain times. The average proportion of women in parliament was roughly 20.2% across regions, with some countries reaching an astounding ratio of almost 47% of legislators being women, while others, during certain periods, had no female members of parliament at all. The standard deviation of 11.19 indicates significant variation in the proportion of women in parliament across SADC member states. Domestic credit to the private sector roughly stood at an average value of 28.4% of GDP; the high standard deviation of 31.393 indicates notable variations throughout the nations in the SADC countries.

The minimum value of 1.09 and the maximum value of 142 further signify the impeccable range of variations of the percentage of GDP issued to the private sector in the form of credit. This could be a result of an extreme financial event such as the 2007 – 2008 financial crisis. The percentage of the rural population with access to electricity stood at an average value of 31%; nevertheless, there is a significant variation, as indicated by the wide standard deviation of 34.299. It can clearly be seen from the minimum and maximum values that, at certain periods, some countries' rural populations had no access to electricity at all, while some achieved a 100% electricity access rate for their entire rural populations, resulting in a large variation. GDP per capita had an average of 3,053.56 US dollars and a standard deviation of 3,481.369 US dollars. As this value is used as a proxy for economic prosperity, it indicates a significant level of economic inequality

amongst the SADC member states. The GDP per capita ranged from 187.857 US dollars to a high value of 16,851.12 US dollars. The notable variations in GDP per capita, proportion of women in parliament, domestic credit to the private sector, inflation rates and rural electrification demonstrate the considerable economic and social heterogeneity throughout the SADC area.

Table 3. Variance Inflation Factor (VIF)

	VIF	1/VIF
domcred	1.87	0.54
ruralelectrper	1.69	0.59
perlwomen	1.35	0.74
inflation	1.03	0.97
Mean VIF	1.49	

Table 3 presents the outcome of the variance inflation factor test, which showed tolerable and acceptable value ranges for multicollinearity. Multicollinearity can lead to unstable and inflated coefficients, making it difficult to identify the true effect of each predictor (Shrestha, 2020). Low VIF values indicate a more consistent model with more reliable coefficient estimates. The highest VIF value of 1.8 is below the problematic threshold. The mean VIF of 1.485 indicates very low, tolerable levels of multicollinearity among the independent variables.

Table 4. Generalised Method of Moment Estimation Results

Dependent Variable: GDPpercapita					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
L.GDPpercapita	0.98***	0.92***	0.67***	0.64***	0.66***
	(0.01)	(0.03)	(0.05)	(0.07)	(0.06)
perlwomen	-0.90	44.17*	51.29**	46.10**	18.79
	(5.70)	(23.50)	(21.48)	(22.58)	(22.72)
domcred	2.32	14.13***	16.04	10.79	-17.60***
	(2.69)	(14.13)	(20.22)	(17.38)	(5.79)
perlwomen x domcred		-1.19***	-0.87*	-0.74*	
		(0.40)	(0.50)	(0.44)	
ruralelectrper			49.24***	52.34***	55.53***
			(7.55)	(8.55)	(8.62)
inflation				-11.81	-15.55
				(15.10)	(19.35)
Observations	174	174	174	174	174
Hansen J P-value	0.94	0.86	0.92	0.85	0.87
AR(2)	0.34	0.27	0.12	0.11	0.12

Robust standard errors in parentheses. ***, **, and * denote significance at the 1%, 5%, and 10% levels, respectively.

Table 4 presents the results of the GMM analysis. The Second-order autocorrelation test and the Hansen J-test verify the legitimacy of the instruments used. Due to the small sample size and to avoid model overfitting, the one-step GMM was opted. The outcome of the GMM model (4) with the interaction term and with all control variables indicated that the percentage of women in parliament had a positive effect on the GDP per capita. Each percentage increase in women in parliament resulted in a 46.10 USD increase in GDP per capita; these results were similar to those of (Baskaran et al., 2024; Mirziyoyeva & Salahodjaev, 2023) and contradicted those of (Altuzarra et al., 2021). The results also showed that in the absence of an interaction term, the level of domestic credit has a negative effect on GDP per capita; a percentage increase in the domestic credit led to a reduction of 17.60 USD in per capita GDP. These results are similar to those of (Cecchetti & Kharroubi, 2019) and contradict those of (Murari, 2017).

These results are fascinating, and they reveal how inclusive governance can transform financial development into economic growth. When examined independently, domestic credit

seems to impact GDP per capita negatively, which could be the result of misallocation of resources, inadequate institutions, and restricted absorptive ability that hinder the productive utilisation of credit (Altuzarra et al., 2021). However, when women's representation in parliament is incorporated as an interaction term, the impact of domestic credit transitions from negative to positive, highlighting the influence of female legislators in enhancing governance, mitigating corruption, and promoting policies that allocate financial resources to education, health, and family welfare (Mirziyoyeva & Salahodjaev, 2023). From the results, it is plausible to argue that women's political participation of women increases credit productivity and transforms hindrances to growth into catalysts for progress. These findings align with gender and development theory, which emphasises that gender inequality hinders economic advancement and that the empowerment of women in decision-making bodies enhances resource distribution and sustainable development results (Silva & Klasen, 2021).

The influence of women in parliament on GDP per capita is rendered insignificant in the absence of the interaction term, suggesting that the predominance of female lawmakers alone is not a necessary condition for economic growth (Dahlum et al., 2022; Khorsheed, 2020). The presence of women in parliament must be coupled with financial inclusion to yield growth (Wani et al., 2024). Augmenting domestic credit increases the financial resources available to women, enabling them to allocate these funds towards productive endeavours that elevate production and GDP per capita. An increased proportion of women in parliament indicates a policy landscape that is likely to be inclusive and conducive to women's financial access. The mitigation of the adverse impact of domestic credit through the interaction term further emphasises that the interdependent relationship between women and credit ultimately ensures that financial resources are utilised productively, benefiting the whole economy.

However, on closer inspection, these results also suggest a diminishing symbiotic effect of women in parliament on domestic credit, as indicated by the negative coefficient of the interaction term. To our knowledge, this is the first evidence that the interaction between women's parliamentary representation and domestic credit exhibits a diminishing symbiotic effect. This observation is in line with the theory of diminishing returns. In this case, we argue that a combination of women in parliament and domestic credit will positively affect GDP per capita up to a certain level, after which their unitary contribution to per Capita GDP will begin to decline, as the negative interaction term offsets the marginal gains from their joint increase. This suggests that there should be an optimum level and balance of the combination of women in parliament and domestic credit. The joint growth of the two items beyond a certain threshold will yield a smaller and even negative contribution to GDP per capita.

The results of the GMM table also show that the effect of women in parliament is significant when the control variables are included, indicating that for female legislators to have any impact on GDP per capita, the existence of favourable economic conditions and suitable infrastructure is necessary. Similar results have been observed by various authors (Khorsheed, 2020; Mirziyoyeva & Salahodjaev, 2023). Domestic credit is significant and has a positive effect in the model without controls, but with an interaction term, suggesting that domestic credit can be adequately used by women, ceteris paribus, and hence stimulate the effect on a country's economic prosperity. Enhanced credit and women's empowerment are crucial for enhanced per capita GDP. Rural electrification positively affects GDP per capita across all models in which it appears, and the presence of an interaction term between women in parliament and domestic credit enhances the effect of rural electrification on the model containing only control variables. Greater representation of women in parliament strengthens the legitimacy of gender-responsive policymaking, ultimately leading to more effective gender-focused interventions in the presence of robust infrastructure, such as rural electrification (Amuakwa-Mensah & Surry, 2022).

The results of the Generalised Structural Modelling are presented in Table 5. The GSEM results indicate that women in parliament have a positive direct effect on GDP per capita, whereas the level of domestic credit has no significant direct effect. In the GSEM model without the interaction term, a percentage increase of women's representation in parliament contributed to an increase of 38.09 USD increase in per capita GDP. The presence of the interaction term enhances

the effect of women in parliament by raising their contribution towards per capita GDP from 38.09 to 53.82 USD. These outcomes are similar to those of one-step GMM, indicating robustness. The effect of the interaction term is negative and significant, albeit small, with every unit increase in the interaction term leading to a reduction of -0.54 USD in GDP per capita. These results are also consistent with the results of one-step GMM. Similar arguments, as presented above when discussing the alignment of one-step GMM results with the theories used in this model, continue to hold for the GSEM model. Credit availability enables women to leverage their role in the labour force by utilising capital for entrepreneurship, business expansion, and productivity gains, thereby amplifying their overall contribution to the economy (Balasubramanian & Kuppusamy, 2020).

Table 5. Generalised Structural Equation Modelling Estimation Results

	I	II
Direct effect		
Perlwomen	38.090***	53.833***
	(11.092)	(11.812)
Domcred	-1.175	15.741
	(5.892)	(10.948)
Ruralelectrper	79.133***	77.404***
	(6.558)	(6.669)
Inflation	-1.148	-0.974
	(2.191)	(2.347)
perlwomen x domcred		-0.548**
		(0.253)
Indirect effects		
perlwomen	0.788	11.255*
Pathway : perlwomen → domcred → per capita GDP	(3.292)	(6.704)
Domcred	2.539***	4.440***
Pathway : domcred → perlwomen → per capita GDP	(0.823)	(1.611)

Notes: Robust standard errors in parentheses. ***, **, and * denote significance at the 1%, 5%, and 10% levels, respectively.

The GSEM findings demonstrate the indirect mechanism by which domestic credit fosters economic growth in conjunction with women's parliamentary representation. In the baseline model, devoid of the interaction term, domestic credit demonstrated a robust positive indirect effect on GDP per capita: each 1 percentage point increase in credit availability was associated with a USD 2.54 increase in per capita GDP, whereas the independent indirect effect of women in parliament was negligible. Upon the introduction of the interaction term, the indirect effect of credit increased to USD 4.40, signifying that the efficacy of credit in enhancing GDP is augmented in environments where women hold parliamentary positions. The presence of women in parliament facilitates the conversion of credit availability into economic growth. These findings emphasise that credit availability is essential for prosperity, but its effect is much enhanced when women are empowered to shape decisions.

These findings are novel, as they shift the focus from the well-studied direct benefits of women's parliamentary representation or domestic credit on growth to their indirect and interaction effects. Even though Global evidence suggests that women's political empowerment can improve economic outcomes when combined with enabling factors, many of them focus on enablers such as civil liberties, civil society participation, and institutional quality (Al-Qahtani et al., 2020; Dahlum et al., 2022). Studies on how credit availability amplifies the effect of women's representation on growth are scarce, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa. Previous research in the region has examined the influence of women's representation and the availability of domestic credit on economic growth, without assessing whether institutional representation is the factor that enables the efficient transfer of credit into economic prosperity (Altuzarra et al., 2021; Jemiluyi & Yinusa, 2021; Mba Fokwa, 2025). Our findings reveal an underexplored mechanism whereby credit

availability and women's legislative presence boost growth, offering a new perspective on how gender and finance shape development trajectories in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Conclusion

Women and credit will forever remain an essential component of the prosperity of any society. SADC countries should strive to gain all the possible benefits from the combination of these variables. There is potential to uncover new avenues for utilising women and credit to enhance economic prosperity by providing women with access to credit and promoting their inclusion in the political arena, which affects the economies of those countries. It is essential to note that the utilisation of both factors should be undertaken with a sound understanding of the decreasing returns and potential economic imbalances that may result from the interaction of the said elements. There is a need to ensure that the combined path taken brings economic success to the region in a way that is both sustainable and inclusive. The approach should be well-balanced and tailored to the specific circumstances of the nation.

The aftermath of the findings of this study can be quite handy for policymakers in the SADC region and beyond. The study has demonstrated that improving women's representation in parliament is a key step toward fully exploiting their economic potential. It has also demonstrated that their economic potential can be leveraged through domestic credit, thereby enhancing their effect on per capita GDP. On the other hand, it also highlights the need for policymakers to be cognizant of the decreasing returns associated with these factors. A well-rounded strategy should be employed amongst SADC countries that takes into account and carefully controls the interplay between the level of domestic credit and women's representation in parliament. The strategies to be employed must be context-specific, since the exact combination and scale of factors may vary depending on the economic and social conditions prevailing in each country in the SADC region.

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Author contribution
All authors contributed to the conception and design of the study, data collection, analysis and interpretation of the results, and the writing of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Use of AI tools declaration
Artificial intelligence tools were used to assist with language editing and to enhance the clarity and readability of the manuscript. The authors remain fully responsible for the content and conclusions of this study.

Conflict of interest
The authors declare that there are no competing interests related to this manuscript.

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