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LEMMA
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SÉMINAIRE

SLAVE-TRADE EXPOSURE AND WOMEN IN LOCAL POLITICS: EVIDENCE FROM MALI - ABLAM APETI

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Abstract:

This paper studies whether a male-biased historical demographic shock can have persistent effects on women's political representation. We combine data on Atlantic slave exports by ethnic homeland with an administrative panel covering all 703 Malian communes over five waves (2006–2020), which records the gender of municipal councillors, mayors and appointed local staff. We find that communes more exposed to the slave trade have more women in local councils. A one standard deviation increase in exposure raises the share of women councillors by 1.7 percentage points, about 20 percent of the pre-reform mean. This gradient holds when exposed communes are compared with unexposed neighbouring communes. It also extends to permanent public servants, who are neither elected nor covered by the gender quota. The gap persists after the 2015 quota, which raised women's representation from 8 to 23 percent across all communes without reducing the historical difference. Moreover, exposure to the male-biased Atlantic trade predicts higher representation today, whereas proximity to the female-biased trans-Saharan trade does not. To interpret these results, we propose a mechanism linking historical demographic shocks to the long-run evolution of gender roles. Male scarcity induces women to enter activities traditionally performed by men, which

increases their visibility in non-traditional roles. Female representation then becomes self-reinforcing, since greater representation raises subsequent female participation, and this generates multiple long-run equilibria. Historical exposure therefore matters through equilibrium selection rather than through permanently different contemporary fundamentals. Our results show that common formal institutions can substantially raise average representation without erasing historically rooted differences across communities.

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