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Gender Diversity and Innovation: The Role of Women's Economic Opportunity in Developing Countries



Policy brief DFID/Tilburg University research: '*Enabling Innovation and Productivity Growth in Low Income Countries*' (EIP-LIC).

<http://www.tilburguniversity.edu/dfid-innovation-and-growth/>



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In the framework of a DFID-funded research project entitled '*Enabling Innovation and Productivity Growth in Low Income Countries (EIP-LIC)*', a team of researchers of Radboud University Nijmegen (The Netherlands) analyzed the relationship between gender diversity in the ownership, management and workforce structure at the firm level and women's economic opportunity at the country level to improve innovation outputs. In present theory, there is an implicit assumption that higher levels of women's economic opportunity at a country level enable firms to better render the benefits gender diversity can bring for innovation. The original working paper is entitled '*Gender Diversity and Innovation: The Role of Women's Economic Opportunity in Developing Countries*' by Daniela Ritter-Hayashi, Patrick Vermeulen and Joris Knobens¹

Research Findings

The research shows that gender diversity at all levels in the organization has a positive effect on innovation in the firms surveyed in low and lower-middle income countries in South Asia, Africa and the Middle East - despite their below-average performance on a world-wide scale of measuring women's economic opportunity. Furthermore, the research illustrates that a country's level of women's economic opportunity plays an important role in the relationship between gender diversity and innovation.

On the one hand, the results put forward that the positive effect of gender diversity on firms' innovation likelihood is amplified with increasingly equal opportunities for women. On the other hand, both gender diversity in the ownership structure and in the overall workforce can have a negative effect on a firm's likelihood to innovate if the firm is operating in a country with very little economic opportunity for women.

It needs to be however pointed out that, extrapolated from this study, gender diversity only has a potential negative effect on innovation in a handful of countries worldwide, ranging at the bottom of the women's economic opportunity ranking (lowest 5 countries for gender diversity in the workforce and lowest 15 countries for gender diversity in the ownership structure).

¹ The paper is accessible at the project's website (<http://www.tilburguniversity.edu/dfid-innovation-and-growth/>)

Policy Implications

Based on the research results, it is essential to acknowledge the value of gender diversity for innovation and to create awareness among managers and employees that innovation emerges and blossoms from gender diversity at the firm level. Government agencies could develop special policies and programs which encourage and support firms in hiring a more gender-balanced workforce, having more female top managers and supporting firms with a gender diverse ownership structure. This could take the form of awareness raising programs explaining the particular benefit of gender diversity for a firm's likelihood to innovate.



Furthermore, the introduction of tax advantages, subsidies or other incentives targeted at increased gender diversity at all hierarchical levels within a firm could be a driver for increased gender balance. Once awareness is raised at the top ranks of firms, it is pivotal that managers initiate a change of attitude and organizational culture top-down, encouraging women to voice their opinion, urging men to value women's viewpoints and knowledge in the innovation process, and reassuring management on the importance of promoting both men and women based on their performance rather than their gender.

It is crucial to encourage increased levels of women's economic opportunity at a country level as a prerequisite for gender diversity to benefit innovation.

Potential avenues are increased access of women to education to decrease the gap in knowledge between men and women. Governments could initiate country-legislation enabling women to better balance family and work demands such as improved childcare as well as maternity and paternity leave. An additional avenue for policy makers is to encourage a social perception of women as being equally valuable members of society like men, with the same rights and obligations.

On a practical level, supporting networking activities through women entrepreneurship associations seems an effective instrument to strengthen women's determination to pursue ambitions. Moreover, establishing programs in which women entrepreneurs lend support to girls on their way of obtaining education can be of advantage. This can take the form of financial support and motivational reinforcement for the girls themselves. Similarly, successful women entrepreneurs can serve as a role model to girls' families, which may be hesitant to invest in their daughters schooling based on traditional gender norms and expectations. Moreover, to change the overall public perception of women entrepreneurs while aiming at a ripple down effect to their immediate surrounding and support system, campaigns celebrating the success of women starting a business can be a further avenue to strengthen their societal position.

This policy brief is the product of a research project funded by the British Department for International Development (DFID) entitled 'Enabling Innovation and Productivity Growth in Low Income Countries' (EIP-LIC). The project is implemented by Tilburg University (The Netherlands) and explores SME-level innovation in Low Income Countries (LICs) and factors that contribute to or limit its diffusion. Data collection and research collaborations take place in 10 African and Asian countries (Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Ghana, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Tanzania, South Africa, Uganda and Vietnam). The policy implications of research are presented in a series of policy briefs, targeted at a broad audience of policy makers within governments, business and development agencies with a view to quantifying research outcomes and promoting evidence-based policy making.