



Different Sight Lines

U.S. economists' views vary by gender, with potential implications for national policymaking

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COMPANIES with female board members routinely outperform competitors whose boards include no women, according to a recent study by the Credit Suisse Research Institute. Growing interest in the subject of gender diversity on corporate boards and in governmental policymaking positions has produced a powerful and expanding literature and generated lively debate about the benefits of gender diversity.

How and why does providing gender balance in decision-making teams enhance group decision making and outcomes? Suggestions abound. Most compelling are the findings of Columbia University psychology professor Katherine Phillips and colleagues (2011), who examined the impact of greater diversity in teams and found that individuals are, on average, likely to do more preparation for any exercise if they know it will involve working with a diverse, rather than a homogenous, group. The researchers explain that a wider range of alternatives are likely to be debated in a diverse group, that diversity encourages people in the majority to think more critically about the issues on which they are working, and that a diverse group will more likely generate better results than a homogenous one.

Gender diversity is now not just an issue of fairness, but also one of performance and outcomes. The question is no longer whether gender diversity matters, but how it can be achieved.

Belief in the benefits of improved gender balance in economic policymaking is predicated, at least in part, on the notion that male and female economists may indeed hold

different views on economic policy—an assertion largely untested until now.

Although studies of the economics profession have shown a fair degree of consensus on a variety of policy questions, the profession's demographics have been changing. Whereas women received only 19.8 percent of U.S. doctorates in economics in 1988, by 2011 women were awarded 34.4 percent of such degrees. Given these changes, gender differences in views on economic policy, if they exist, may begin to have significant implications for policymaking.

Core beliefs

We surveyed a random sample of male and female members of the American Economic Association who received doctoral training in the United States. After controlling for the decade in which subjects received their Ph.D. degrees and type of current employment, our survey found some similarities but also important differences in the views of these economists, breaking along gender lines. In fact, for most questions, gender was the only factor leading to a significant difference of opinion.

Perhaps not surprisingly, our statistical analysis showed a consensus in the views of male and female economists on economic methodology and core principles. Most economists agreed with the notion that individuals are utility maximizers and with the assumption of unlimited wants—two long-standing principles in economic doctrine—and that mathematical modeling should be an important part of economics.



A bit surprising was the finding that economists also agree that research on households should include intra-household decision making. This finding reflects the growing influence of research on household-bargaining models that explicitly recognize the potential for conflicting interests within a household.

Our conclusion? Male and female economists start from the same assumptions about how people behave and how to approach the study of economics, and the views of both groups have evolved to recognize both cooperative and competing interests within the household.

Divergent views

Despite shared academic training and similar views about core precepts and methodology, male and female economists showed significant differences in their support for market solutions rather than government intervention.

Economists as a group typically skew toward market solutions as an efficient means of allocating resources. Yet the male economists in our study were more likely, on average, than were the female economists to see government regulation in both the European Union and the United States as excessive. The men were also more likely to agree that parents should be given education vouchers for either public or private schools rather than having to rely on government-funded public schools.

We found rigorous statistical evidence of differences in the views of male and female economists regarding redistribution and other so-called compassion issues. Women showed far more support for making the distribution of income in the United States more equal and the U.S. tax structure more progressive. They also favored linking import openness to labor standards of export partners and were more likely to agree with the statement that employers in the United States should be required to provide health insurance to their full-time employees.

Overall, our findings are consistent with studies identifying gender gaps in the general population on compassion issues: aid to the poor, unemployed, and sick. But our results reveal a great deal about the economics profession as well. Women surveyed were more likely to accept government intervention to address social inequities, such as inadequate access to health care and poor labor standards, while male economists assigned greater weight to the dangers of government intervention, such as the potential for an increase in the minimum wage to raise unemployment rates among unskilled workers.

Most startling were the strongly divergent views among male and female economists surveyed on questions of gender equity in general and in the profession itself. Women were far more likely than men to disagree with the statement that job opportunities for men and women in the United States are approximately equal. When asked about the gender wage gap, men were far more likely than women to believe that it is explained by differences in human capital (training and skills) and voluntary occupational choices.

When evaluating gender equity in the economics profession, male economists were decidedly more sanguine

than women. Asked if graduate education in the United States favors men over women, women were far more likely to believe that it does. Similarly divergent were the views of male and female economists about opportunities for

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economics faculty members. Women were far less likely to view the opportunities for women in economics as commensurate with those of their male colleagues.

Economic policy

Growing numbers of female economists will help shape policy debates in the years to come. Not only will their views—the fact that they are less willing than their male peers to see inequities as inevitable and more likely to explore alternative mechanisms to shape public policy—affect policy. Women economists are also likely to change the dynamics of how we arrive at policy outcomes. The increasing presence of women economists is likely to contribute to an environment in which individuals expect differences in perspectives and work harder to assimilate different ideas.

As former U.S. President Bill Clinton said, “We make the best decisions when we talk to people who know things we don’t and understand things differently.” Ultimately, we hope our differences will result in better policy. ■

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