

PRESS RELEASE

April 22, 2021

Representation Not Sufficient for Promoting Gender Diversity, Study Says

Representation of women and minorities in groups, which choose organisation's leaders on its own is not sufficient to support gender diversity unless the organisational culture changes, a recently published study showed.

A team of scientists around Nicola Persico at the Northwestern University and Bernhard Ganglmair at the University of Mannheim and the Leibniz Centre for European Economic Research (ZEW) analysed the Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF), an open standards organization, which develops and promotes voluntary Internet standards.

Top operational leaders in the IETF are appointed by a ten-member selection committee called NomCom. Its members are randomly selected each year from a pool of volunteers.

"In the case of the IETF, more women were appointed only after cultural norms supporting diversity and inclusion became more salient", the scientists stated.

"Our results are highly relevant for the current discussion about a quota for women in political parties or the boardrooms of companies. They show how important it is to pay attention to cultural norms," Ganglmair said. "Higher participation of women must go hand in hand with changes in the entire organization."

During the first part of the study, in the years 2005 to 2011, increases in female representation of the committee resulted in the appointment of even fewer women. It needed a cultural regime change in the years 2012 to 2020 so that female appointments increased.

Culture is referred to holistic, informal norms, both societal and organisation-specific, i.e., public speeches, codes of conduct, and other activities that are technically unconnected with the appointment process, but whose effect is to change members' attitudes towards certain gender stereotypes.

"There is strong evidence that IETF culture changed around 2012 because of both active efforts from inside the organisation and a broader societal shift in attitudes regarding gender diversity and inclusion," according to the authors. "This evidence indicates that representation is not enough to select gender diversity," they added.

The cultural change regarding diversity can be observed in the share of emails containing the word "diversity" of all IETF emails, which shot up to 1 percent in 2013 and stabilised around 0.2 percent thereafter, more than twice the pre-2010 average.

At the same time, societal interest in gender composition jumped around 2011-12 as reflected in Google search data. "The causal effect of adding a woman [to the selection committee] after the shift in informal norms is an 11.9 percentage point increase in female appointments, compared to a 6.2 percentage point decrease beforehand," the study revealed.

Given that the IETF's decisions have enormous technological and financial implications, many companies seek to place employees in leadership roles. IETF was, inter alia, significantly involved in developing the HTTP protocol and the e-mail protocol POP3.

PRESS RELEASE

“Without IETF’s contribution to the development of these protocols, the Internet as we know it today would not exist. Within this context, underrepresentation of women in IETF leadership is highly socially relevant,” the authors concluded.

Prof. Dr. Bernhard Ganglmair is member of the Collaborative Research Center Transregio 224 EPoS. The presented discussion paper is a publication without peer review of the Collaborative Research Center Transregio 224 EPoS. Click [here](#) for the full discussion paper. Or have a look at the [list of all discussion papers](#) of the research group.

Established in 2018, the Collaborative Research Center Transregio 224 EPoS, a cooperation of the universities Bonn and Mannheim, is a long-term research institution funded by the German Research Foundation (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, DFG). EPoS addresses three key societal challenges: how to promote equality of opportunity; how to regulate markets in light of the internationalization and digitalization of economic activity; and how to safeguard the stability of the financial system.

For further information and interview requests, please contact the author of the study:

Prof. Dr. Bernhard Ganglmair
Department of Economics
University of Mannheim
Phone: +49 621 1235-304
Email: ganglmair@uni-mannheim.de

CRC TR 224 Office, Ture Petersenn
phone | +49 228 7362184
e-mail | crctr224@uni-bonn.de

www.crctr224.de