

Shorter Notice

Asian Development Bank (ADB). *How Inclusive is Inclusive Business for Women—Examples from Asia and Latin America.* Manila, Philippines: Asian Development Bank. 2016. x+60 pages.

Asian Development Bank's report on improving the economic situation of women examines the potential of inclusive business for empowering women. The report defines inclusive business as a business activity in the private-sector, with systematic impact to the benefit of low income communities. This report evaluates 104 Asian Development Bank (ADB), Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), and International Finance Corporation (IFC) inclusive business investments which were active in 2015. Of these 104 inclusive business investments, this report examines 13 of these companies in depth about how they contribute to women's economic empowerment. The evaluation shows that there are only a few inclusive business models that directly promote gender empowerment. The report emphasises that although there are many initiatives promoting gender-related issues, these projects remain small in scale and have negligible impact. At the same time, it is argued in the report that the inclusive business has great potential in helping women improve their capacity to bring about economic change for themselves. It has great potential to address the need to expand women's access to goods, services, and income opportunities by involving women in a company's main activities. The most prominent feature of the inclusive business is that it can enhance women's empowerment in respectable ways. According to the report there are two ways in which inclusive business may enhance women's empowerment. First, women may be implicit beneficiaries of inclusive business models, that is, inclusive businesses provide services or products in areas in which women are typically at a disadvantage. In such areas, inclusive businesses often create tangible benefits for women. The second way involves women as explicit beneficiaries. Inclusive business models with this goal in mind may take measures to target women specifically in creating economic opportunity. The initial evidence suggests that inclusive businesses are bringing positive change to women's lives. Compared to mainstream business, inclusive businesses benefit women by paying higher wages or prices and taking care of health and safety concerns, among other things. Highlighting the hurdles in making inclusive business a success, the report argues that the companies which ignore the barriers faced by women in society often overburden them and run the risk of failure. These barriers, as well as their associated issues for companies, are rooted in underlying gender norms. The report identifies four broad constraints that are pervasive throughout the developing world for companies engaging low income women in their value chains. These constraints are women's multiple

commitments, gender-based expectations, insufficiently protected rights and agency, and a lack of skills. The report shows that the companies, featured in this report, pursue a variety of solutions to these constraints. Some companies establish support systems for women to cope with the burden of multiple commitments, others collaborate with nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), and still others work with families and communities or build women's skills. Furthermore, the report rightly highlights that women's economic empowerment is a complex social process that demands the determination and collaboration of all societal actors. The private sector can do much more to scale up inclusive businesses and strengthen gender-inclusiveness. Notwithstanding the positive role of the private sector, the report warns that the private sector alone cannot achieve the desired results and the public sector must also demonstrate clear commitment to strengthening women economically by establishing the legal framework for inclusive business and introducing policies that help women lift themselves out of poverty. Development partners can also play a role in coordinating and strengthening the conditions in which women inclusive businesses can grow. They can also act as financiers of smaller businesses, particularly since the more innovative women-inclusive initiatives often come from social enterprises. In addition, academic and research institutions need to focus more on identifying practical examples of what works and what fails. Put simply, the private sector, public sector, development partners, and academic and research institutions must work in close collaboration to realise the potential of inclusive business for women's empowerment. In sum, this report is a valuable contribution to understanding intricacies involved in making inclusive businesses, which aim at women empowerment. [*Omer Siddique*].