Abstract This study examines whether and how female board directors may affect corporate social performance (CSP) by drawing on social role theory and feminist ethics literature. The empirical analysis, based on a sample of 126 firms drawn from the *S&P500* group of companies over a 5-year period, suggests that board gender diversity (BGD) significantly affects CSP. However, this impact depends on the social performance metric under investigation. In particular, more gender diverse boards exert stronger influence on CSP metrics focusing on 'negative' business practices, such as the 'concerns' dimension of the *Kinder Lydenberg Domini*, *Inc*. (KLD) ratings*.* This is because such CSP ratings have the potential to induce higher levels of 'empathic caring', which strongly appeals to female directors. Hence, this study reveals further hidden connections in the BGD–CSP link which have important implications for managers, nongovernmental organisations and socially responsible investors.

- Content Type Journal Article
- Pages 1-13
- DOI 10.1007/s10551-012-1293-7
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- Journal Journal of Business Ethics
- Online ISSN 1573-0697
- Print ISSN 0167-4544

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