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The Influence of Quotas on Promoting Women in Decision Making Positions

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Abstract

Gender discrimination is keeping women from participating in politics on equal footing with men. To modify this, several countries and stakeholders have implemented gender quotas to promote women's representation in political institutions. However, time has proven that quotas are double-edged weapons with both negative and positive effects. This paper seeks to analyze the pitfalls of gender quotas and will introduce potential solutions that can increase the productivity of quotas.

Keywords: Quotas, politics, gender, discrimination, equality, equity, women, governments, policies, stakeholders

Introduction

Angela Merkel, one of the most authoritative female leaders in the world, has proven that women can manage decision-making positions. Her foreign policies, and her economic and energy reform propositions have helped her to reach the top of Forbes' list eight times (Conolly, 2015). And yet, it is apparent that women are still underestimated when it comes to their political competencies. The underrepresentation of women in politics is a global problem. In fact, only 7.8% of the CEOs of the largest companies and corporations in Europe are women, while only 31 women held executive roles across these organizations (Catalyst, 2022). As a result,

governments, boards, and administrations are dominated by men. While gender-related associations, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and other stakeholders have worked toward breaking the existing glass ceiling for women in leadership roles and in politics, they have mainly focused on implementing quotas, which can be controversial, hard to implement, and in some cases, have mixed results. In general, gender quotas exist in three major forms. The first one is known as a “reserved seat quota,” which allocates a specific number of places for women in parliaments. The second type is a “legislative quota,” which mandates that a set number of a political party’s nominees are women. The third and final type of quota is known as a “voluntary party quota,” where parties themselves are responsible for ensuring that women are equally represented among their candidates (Bush, 2011). While some argue that quotas are vital for preserving spots for women in parliaments and in politics more broadly, opponents claim that they are unmeritocratic and inefficient (Robbins & Thomas, 2018). These disagreements over the worth of gender quota systems highlight the need for further investigation and research. Accordingly, this policy paper will investigate some of the reasons why quotas might be ineffective. The paper draws on a rigorous literature review and current evidence from gender quotas around the world. The paper concludes with a discussion about how to navigate the disagreements over the effectiveness of gender quotas and offers several recommendations.

Why Gender Quotas Might Not Work as Well as We Hope

Traditional critiques of gender quota systems revolve around two primary issues, first, that quota systems are unmeritocratic, and second, that they “work against” the ideological basis of electoral democracy—in other words, that people are “forced” to vote for these candidates, and political parties are “forced” to select women candidates. The critique that

gender quota systems are unmeritocratic is problematic for several reasons. First, the criteria used to define “merit” are uncertain and overgeneralized (Murray, 2015). Further, a “neutral” list of objective qualities that a desired candidate should have does not exist. Rather, the definition of merit changes depending on voter communities and preferences. Finally, the implementation of a quota system is not shown to affect the merit of those who get elected, as many leaders with low educational or skill levels, those who are corrupt, and those who have cheated the system for any number of reasons are frequently still able to enter politics irrespective of whether a gender quota system exists.

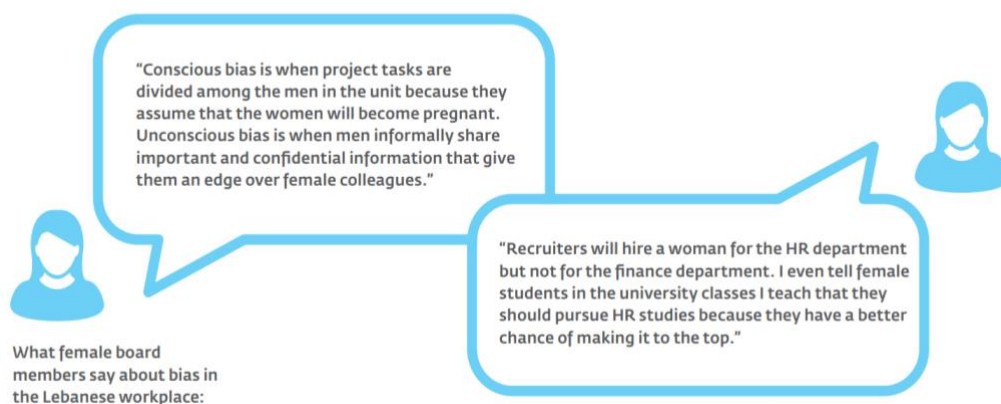
Additionally, rivals of gender quotas sometimes base their arguments on inaccurate historical and political perspectives. For example, quotas, especially in Europe, receive great opposition and antagonism because political leaders claim that this policy was adopted by the Soviets, even though this myth has long been disproven by research on the subject (Dahlerup, 2004). Another argument used to contradict the usage of quotas is that they may violate the historical norms and values of a country. Yet, such an argument is not convincing. For example, there are millions of acts that are performed daily that go against the norms and values of society. Further, these norms and values change, and have changed historically. In this case, the implementation of a gender quota system might be a change for the better.

More serious concerns about the efficacy of gender quotas revolve around traditional political culture, and how newly elected women leaders would fare in this environment. For example, some critics claim that gender quotas might further stigmatize women because those already in positions of political power would feel that women were “forcibly” placed into politics in a way that challenges the status quo. This would only exacerbate current forms of gender

stereotyping and discrimination, as women are already underestimated and undervalued in the political arena. For instance, a woman who was placed on an industry's board only for publicity and because of a quota might be viewed unprofessionally and therefore further marginalized, which could lead to damaging psychological outcomes (He & Kaplan, 2017). They will also suffer from the negative treatment she receives from her male coworkers, who believe that they were "forced" to cooperate with her because of their company's publicity stunt. Further, psychology suggests that even though male workers might believe in the gender equality agenda, they might be demotivated to collaborate with women when it is imposed on them (He & Kaplan, 2017). Something similar might occur to women members of parliament elected because of a quota system. Relatedly, quotas affect the workplace's general stability. This is because organizations must accommodate to new rules and regulations that might not be welcomed by everybody. From a psychological perspective, this generates internal conflicts, for what is seen as a gain for some (women) is perceived as a loss for many others (men).

Figure 1

The challenges faced by women in boards and industries, even after the implementation of different gender quotas



Note. Image taken from International Finance Corporation [IFC], 2019.

Moreover, according to a study conducted by Gender and the Economy (He & Kaplan, 2017), only 5% of the 500 prominent CEOs of 2016 were women, despite the introduction of quotas. Based on these numbers, it is estimated that at least 30 years are needed for women's representation to reach 30% (He & Kaplan, 2017). A few important examples of this slow upward growth can be found in countries that have adopted a gender quota system. For example, the implementation of gender quotas at the municipal level in Spain were shown only to increase the number of women on political party lists. Meanwhile, the number of women that were eventually elected to the position of mayor or into other political positions with decision-making power did not increase. In fact, prior to the introduction of quotas, the percentage of female mayors was equal to 13% in 2003. Twelve years later, this number increased by 6% among the municipalities irrespective of whether the municipality had mandated gender quotas (Bagues & Campa, 2017). Additionally, "reserved seat quotas" implemented in the Arab region (see Figure 2, below) often reserve a minimal number of seats for women candidates, tempering the effects of such gender quotas even further (Welborne, 2010).

Figure 2

Table depicting the inconsiderable representation of Arab women in the political sectors even after the employment of numerous quotas

Table 1 | Arab League Countries with Gender Quotas

Country	Type	Adoption Timeline	Electoral System	Latest Parliamentary Results
Algeria	Political party quotas	2002-	List PR	8%
Djibouti	Reserved seats	2002-	PBV	14%
Egypt	Reserved seats	(1979-1986) 2009-	TRS	2%
Iraq	Legal Candidate quotas	2004-	List PR	26%
Jordan	Reserved seats	2003-	SNTV	12%
Mauritania	Legal Candidate quotas	2006-	TRS	22%
Morocco	Political Party quotas	2002-	List PR	10.8%
Palestine	Legal Candidate quotas	2005-	Parallel	13%
Somalia	Reserved seats	2004-	N.A.	8%
Sudan	Reserved seats	(1973-1984) 2005-	FPTP	25%
Tunisia	Political Party quotas	2004-	Parallel	28%

Both Sudan and Egypt have previously implemented quotas for the time periods indicated in parentheses.

Note. Image taken from Welborne, 2010.

Exploring Alternative Strategies

Strategy 1: Secularization

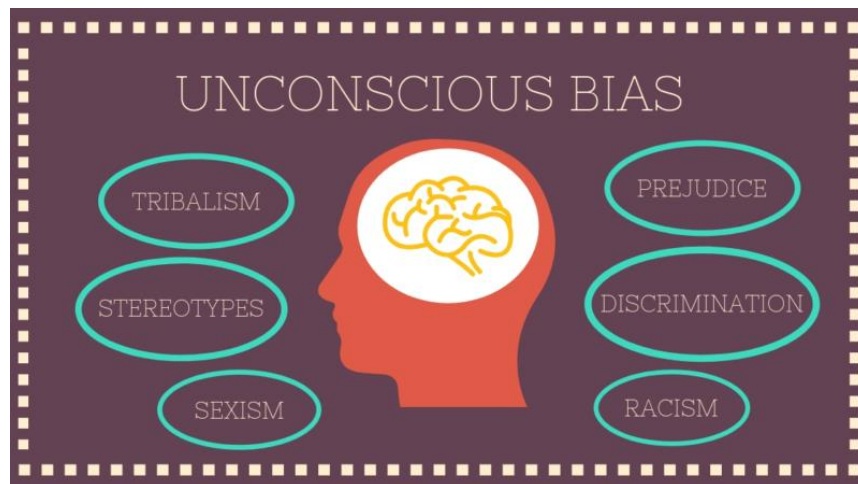
Even though quotas seem unsuccessful in promoting women in decision-making positions, several initiatives can be mobilized to increase the effectiveness of quotas, whether major or minor. One solution proposed to render the employment of quotas more efficient is to promote secularization in countries where religion and politics are closely intertwined (Dahlerup, 2004). This is because the pre-existing norms and traditions embedded within various religious communities might reinforce gender roles and stereotypes, leaving women in a disadvantaged position. This is particularly true in the case of Lebanon, where men are seen as leaders while women are restricted to their gendered roles as “caregivers” and face many barriers that prevent them from entering the political sphere. Implementing a quota system will not sufficiently address this system and the gender discrimination it enforces. Relatedly, imposing

such a major change would not be appreciated or understood by many, which could lead to conflict. Instead, promoting secularization can help to better secure gender equality at the core of society, which can lead to better women's political representation over the long-term.

Strategy 2: Targeting Unconscious Bias

Another suggested strategy to increase the efficacy of quota implementation is the targeting of unconscious biases that contribute to gender inequality (Mishra, 2018). For instance, the prevailing theories that women cannot hold serious leadership positions because of family duties, their responsibilities as wives, or their responsibilities as mothers can and must be amended. To a certain extent, such a solution might succeed in eradicating the negative outcomes of quota application in both the short- and long-term. However, the work of undoing unconscious bias takes years of hard work and effort, making this solution time-consuming even though it is necessary in the fight to get rid of gender inequality (Kuschmider, 2021).

Figure 3
The Different Forms of Unconscious Bias



Note. Image taken from Suarez, 2019.

Strategy 3: Defining Merit-based Criteria

Another strategy includes redefining the credentials, requirements, and qualifications of leadership roles before employing quotas as a way of challenging the idea that quotas are unmeritocratic systems that unfairly promote women (Mishra, 2018). However, finding common denominators between males and females in terms of leadership qualifications and requirements that can satisfy an entire voting community is not plausible. Furthermore, having male and female leaders with identical capabilities would effectively work to keep various other communities out of political leadership. For example, people without access to higher education, poor people, and people who do not have specific credentials will all be kept out of politics, which challenges the core goal of democracy, which is to represent a diverse voter body. In other words, diverse voting communities would not be well-represented with such a list of qualifications and requirements for entering politics. For example, forcing the Lebanese parliament to include the same number of men and women, all with similar educational and cognitive qualifications and experiences, would be disadvantageous. While their similarities might facilitate their ability to work together to address political problems, they might also disregard problems that do not directly affect them. For example, as privileged politicians, they might not feel an urgency to advocate for strong anti-poverty laws even if many of their constituents are in need of such policies. Thus, the decisions of a board or a parliament composed of leaders with identical backgrounds would be controlled by unconscious biases. Therefore, it can be safely concluded that pinpointing the criteria for meritocracy is a double-edged solution, which can have both positive and negative results.

Strategy 4: Strengthening Women's Rights in Everyday Life

A final strategy to increase the effectiveness of quotas is related to the status of women more broadly. If women are not financially, socially, and educationally ready, the implementation of quotas will not work. Accordingly, to stimulate women's participation in the public sphere in general, and in decision-making positions and politics in particular, stronger welfare systems must be developed. Welfare systems can help to ensure the education, training, and employment of women, while orienting them towards being socially and financially independent. As a result, women would be empowered and might more readily exercise their rights to participate in politics and beyond. Moreover, welfare systems assist in housing and childcare, especially in low-income areas. Therefore, what might be a burden on some women and a cause for their lack of participation in multiple fields, such as childcare and family care, will be diminished. According to Orloff (1996), welfare systems applied in 20 different industrialized countries supported the presence of women in economic and political sectors. Therefore, welfare systems can significantly and positively impact quota systems because they support the social rights of women and encourage them to participate in politics and the public sphere.

Recommended Solutions to Render Quotas more Effectual

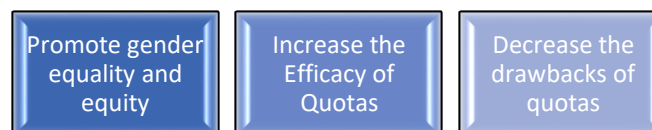
To increase the efficacy of gender quotas, various policies, initiatives, and strategies can be used. First, gender activists and professionals can provide mentorship programs and sessions that teach political leaders about the advantages and disadvantages of quotas. Then, those responsible would get the chance to further understand when and how they should rely on gender quota systems. This way, officials can learn how to properly track the implementation of

gender quotas and can simultaneously implement other policies that can help strengthen women's empowerment in the political sphere.

Additionally, quotas should undergo trial phases and should continuously be studied. For instance, gender quota systems can be implemented in municipal governments and then, based on whether this trial was successful, be subsequently implemented at the national level. For instance, the Spanish electoral quota was first applied on a minor group of participants and was then extended to a larger group (Bagues & Campa, 2017). Thus, quotas can be studied and tried before their use at the national level. This can reduce the potential drawbacks of a gender quota, which can consequently give officials the chance to prevent these problems.

Relatedly, another solution could be the creation of small committees responsible for the development and oversight of gender quotas. For example, if the quota involves the health industry, a committee formed of doctors, pharmacists, and nurses should be the one to decide how it should be applied. Thus, the suggested quota would be tailored to fit the specific context in which it is implemented. Subsequently, this specialization would increase quota efficiency, decrease its unfavorable missteps, and promote equality and equity.

Figure 4
The Advantages of Specialized Quota Committees



Note. Image prepared by author.

Conclusion

Although the aforementioned policies are capable of rendering quotas more efficient, their viability in countries such as Lebanon is still questionable. Real-life examples prove that quotas are inefficient and that women are still relying on “balancing acts” to step over societies’ gender stereotypes to access leadership roles and, once they secure these roles, to flourish therein (Zheng et al., 2018). In Lebanon, women’s rights and feminist advocates have long argued for the use of a gender quota system to guarantee women’s equal representation in parliament. Most recently, ahead of the 2022 parliamentary elections, a proposal was drafted that would reserve 26 seats for women out of the 128, 13 for Muslims and 13 for Christians (Tabbara, 2021). However, the proposal was rejected by parliament, resulting in only 15% women candidates (out of 1,043 registered candidates), and a total of eight women elected to parliament (Houssari, 2022). It is important, therefore, to keep pushing for a gender quota system in the short-term while simultaneously working to implement some of the strategies suggested in the previous sections to remove gender inequality and discrimination that prevents women from entering politics to begin with.

All in all, conflicts related to gender equity, equality, and discrimination are still apparent. On the one hand, gender quotas, which have been implemented since the early 20th century, have positively influenced women’s involvement across different sectors to varying degrees. Yet, their drawbacks suggest that quotas necessitate amendments to render them more effective and beneficial. Thus, the importance of these other policies cannot be understated, as women’s underrepresentation in politics is a major issue plaguing women around the world.

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