



Regional Workshop on The Implementation of Quotas: Asian Experiences

Quotas — A Jump to Equality?
The Need for International Comparisons of the Use of Electoral Quotas to obtain Equal Political Citizenship for Women

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Why the Scandinavian Countries are No Longer a Model

For many years feminist organizations around the world have looked upon the Scandinavian countries, Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Finland, as a model for women's equality. One key factor has been the very high representation that women have obtained in parliaments and local councils in the Scandinavian countries, especially since the 1970s.

Table 1: Percentage of Women in Scandinavian Parliaments Today

Sweden	42% (1998)
 Denmark	38% (2001)
Norway	36% (2001)
Finland	37% (1999)

This extraordinarily high representation, seen in a global perspective, has led to the question: “How did you come that far?” What can we learn from the Scandinavian experience? As Nordic researchers we have tried to answer these questions by pointing to structural changes in these countries such as secularization, the strength of social democratic parties and the development of an extended welfare state, women's entrance into the labour market in large numbers in the 1960s, the educational boom in the 1960s, the electoral system and several other factors. Strategic factors are also seen as important, especially the various strategies used by women's organizations in the Nordic countries in order to raise women's political representation.

I will, however, argue that the Scandinavian experience cannot be considered a model today, because it took 80 years to get that far. Today, the women of the world are not willing to wait that long.

The introduction of electoral quotas is a symbol of women's impatience today and is often an efficient tool for increasing women's representation. A very good example is South Africa, where the introduction of quotas by the African National Congress (ANC) made women's representation in this new democracy jump to a world high level of about 30 per cent.¹

Electoral Quotas

Quotas are very controversial, yet several countries around the world, including such diverse countries as Argentina, Bosnia, France, South Africa, Sweden and Uganda, and have recently introduced gender quotas in public elections. An electoral gender quota system sets up a quantitative prescription for the minimum representation of either sex, e.g. 40 per cent. Sweden's "every second a woman" and "parité" (France, Belgium) are other names for quota systems.

In political life, quotas have often raised vehement debates. Research on quotas so far has tended to concentrate on these debates and on the actual decision-making process. These discursive controversies are also an essential part of the present research project, but, in addition, an emphasis is being placed on the too often neglected aspect of the troublesome implementation of quotas and on the consequences of introducing quotas. From studies of single countries we know that a decision to introduce a requirement of a minimum of 30 per cent of each gender on the electoral lists, for instance, does not automatically lead to women getting 30 per cent of the seats. Thus by comparing the use of quotas in many similar and different political systems, it is possible to highlight whether and under what conditions quotas can be considered an equal policy measure that does contribute to the stated goal, equal political citizenship of women.

Introduction of quotas is always highly controversial and yet the debates are often confused and only understandable if the hidden assumptions about women and women's position are scrutinized. This makes it possible to see why quotas for some are seen as *discrimination and violation of the principle of fairness*, while others consider them *a compensation for structural barriers that prevent fair competition*. The idea of quotas is often in conflict with other notions like the prevailing discourse of fairness and competence, and the idea of individualism. On the other hand, quotas are seen as an efficient measure to reach "real" equality, that is equality of results.

An unclear debate and lack of legitimacy of the claim often leads to problems at the stage of implementation. In an earlier survey of the political parties in the Nordic countries and among women's organizations in the same parties about quotas, the Norwegian labour party stated that it takes three elections to implement a quota system. This is because the party does not throw out a male incumbent MP in order to include a woman.

The results of previous single country studies are quite diverse: from the partial failure of the attempt to introduce women's short lists in a single majority electoral system like England, which nevertheless has shown some positive results,² through the often "minimalistic" compliance with the rules by the political parties in Latin America, which has resulted in small and uneven gains in women's representation in the region³ to the somewhat stigmatizing consequences of reserved seats for women in Uganda.⁴

Research on Women in Politics

Today, we see a worldwide increase in women's representation, but the regional differences are immense (world average 14 per cent)⁵. The international research community has taken a strong



interest in the results of Nordic research, because since the 1970s the representation here has been extraordinarily high by international standards. This has sometimes been attributed to the introduction of quotas.⁶ However, this is not accurate, since quotas in the Nordic countries were introduced *after* women's representation had taken off in the 1970s, and not all Nordic political parties use quotas, mostly parties to the centre and the left. Furthermore, the few Danish parties with quotas abolished the system after just a few years. The Swedish principle of “every second a women” is not even considered a quota system by the general public, even if it is in fact a radical one, demanding, and in many cases leading to, 50 per cent of each sex as the result.

We need more international comparative studies of quota systems and of women in politics in general.⁷ The many empirical single country studies and anthologies of women in politics in the last two decades⁸ have paved the way for new, cross-national comparative research projects.

Research on gender and politics has tried to answer the two most frequently asked questions, which from a research perspective are rather complicated. Firstly, how did this increase in women's representation come about?⁹ Secondly, what difference does it make to have many women in politics?¹⁰ The interaction between the elected women and women's organizations have been seen as important for the performance of female politicians and vice versa.¹¹ One conclusion is especially relevant for the introduction of quotas: that in almost all political systems, no matter what electoral regime, it is the political parties, not the voters, that constitute the real gatekeepers into elected offices. Consequently, the party nomination practices should be kept in focus.¹²

A new trend is also the growing interest in theoretical questions within gender studies, including the study of gender and politics. *The concept of citizenship* has been central to many feminist research projects in recent years, focusing on welfare state development and on the historical connection between political, social and civic citizenship.¹³ The concept of citizenship focuses our attention on comparisons between the political exclusion and inclusion of women and that of other groupings or categories. The new philosophical discussion of *women as a contested category* is also highly relevant for studies of gender and politics, and will be examined later.

The Stockholm University Research Project: “Quotas — A Key to Equality?”

Quotas in politics, the labour market and universities may be seen as an expression of a growing impatience among the supporters of equal political and social citizenship for women, since quotas can lead to a quantitative jump — if implemented. Whether quotas per se lead to a qualitative change, that is to actual empowerment of women, or may even cause a certain stigmatization is an open question which needs further investigation.

There is a clear consensus amongst comparative studies of the representation of women in parliament that quotas make a positive impact on the numbers of women represented. To date, there has been no evaluation of the extent to which the form and efficacy of gender quotas is determined by the model of citizenship and political system operating within particular countries. This project addresses this absence. It seeks to establish whether the precise form and perceived efficacy of quotas depends on the nature of citizenship at a discursive level, and the nature of the political system at an institutional level.

The use of quotas is increasingly influenced by international recommendations and from cross-country inspiration. The international idea of quotas, however, meets very different contexts in individual countries. This meeting is the core of the project. Consequently, quotas are being introduced in countries that do not have the long history of mobilization of women and of women's integration into the labour market and political life as the background for introducing quotas, as was

the case in the Nordic countries.¹⁴ There are several models of the empowerment of women, usually defined as the ability to act and to prevent action, while citizenship refers to rights and to capacities for collective action.

The theoretical discussion

In the discussion of quotas, several important discussions about principles merge. Quotas represent a change in public equality policy, from “equal opportunities” to “equality of results”. But quotas also touch upon fundamental questions in democratic theory and in feminist theory, and this project intends to contribute to these theoretical discussions.¹⁵

In her classic text, Hanna Pitkin argues that there is no common understanding about the nature of representation and about what fair representation is.¹⁶ In the distinction between *representation of ideas* versus *social representation*,¹⁷ quotas for women represent the second. Opponents of quota systems often argue from the first position. Concepts of universal versus differentiated citizenship are under discussion here. At play are also different concepts of the role of the politician: the delegate with a closed mandate versus the true representative or the public servant versus the group representative.¹⁸

Anne Phillips advocates gender quotas in a system that combines *a politics of ideas* with *a politics of presence*. Even if she sees the many arguments against quotas, Anne Phillip asks why everybody agrees on the demand for the equal participation of women, but not for equal representation? The fact that women all over the world have been *excluded* from representation, must be taken as the starting point, not the abstract principles of representation.¹⁹

Even if quotas are often met with suspicion, all electoral systems include some kind of quotas, for instance geographical based quotas, where more densely populated areas are given a disproportional number of seats in parliament. The relationship between gender quotas and quotas for other social groupings is complicated, since there are women in all (other) social groups.

Quotas touch upon the discussion of why women's representation is important. Three arguments are made today, including those used in the campaigns for suffrage: (a) women represent half the population and have the right to half the seats (*the justice argument*); (b) women have different experiences (biologically or socially constructed) that ought to be represented (*the experience argument*); and (c) women and men have partly conflicting interests and thus men cannot represent women (*the interest group argument*).²⁰ A fourth argument deals with the importance of women politicians as *role models* that may pave the way for other women.

In her book *Gender and Citizenship* Birte Siim²¹ distinguishes between three models of citizenship: the liberal (the UK, the USA), the participatory (Scandinavia) and the republican (France). The present Belgian and French introduction of quotas under the name of *parité* is supposed to transcend the controversial concept of group representation. Based on and developing a republican understanding of citizenship, *parité* does not mean simply adding women but implies the recasting of the social pact that enables women to be representatives of the universal. This allows ample room for the recognition of a plurality that is irreducible to the plurality of opinions and therefore makes room for the introduction of otherness in representation.²²

Quotas also touch upon the present philosophical dilemma within feminist theory about “the category women” and point to the old problem, so well-known by the feminist movement, that not all women identify with the group “women”. Women as a group is both the Achilles heel of the feminist movement and its *raison d'être*.

The proletariat say "We", Negroes also. Regarding themselves as subjects, they transform the bourgeois, the whites, into "others". But women do not say "We"...Men say "women", and women use the same word in referring to themselves (Beauvoir 1949).²³

The present critique within feminist theory is partly a critique of Western ethnocentrism, stressing the principle of multiple identities, partly a post-structuralist critique, that feminism tends to construct the very category it wants to dissolve.²⁴ But instead of labelling with static concepts of "essentialism", the dilemmas and strategic choices of women in various contexts should be explored empirically.²⁵ Studying quota systems implies analysing what concepts of representation and what understanding of women as a group are at play in the worldwide discussions of quotas for women.

International Comparisons of Electoral Gender Quotas

A comparative research design allows for analysis of how quotas are introduced and of work in different contexts (structures as well as actors). A selected number of countries from all regions in the world will be included, based on the expertise of the international research network created for this project. It will be necessary to supplement previous single country studies to fill gaps. The project will result in articles for scientific journals and a larger book on quotas, which will include single country studies by the internationally well-reputed scholars, in addition to chapters dealing with the comparative aspects. Furthermore, a handbook for a general audience is planned in cooperation with International IDEA, Stockholm. The international project will deal with the following four aspects of quotas as a policy measure (a-d):

a. The discourse

The Stockholm University project will study the debate on quotas. This seems to be peculiar to each country, as it is connected to other recent debates and to the general discourse on the meaning of gender and on democratic representation (see above). Even if discourses are increasingly international, the actual debates still takes place predominantly within national or regional linguistic boundaries. Thus Htun & Jones argue that the principles of gender equality in Latin America have been gradually incorporated into the prevailing understanding of democracy and modernity, which gives quotas a symbolic value.²⁶ Notions of difference versus sameness are at play in these debates: whether quotas are seen as a temporary or permanent means can be used as a test of the ontological understanding of gender differences.²⁷ Further, if quotas are the answer, what then is the understanding of the problem and how is it constructed in the public debate?²⁸

b. The decision-making process

The project will compare the decision-making process in the included countries. Here the institutional setting, the party structure and the influence of the women's movement become crucial. Who were the main actors behind introducing quotas? Some countries have introduced quotas through amending their constitution or by law. In these cases, the state intervenes in order to secure equal representation. In the Nordic countries, gender quotas have only been decided by law in the case of appointed representation on public committees and boards.²⁹ In public elections in the Nordic countries, quotas are exclusively based on the political parties' own decisions, as in the case of the Swedish "zipper system". Consequently, it is easy to remove quotas again, as the Danish case reveals.

c. The Implementation of different kinds of quotas

The project will scrutinize the implementation process, a usually neglected aspect of quotas — by researchers as well as by policy-makers. This study deals only with quotas that are applied in processes of selection potential or actual candidates for public elections. The issue of internal party quotas is thus omitted as are quotas for public commission and boards. National elections are in focus, but regional and local public elections are included, providing the data is available.

Even if constitutional amendments and new electoral laws may seem more commanding, when it comes to implementation it is not at all evident that this method is more efficient than party decisions. It all depends on the actual rules and possible sanctions for non-compliance. A distinction must be made between: (a) the pool of potential candidates, (b) the actual nominees, and (c) the elected. There are examples of quota requirements on all three levels, but most quota systems concern the second level. Here the crucial question is where, for example, the 40 per cent required women are placed on the lists or if the districts offer real chances of election. The partly unsuccessful “women’s short lists” in England present an example at the first level, which broadens the pool from which the selection committee or the primary may choose. “Reserved seats for women” is a different quota system, in which certain seats are set aside, as for example in Uganda where certain regional seats are reserved for women (Christensen 1999).

This comparative study can contribute to a much more solid understanding of how different types of quotas work, seen in relation to different electoral and nomination systems (e.g. primaries or not, the degree of centralization of the party organizations, closed versus open lists). It is a preliminary finding that quotas are less likely to be applied and to succeed in electoral systems based on single-member constituencies, where each party only presents one candidate — contrary to proportional representation systems. But even in a PR-system, small parties and parties in small constituencies have difficulties implementing quotas without controversial central interference in the usual prerogatives of the local party organization to select their own candidates.³⁰ Thus conflicts with other principles might hinder implementation. The legitimacy of the quota system is crucial. It is one of the hypotheses of this project that the character of the debate leading to the introduction of quotas is just as important for the result as the electoral system.

d. Consequences of quotas

The result of introducing quotas will be studied in quantitative as well as in qualitative terms. Electoral statistics can tell the number of women elected. Unfortunately, the official electoral statistics in many countries do not have sufficient data on those nominated by sex, which must be provided through other channels, for example, through the parties. The consequences of quotas should also be studied in qualitative terms, looking into both the intended and the unintended consequences (e.g. stigmatization, glass ceilings preventing the percentage of women from rising above the quota requirement — or unintended splits between different groups of women).

The preliminary hypothesis of this project is that quotas that rest on a previous mobilization and integration of women into all parts of society have better chance of succeeding than those without this precondition, leading to permanent empowerment of women with equal political citizenship. Since quotas in themselves do not remove all the other barriers for women's full citizenship, the crucial question is whether quotas imposed because of international inspiration without mobilization among larger groups of women themselves can achieve the goal. Does a critical mass of women count in itself?³¹

The Interplay between the National and the International level will also be subject to analyses, especially the influence of the many international bodies that increasingly issue recommendations and even rules in the field of equality policy. Quotas have been recommended by the United Nations, the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the European Union and OSCE, e.g. in the United Nations' CEDAW convention and the Beijing Platform for Action, both from 1995. Many international organizations have worked on this question: International IDEA, OSCE, the IPU and the EU, who all have projects on women and decision-making. No doubt, these international recommendations have given legitimacy to the use of quotas.

To what extent and under which circumstances has it been possible for actors like the women's movement to use the international recommendations and cross-national cooperation between organizations to promote their case at home? The theoretical framework for this study is the present



discussion as to whether social movements in general get more opportunities through internationalization and globalization, or are in fact disempowered by these developments, unless they give up their very character as democratic grass-roots movements and become professional NGOs.³²

The Importance of Research on Quotas

Studying various quota regimes will contribute to the theoretical discussion of notions of equality, of representative democracy and of understandings of gender in politics. Through the international comparison on the use of quotas, new knowledge is produced, especially about a previously neglected aspect: the implementation of quotas and the consequences and results of introducing quotas under various conditions. The results will be relevant for research into equality policies and affirmative action in other fields, for example, in the labour market.

This knowledge will also be useful to policy-makers working with equality policies and affirmative action. Under what conditions do quotas contribute to the empowerment of women in politics? When do quotas lead to stigmatization? Today, decisions to use quotas are often based on insufficient discussion of the principles and a lack of knowledge of whether specific forms of quotas do lead to the stated goal. The publishing of a global handbook on the implementation of quotas together with IDEA will make the research results available to a larger audience. In general terms, this project will contribute to our understanding of the interaction between discourse, institutional setting and actor strategies in promoting policy change and new policy outcomes.

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