

“Quotas are Changing the History of Women”

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Changing History

A dramatic change has taken place recently in the global rank order of countries based on their level of female political representation. As a result of quota provisions, Rwanda, Costa Rica, Argentina, Mozambique and South Africa are now placed very high in the world league of the Inter-Parliamentary Union.¹ The five Nordic states, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden, which for a long time were virtually alone at the top of the ranking table, are now being challenged. Although controversial, the electoral gender quota has proven to be a highly effective instrument for achieving equality, provided that it is implemented properly.

In 2003, only 15.2 percent of members of parliament (MPs) around the world are women (2004: 15.6%). But significant differences exist between regions. The Nordic countries have the highest number of women parliamentarians (39.7 percent), while the Arab states have the lowest (six percent). Sub-Saharan Africa comes close to world average (14.9 percent), although there are considerable variations among nations.

Table 1: Women in National Parliaments (Lower Houses)—regional differences

Nordic countries	39.7%
Americas	18.4%
Europe/member states of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) (excluding the Nordic countries)	15.5%
Asia	15.5%
Sub-Saharan Africa	14.9%
Pacific	12.1%
Arab States	6.0%

Source: <http://www.ipu.org>, 20 October 2003

A New Research Agenda

Throughout the world women's organisations and political parties are searching for methods to end male dominance in politics. In principle, most people and governments support the idea of gender balance in political life. Today, introducing quota provisions in politics is considered a legitimate equal opportunity measure in many countries all over the world.

This development calls for a new research agenda. What happens when electoral gender quotas are introduced in political environments as dissimilar as those of Argentina, France, India, Pakistan, South Africa, Sweden and Uganda? Under what conditions do quotas contribute to the empowerment of women? When do gender quotas lead to unintended negative consequences like stigmatization and marginalization? These are crucial questions that need to be addressed by feminist researchers, as well as by international institutions and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

The number of countries that have introduced some type of quota system is much larger than one would expect. Electoral gender quotas are being implemented at a remarkable rate all over the world.² Having gathered data on the employment of quotas globally, it is time to formulate a new research agenda to compare these different quota systems. Such cross-national research should examine the discourse that is taking place, decision-making processes, and the effects of quotas.

While electoral statistics can provide information on the number of women elected, many countries, unfortunately, do not have available data on the sex of nominated candidates, which must be obtained through other channels, such as through the parties themselves. Quotas should also be assessed from a qualitative perspective, however, that is, the intended and the unintended ramifications, such as the real empowerment of women or specific groups of women versus the possibility of stigmatization and glass ceilings that prevent the number of women to exceed the quota requirement.

With some exceptions, until now, research on quotas has primarily been limited to one country. It is essential to widen the analysis, and to conduct research that compares quota discourse and implementation processes and results under different electoral systems, different political cultures and different gender regimes. Existing single-country studies seem to come up with quite different conclusions about the ability of quota systems to empower women. These differences, though, might be due to the chosen approach rather than to actual differences between nations.

The Theoretical Foundation of Quota Provisions

Quotas are highly controversial in some countries, whereas quota proposals have passed with only little discussion in other countries. Yet the debate is often confused, and is only comprehensible if hidden assumptions about women and the position of women are scrutinized. Hence some consider quotas to be a form of *discrimination and a violation of the principle of fairness*, while others view them as *compensation for structural barriers that prevent fair competition*. Quotas sometimes considered violating other principles like fairness, competence and individualism. Yet quotas are also seen as an efficient way of attaining 'real' equality, that is, 'equality of results'.³

If we take the actual exclusion of women as the starting point, that is, if we recognize that many barriers exist that prevent women from entering the realm of politics, then quotas are not seen as discriminating (towards men), but instead, as compensation for all the obstacles that women are up against. When all of these impediments are removed, quotas will no longer be necessary, it is argued. In this respect, quotas are a temporary measure. It may take decades, though, before all social, cultural and political barriers preventing equal female representation are eradicated.

The gatekeepers to the political scene use to be the political parties, because of they control the nomination process. The role of voters is often not as decisive as one would think. Who will be elected is frequently decided by the nomination committees of the political parties—they select the candidates and place them in good or bad constituencies in terms of the chances of being elected. Prior to the polls, the political parties usually know which seats are ‘safe’. In all systems, it is important to examine who actually exercises control over the nomination process. In countries with a high level of female representation, women’s organizations have consistently asked: who controls the nomination process? Consequently, women have demanded 50 percent of seats on nomination committees and within the party leadership in order to influence the process.

The decision as to whether or not to introduce a quota is increasingly influenced by the recommendations of international organizations and by developments in different national contexts. Electoral gender quotas are being introduced today in nations where women have been almost entirely excluded from politics, as well as in states with a long history of female involvement in the labour market and in political life, such as the countries of Scandinavia. Electoral quotas were not introduced in the latter until the 1980s, when women’s parliamentary representation already exceeded 25 percent.

The introduction of effective quota systems represents a shift in approach, from ‘equal opportunity’ to ‘equality of results’. However, since most quotas systems specify the number of women and men to be presented to voters on electoral lists, and not the gender distribution following the election, one might prefer to see electoral gender quotas an example of ‘equal opportunity’. Women and men have an equal chance to present themselves to the voters and in open lists PR-systems as well in majority systems voters have the choice of voting for a female or male candidate. In general, a quota system represents a break with the widespread gradualism of equality policies. Viewed from this perspective, the Scandinavian countries can no longer be considered a model for ensuring equal political representation around the globe.

Why Scandinavia is No Longer the Model

For many years feminist organizations worldwide have looked to the Scandinavian countries—Denmark, Norway and Sweden—as a model for achieving equality for women. A key factor has been the very high level of representation of women in parliament and on the local councils, especially since the 1970s.

Table 2: Percentage of Women in Scandinavian Parliaments Today

Sweden	45% (2002)
Denmark	38% (2001)
Finland	38% (2002)
Norway	36% (2001)
Iceland	30% (2003)

How did women in Scandinavia come this far? What can we learn from the Scandinavian experience? As Nordic researchers we have tried to answer these questions by pointing to structural changes within 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 of the 1960s, and the electoral system (PR). Strategic factors are also seen as important, especially the various approaches employed by women’s organizations to raise the level of female political representation.

The international research community has paid considerable attention to the results of Nordic research. The extraordinarily high rate of female representation in the region since the 1970s, by

international standards, has sometimes been attributed to the introduction of quotas.⁴ However, this is not an accurate assessment: quotas were not introduced until women had already acquired around 25 percent of the seats in parliament. Women politicians then used this new power to consolidate the position of women by working for the introduction of quotas in their respective political parties. Quotas were never introduced by law in the Nordic countries, only as a result of internal party decisions. And not all Nordic political parties use quotas—those that do are mostly to be found in the centre and to the left of the political spectrum. The few Danish parties that employed quotas abolished them after just a few years. Finally, the Swedish principle of ‘every second a women’ is not even considered a quota system by the general public, even if, in fact, it is a radical quota system demanding, and in most cases leading to, a 50 percent gender balance.

The Scandinavian experience cannot be considered a model for the 21st century *because it took 80 years to get that far. Today, the women of the world are not willing to wait that long.* Electoral quotas are a symbol of the impatience of modern women. A very good example is South Africa, where the introduction of quotas in the 1994 election by the African National Congress (ANC) party resulted in women’s representation in this new democracy, reaching 27 percent in the very first democratic election.⁵

Different Quota Systems

Even if constitutional amendments and new electoral laws providing gender quotas may seem more commanding, it is not at all evident that these methods are more efficient than political party quotas when it comes to implementation. It all depends on the actual rules and the possible sanctions for non-compliance, as well as on the general opportunities that exist for quotas within the country. A distinction must be made between quotas for: 1) the pool of potential candidates; 2) the actual nominees; and 3) the elected. There are examples of quota requirements on all three levels, but most quota systems concern actual nominees, see the discussion of ‘equal opportunity’ versus ‘equality of result’ above. Concerning rules for nomination, the crucial issue is whether there are any rules concerning the rank order on the list of the, say 40 percent of required women. Are the nominated women placed in a position with a real chance of election? The partly unsuccessful ‘women’s shortlists’ in England are an example of a quota requirement on the first level, broadening the pool of candidates from which the selection committee can choose. ‘Reserved seats’ are a different kind of quota, whereby a specific number of seats are set aside for female candidates as in the Ugandan case, where a number of regional seats are reserved for women.

The electoral quota for women may be constitutional (like in Burkina Faso, Nepal, the Philippines and Uganda), legislative (as in many parts of Latin America, as well as, for example, in Belgium, Bosnia–Herzegovina, Serbia and Sudan) or it may take the form of a political party quota. In some countries, including Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, Germany, Italy, Norway and Sweden, a number of political parties have some type of quota. In many other others, though, only one or two parties have opted to use quotas. However, if the leading party in a country uses a quota, such as the ANC in South Africa, this may have a significant impact on the overall rate of female representation. Yet most of the world’s political parties do not employ any kind of quota at all.

In some countries quotas pertain to minorities based on regional, ethnic, linguistic or religious cleavages. Almost all political systems utilize some kind of geographical quota to ensure a minimum level of representation for a densely-populated area, such as an island. That type of quota is usually not considered to be as controversial as a gender quota.

Quotas work differently under different electoral systems. Quotas are most easily introduced in PR and other multi-list systems. But even in a PR system, because of the few elected candidates, small parties and parties in small constituencies experience difficulties in implementing quotas without interference from the central party organisation.

Quotas in Less Democratic Political Systems

Quotas may be introduced in democratic political systems, as well as in systems with limited democratic freedoms, or even in non-democratic or authoritarian political systems. The present discussion is limited to those systems in which some kind of election is taking place.

It seems appropriate to apply the concept of 'reserved seats' to systems that guarantee women a certain number of seats in parliament, for instance, independent of the outcome of an election. By contrast, 'electoral quotas' stipulate that a certain percentage of women must be on the lists that are presented to voters. In both cases, voters decide who of the female candidates are to be elected.

The differences between the various systems should not be exaggerated. In a closed list system, quotas, in reality, determine which of the candidates will be elected, but the number of seats to be awarded to each party is still down to the electorate. It follows that a reserved seats quota may be applied in democratic as well as in non-democratic or semi-democratic systems.

In Uganda, for example, an Electoral College in each of the 56 districts elects a 'Woman Representative' to parliament. Other groups, such as youth, workers and the armed forces, also have seats reserved for them. One also finds that some women are elected to so-called free seats. These allocations, combined with the holding of open elections in the country's 214 constituencies, have seen the level of female representation in Uganda's parliament rise to 24.7 percent.⁶ Meanwhile, in many former communist countries, seats were often distributed in advance to various groups, including women's organization, trade unions and farmers. Reserved seat quotas may or may not give voters a choice between candidates belonging to a designated group.

The quota that was introduced in Jordan in June 2003 constitutes yet another kind of arrangement, mixing the reserved seat and the usual electoral system. According to the law, six of the 110 seats in the lower house of parliament are to be reserved for women. But there are no provisions to ensure that there are a minimum number of female candidates, as is the case with most other quota systems. In Jordan, the government exercises a certain amount of control over the nomination process. The six women who received the highest percentage of votes cast in their respective constituencies (compulsory preferential voting in a multi-member majority system) were elected to parliament. The women who were selected in this way received between five and ten percent of the vote in their respective constituencies.

It was a great disappointment to women's organizations that no women were elected to parliament from the capital, Amman. Women's organizations in Jordan have demanded a larger number of reserved seats, 12 or more. Jordan's quota provisions, however, are only a temporary arrangement (lasting for one parliamentary period).

Gender Neutral Quota Provisions?

Most quotas aim at increasing women's representation, because the problem to be addressed typically is the under-representation of women. This is particularly relevant since women usually make up 50 percent of the population or even more. An electoral gender quota regulation may, for example, require that at least 40 percent of the candidates on an electoral list are women. A minimum requirement for women implies a maximum number of men.

Some quota systems, however, are constructed on a gender neutral basis, meaning that they seek to correct the under-representation of both women and men or, at any rate, to establish a maximum for both. The requirement may be that neither gender occupies more than 60 percent

and no less than 40 percent of seats.

A 50–50 quota is, by nature, gender neutral. It also sets a maximum for the representation of women, which a minimum female requirement does not.

A 'double quota' not only calls for a certain proportion of women on an electoral list, but it also prevents female candidates from being placed at the bottom of the list with little chance of election. Argentina and Belgium are examples of countries with a legal requirement for double quotas that is including rules about the rank order of the candidates according to their sex.

Quota Controversies

Quotas have often stimulated vehement political debate. To date, research on quotas has tended to concentrate on these debates and on the decision-making process. While these discursive controversies are an essential part of my present research project, an emphasis is also being placed on the frequently neglected and troublesome matter of quota implementation and on the consequences of introducing quotas. From single-country studies we know, for instance, that the introduction of a requirement demanding a minimum of 30 percent of each gender on an electoral list does not automatically result in women acquiring 30 percent of seats. Thus, by comparing the use of quotas in many similar (and different) political systems, it is possible to determine whether quotas are an equitable policy measure, contributing to the stated goal of equal political citizenship for women.

An unclear debate and lack of legitimacy with regard to the claim often leads to problems at the implementation stage. In a survey of political parties in the Nordic countries, and of women's organizations in the same parties, the Norwegian Labour Party reported that it takes three elections to implement a quota. Why? Because the party is not prepared to throw out an incumbent male MP in order to include a woman.

The results of past single-country studies vary to a considerable extent: the partial failure of the attempt to introduce women's shortlists in a single majority electoral system, like that of England, which nevertheless showed some positive results;⁷ often 'minimalist' compliance by political parties with the rules, resulting in small and uneven gains in women's representation in Latin America, with Argentina and Costa Rica serving as outstanding positive examples;⁸ and the somewhat stigmatic consequences of the system of reserved seats for women in Uganda.⁹

The 30 percent quota provision for local councils in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan amounts to a sort of revolution in the gender regime in this area. Research has shown, though, that the quota system requires that women's organizations develop capacity-building programmes for nominated and elected female candidates. If quotas are to lead to the empowerment of women, elected women must have the capacity to fulfil their new responsibilities; especially in a strong patriarchal society capacity building for women politicians is essential. At the same time, quotas, when properly implemented, might contribute to a more gender balanced society.

International 'Translation'

It is argued that a new international discourse on gender balance in institutional politics is an important factor behind the recent introduction of quotas all over the world. Today we see male-dominated parliaments passing quota laws. However, the fact that some countries have opened up to quotas, while others have not, and the fact that *specific types* of quota systems seem to manifest themselves in regional clusters, all point to the need for contextual-based research on the 'translation' of this international discourse, so that it is applicable in different individual and regional contexts. The women's movement appears to have a crucial role to play in this process.

Endnotes

¹ See <http://www.ipu.org>.

² See www.quotaproject.org, a Global Database of Quotas for Women, established and maintained by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) and Stockholm University.

³ Dahlerup, Drude. 1998. 'Using quotas to increase women's political representation'. In Karam, Azza, ed. *Women in Politics Beyond Numbers*. Stockholm: IDEA. <http://www.int-idea.se/women/>.

⁴ Phillips, Anne. 1995. *The Politics of Presence*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

⁵ Ballington, Julie. 1998. 'Women's Parliamentary Representation. The Effects of List PR'. *Politikon. South African Journal of Political Studies*. 25(2). pp. 77–93; Ballington, Julie. 2000. 'Representation of Women in Political Parties'. *South African Local Government Elections 2000*. EISA. no. 6.

⁶ See www.quotaproject.org.

⁷ Squires, Judith. 1996. 'Quotas for Women: Fair Representation?'. In Lovenduski, Joni and Norris, Pippa, eds. *Women and Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. pp. 73–90.

⁸ Pechard, Jacqueline. 2003. 'The Quota System in Latin America; General Overview'. Paper presented at the IDEA workshop on the '*Implementation of Quotas: Latin American Experiences*', held in Lima, Peru, from 23–24 February 2003; and Htun, Mala N. and Jones, Mark. 2002. 'Engendering the Right to Participate in Decision-making: Electoral Quotas and Women's Leadership in Latin America'. In Craske, Nikki and Molyneux, Maxine, eds. *Gender and the Politics of Rights and Democracy in Latin America*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan Ltd. pp. 32–56.

⁹ Christensen, Trine Grønberg. 1999. 'A Woman's Place is in the House—State House!'. Dissertation, Department of Political Science, University of Aarhus; and Tripp, Aili Mari. 2000. *Women and Politics in Uganda*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press.