

Quota Laws for Women in Politics: Implications for Feminist Practice

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Abstract: *This paper considers the adoption and diffusion of gender quota laws worldwide aimed at increasing the number of women holding political offices. In more than fifty countries where such laws have been enacted, this study explores the motives for their adoption, the actors, and the implications this has for feminist practice. While quotas have been able to increase women's political participation, they also bring to light other structural inequalities, including violence against women in politics and cultural resistance. This paper underlines that intersectional, context-specific strategies are imperative in realizing the full transformative potential of gender quotas. The paper also concluded that gender quotas are one important step to achieving political equality but do not eliminate problems outright. Overcoming several other barriers, such as quotas to reduce political violence and ensuring that the mechanisms are intersectionally inclusive, remains a necessary component for transformation.*

Key Words: Quota Law, Women, Politics, Feminist Practice, Gender Quota

Introduction

The adoption of gender quota laws is rooted in the long history of women's struggle for political inclusion. Early feminist movements, such as suffrage campaigns, emerged to address women's exclusion from political decision-making. In due course, quotas emerged as a response to persistent gender gaps in political representation.

Gender quotas reflect both corrective dual objectives for historical injustices and meeting international commitments such as the SDGs (Waylen, 2014). However, many challenges have been noted in practice that include backlash, cultural resistance, and even violence against women in politics, VAWP (Krook & Restrepo Sanín, 2016). These challenges call for nuanced analyses and strong responses so that quotas actually advance real equality, not just symbolic representation.

Types of Quota Policies

According to Krook (2008), quota policies are categorized into three broad categories: party quotas, reserved seats, and legislative quotas.

1. Party Quotas: Party quotas refer to the voluntary adoption of more balanced candidatures by political parties. For instance, countries such as Sweden and Germany have seen a high rise in women's representation with the introduction of party quotas. However, in many countries, voluntary measures are often not implemented and lead to variable outcomes.

2. Reserved Seats: Reserved-seat laws entail specific quotas or percentages of a country's legislation reserved for female candidates. Such policy has created a situation of over 60% of its parliamentary seats by women in a country such as Rwanda Burnet, (2011). Yet other instances, notably those in parts of South

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Asia, have allowed the quota model to confine the broader and wider participation by female subjects through reserved-seat legal mechanisms (Tripp, 2010).

3. Legislative Quotas: Legislative quotas are policies that require all parties to put forward a certain percentage of women candidates. In Latin America, they have been transformative, though their enforcement is particularly challenging in countries with weaker institutional frameworks, such as Guatemala. According to Murray (2010), the effectiveness of the legislative quota often depends on political will and legal sanctions for noncompliance.

Quota Adoption Motivations

Motivations to implement quotas are varied and reflect political, social, and cultural dynamics:

Mobilization by Women Groups

From a more grassroots level of organizations and movements comes evidence of grassroots movement importance in cases such as Argentina, through the initiative taken by the women's advocates in bringing on the first ever national gender quota law in the country for the year 1991 as it is recorded; Htun & Weldon (2012), have been still important in monitoring and ensuring a fulfillment in government responses through quotas taken toward such causes.

Political Elites' Strategic Benefits

Yet quotas can have instrumental uses in the hands of political leaders. They may attain electoral advantages or even reap international benefits this way. So, in pursuit of substantive policy goals, quotas only undermine gender equality goals (Krook & True, 2010).

International Norms and Pressure

Such bodies as the United Nations have supported gender quotas within the context of broader equality policies. The United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, CEDAW, has increased pressure globally for imposing such quotas.

Violence Against Women in Politics

A critical barrier standing between quotas and their success is violence against women in politics. Krook & Restrepo Sanín (2016) defined VAWP as actions that deter women from political participation through physical violence, psychological abuse, and symbolic denigration.

1. Physical Violence: In Afghanistan and other countries, women politicians come under life-threatening attack, making the case of patriarchal norms and political instability an intertwined issue.

2. Symbolic Violence: Online harassment of women leaders in developed countries like the UK and Italy is a typical example of symbolic violence, which is a form of violence that delegitimizes women's political roles and discourages participation.

3. Legal and Institutional Responses: Bolivia was one of the pioneers in elaborating legal frameworks on VAWP, and it has worked as a model for the rest of the countries. Tripp (2010) makes an important observation that its implementation "is still very weak" and requires more support by institutions and greater "international collaboration."

Critical Analysis of Underlying Assumptions

While the notion of gender quotas is often championed as a transformative tool in increasing women's presence in politics, a closer look at what underlies assumptions about gender quotas reveals a number of complexities. While these assumptions are broadly optimistic, they might unwittingly simplify or omit critical contextual factors. The section that follows undertakes a critical examination of those assumptions underlying the issue.



1. Quotas Universally Enhance Representation

The most obvious assumption is that quotas everywhere increased women's presence in politics. Though quotas frequently increase the numbers of women, their success has been dependent upon:

Institutional Frameworks: Effective implementation requires sound legal and political systems within which the changes are to operate. In contexts when enforcement is weak, quotas may also be ignored or manipulated.

Cultural Norms: Societal attitudes toward women in leadership roles affect the effectiveness of quotas. In patriarchal societies, for example, quotas may result in symbolic compliance without substantive empowerment (Goetz, 2007; Htun & Weldon, 2012).

Intersectional Obstacles: Quotas cannot amply overcome other obstacles that women from marginalized backgrounds may confront, such as political opportunities not easily reaching minority women or those from low-income backgrounds.

Example: Legislatively established quotas of women in local self-government or Panchayati Raj in India have quantitatively increased the representation but not necessarily enhanced women's voice since male relatives act as proxies in most cases.

2. Quotas Reflect Progress towards Gender Equality

Another assumption is that quotas per se coincide with the larger objectives of gender equality. While quotas can tackle numerical disparities, they cannot dismantle structural inequalities on their own. Key challenges include:

Tokenism: Quota-elected women are perceived as less capable or even as symbolic representatives, which undermines their authority.

Reinforcing Patriarchy: Quotas can sometimes reinforce existing power structures. Political elites co-opt quotas in an effort to ensure that only politically "safe" women gain office, sidelining those who would have attained office through more meaningful change.

Example: While in Rwanda, the implementation of quotas saw great increases in women's representation, critics cite the ruling party as using the system to maintain centralized control and limit the space for independent female voices.

3. Women's Groups Advocate Uniformly for Quotas

It is often assumed that women's groups uniformly support quotas. However, feminist movements are diverse, with varying priorities and perspectives. Though some groups see quotas as a necessary step toward equality, others critique them for:

Quotas Distract from More General Systemic Issues: Some feel that quotas divert attention and energies away from more fundamental issues of economic inequality and violence against women (Goetz, 2007).

Reinforcing a Simplistic View of Women: Quotas can accidentally bypass differences in intersectionality within the category "women," such as racial and class differences. These are some of the criticisms thereof which (Phillips, 1998) work.

Example: Latin America: Debates among Latin American feminist groups have exposed divisions among those emphasizing a quota priority versus those working more on grassroots mobilization and broader social reforms (Lovenduski, 2005).

4. Support of Quotas is Sincere on the part of Political Elites

The often-made assumption is that political elites support quotas out of a commitment to gender equality, which far too often is an oversimplification of the motives. Rather, elites are considering quotas because of strategic interests such as

Gaining Favor with International Organizations: This can be arguably seen as an attempt to comply with international norms and encourage donor funding.

Using Quotas for Appearances: Political elites might use quotas in order to look progressive while still retaining the power of controlling candidate selection processes.

Example: Quotas in Bolivia have been criticized for being used by political parties as a means of gaining international legitimacy without necessarily empowering the women candidates themselves (Burnet, [2011](#)).

5. Representation Amounts to Empowerment

One strong assumption is that numerical representation results in substantive empowerment. However: **Presence Is Not Influence:** Women could be a minority in the leadership structures of legislatures and, hence, have limited influence over policy issues (Bergqvist, [1999](#)).

Hostile Environments: The political arena often remains dominated by male norms, making it difficult for women to thrive (Piscopo, [2015](#)).

Example: Women elected under the reserved seat systems in some African countries are barely influential in making or determining policy decisions, as can be depicted from the deeply entrenched patriarchal practices.

6. Quotas Benefit All Women Equally

There is the final, implicit assumption: that all women will benefit equally from the quotas. In this context, one is simply overlooking intersectional challenges among women based on race, ethnicity, class, or disability. For example:

Lack of Resources: The marginalized women may not have the financial and social capital to compete effectively, even under quota systems.

Intersectional Considerations: Quotas not designed with any intersectional elements run the risk of excluding disadvantaged groups.

Example: In South Africa, the combination of racial quotas with gender quotas has exposed tensions between addressing gender and racial disparities in one stroke (Dahlerup, [2013](#)).

Implications for Feminist Practice

Broader Implications of Gender Quotas

While mammalian orders would render gender quotas a progressive move to increase women's participation in politics, the broader implications go beyond the simple numerical representation of women in the legislatures. The effective implementation of the quotas has far-reaching effects on social structures, political systems, and feminist movements. This section will look at these broad prerogatives by exploring how quotas shape systemic change, challenge existing power dynamics, and reshape societal perceptions of women in leadership (McBride & Mazur, [2010](#)).

1. Intersectionality as a Central Framework

It is in this respect that gender quotas, in design and implementation, need to incorporate an intersectional perspective. Intersectionality draws on the fact that women's experiences and identities are intersecting-reinforcing their roofs based on race, ethnicity, social class, and even disability. The inability to address such layers of inequality will substantiate quotas for privileged women only.

Implications

Marginalized Groups: Dahlerup ([2015](#)), noted that "marginalised groups among women often cannot afford to draw upon social capital or financial resources when it comes to reaping quotas." There should, therefore, be active consideration within policies aimed at addressing this in the use of additional measures that could take the form of a grant of facilities or highly specified training.

Policy Design: These may be intersectional quotas that guarantee representation to ethnic minorities, Indigenous women, and other groups at a disadvantage. Indeed, by combining gender quotas with representation for Indigenous people, Bolivia nudges the boundaries of innovative policy design.



Example: In India's Panchayati Raj system, the reservation of seats for women in local governance has improved outcomes at the margin, as it amplifies the voices of lower-caste and tribal women in decision-making.

2. Addressing Structural Barriers

Quotas cannot change the deep-seated structural barriers to women's political participation, such as patriarchal norms, lack of access to education and economic resources, and cultural resistance to women's leadership.

Implications

Cultural Change: Quotas may serve as a catalyst for changing the attitude of society toward women in positions of authority. Complementary efforts, like public awareness campaigns and educational programs, are needed if deep-rooted change is desired.

Institutional Reform: The political institution should change to provide an enabling environment for women. This will involve the adoption of practices that are sensitive to gender, including parental leave policies, assurance of workplaces free from harassment, and equal opportunity in leadership positions within the parties.

Example: Nordic countries, which probably have the highest degree of gender equality, have coupled quotas with a broader set of social reforms—such as subsidized childcare and family leave policies, to support the political and professional advancement of women (Bergqvist, [1999](#)).

3. From Symbolic to Substantive Representation

A key challenge is to make quotas lead to substantive rather than just symbolic representation. Substantive representation requires an assurance of real power in influencing policies to be given to women in political positions for the advancement of gender-equitable outcomes (Krook, [2008](#)).

Implications

Policy Advocacy: Women in politics may lead to legislative agendas on issues like gender-based violence, reproductive rights, and economic inequality. Quotas should be accompanied by capacity-building programs in order for women to assume leadership roles effectively.

Institutional Power: To ensure that women are able to influence the process of policymaking, they should be represented on an equal footing in the legislatures, political parties, and other agencies of decision-making power (Paxton & Hughes, [2015](#)).

For instance, parliamentarians in the Parliament of the Republic of Rwanda women can take priority or lead concerning some progressive pieces of legislation passed for land rights as well as home violence today, which best showcases what substantive representation presents and achieves so far.

4. Countering Political Violence against Women

The history of quotas also reflects backlash as women face political violence. The violence extends to physical abuse, psychological pressure, and even online intimidation, hence sabotaging the real quota impact (Krook & Restrepo Sanín, [2016](#)).

Implications

Protection via the Law: Many countries have been urged to legislate and put into effect measures to protect women who participate in political matters. An example of model legislation was passed by Bolivia in 2012 to deal with violence against women in politics (Tripp, [2010](#)).

Monitoring and Reporting: International organizations and civil society can also contribute by monitoring and reporting incidents of political violence to hold perpetrators accountable for their actions.

Example: Afghan women politicians have been threatened and attacked, indicating that increased security measures would better protect them and their involvement.

5. Strengthening Feminist Movements

It's complicated because gender quotas are crucial for feminist movements, which simultaneously energize activism by providing concrete victories and fostering complacency where quotas are understood as an endpoint rather than a starting point of broader change.

Implications

Coalition-building: Quotas create formal alliances among women's organizations, feminist groups, and political parties in civil society seeking broader systemic changes than those around representation alone could bring about (Goetz, [2007](#)).

Against Tokenism: Feminist movements should ensure that political systems are held responsible for guaranteeing that quotas, in case they succeed in empowering women, are not mere symbolic forms of compliance.

Example: The feminist movements in Latin America have used quotas as a platform to demand broader changes, such as electoral reforms and more funding for women's campaigns (Dahlerup, [2013](#)).

6. Changing Societal Perceptions

Perhaps the most significant of the long-term implications of quotas has to do with changing societal perceptions of women's roles in leadership: normalizing their presence in politics, challenging stereotypes, and thereby inspiring future generations.

Implications

Role Models: Women leaders can act as role models and inspire young women to pursue careers in politics and public service.

Public Opinion: Over time, quotas might change public opinion about gender equality and decrease resistance to women's leadership.

Example: Quotas have been in place for decades in countries like Sweden, where women leaders are widely accepted and celebrated; this reflects a societal shift toward inclusivity of gender.

Future Research and Policy Directions

1. Intersectional Research

Future research should also investigate the impact of quotas on underrepresented groups, such as ethnic minorities, sexual minorities, and people from rural areas.

2. VAWP Monitoring

Establishing international mechanisms for monitoring and reporting on VAWP can further strengthen accountability and inform policy intervention.

3. Innovative Quota Designs

Policymakers should thus explore flexible quota systems addressing both representation and empowerment, for example, by integrating quotas with mentorship programs for women leaders (Celis & Childs, [2012](#)).

Conclusion

Gender quotas are one important step to achieving political equality, but they do not eliminate problems outright. Overcoming several other barriers, such as quotas to reduce political violence and ensuring that the mechanisms are intersectionally inclusive, remains a necessary component for transformation. Innovative approaches and global collaboration can enable countries to harness the full potential of gender quotas. Conclusion

The adoption of gender quotas represents a milestone in the struggle for political equality because it gives a concrete mechanism for dealing with historical underrepresentation. Yet, the deeper meaning of such policies shows that quotas per se are not the solution but a catalyst for deeper systemic



transformation. While quotas can increase the numerical presence of women in political spaces, their success is contingent on addressing the remaining structural, cultural, and intersectional barriers.

In order for quotas to achieve substantive empowerment, policymakers and advocates must emphasize other complementary measures such as institutional reform, capacity building, and legal protections against political violence. Intersectional approaches that take into consideration the diverse experiences and challenges of marginalized groups are essential in fostering true inclusivity. The active engagement of feminist movements, civil society organizations, and male allies can amplify the impact of quotas beyond tokenism to genuine equality.

The long-term success of gender quotas lies in their ability to normalize women's leadership, shift societal perceptions, and inspire future generations. As countries continue to adopt and refine these policies, ongoing research and collaboration will be critical in making sure that gender quotas realize their transformative potential and pave the way for a more inclusive and equitable political landscape.

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