Activity 1 – Gender quotas in politics

Introduction:

Most states allow women to vote and run for public office. However, across the world, only 24% of all national parliamentarians, or barely 1 out of 4, are women.¹ This is despite significant advances in women’s education and an increasing number of women with sufficient public governance experience in non-elected posts.

Most feminists will agree that there are many obstacles faced by women pursuing leadership roles beyond formal legal barriers. While recognising the differences across various political contexts, we can argue that some of the most common challenges experienced by women are a relative lack of access to economic resources or to the social and business networks that are likely to fund campaigns, perceptions of women leaders as emotional and weak as opposed to male leaders as rational and strong, lack of role models and mentors, gender-based threats and harassment, and a persisting uneven division of family care responsibilities. Furthermore, certain subgroups of women, such as women of colour, or women who have no connections to traditionally political families, may face even more barriers than others.

Most feminists view the underrepresentation of women in politics as a problem insofar as women are approximately half of the population and deserve to be fairly represented. Their exclusion can contribute to the neglect of issues that especially affect women, such as support for women who are often unpaid carers of children and elderly family members, maternity benefits, reproductive rights, domestic violence, and unjust inheritance and property laws. It also means that we are failing to tap the skills and experience of half of the world’s population in making important decisions about how we allocate resources and direct society.

Gender quotas or Positive Discrimination

One measure that has been introduced in over 80 countries to bridge the gender gap in political representation is gender quotas for government positions, such as in parliament. Gender quotas (sometimes also referred to as ‘reservations’, ‘affirmative action’ or ‘positive discrimination’) refer to fixed seats allocated for women, usually between 30% - 40% of the total seats available, either as a binding requirement by the state or as a voluntary initiative taken up by political parties. By default, it is a policy that formally discriminates in favour of women. Gender quotas have different configurations, and ideally, they are tailored to a

country’s political and electoral systems.\textsuperscript{2} Legislated candidate quotas are a binding requirement that a minimum number of candidates for each political party must be women. Legislated reserved seats stipulates the number of women to be elected to legislative bodies. Voluntary party quotas, such as in the UK where the Labour and Liberal parties have introduced all-female shortlists, are taken up by political parties on their own. The UK’s Sex Discrimination Act of 1975 makes any discrimination or quotas due to sex, race and ethnicity generally illegal for any reason in education, employment, and other settings. However, an exemption was made in 2002 to allow the use of all-women shortlists, but only until 2030.\textsuperscript{3}

**Justification for quotas**

Supporters of gender quotas for women in government say that women’s representation is hard to achieve without quotas. They may argue that female leaders are better able to advocate for women’s policy interests because of shared experiences. Furthermore, if there is no critical mass of women leaders, the few women in power will have a harder time challenging traditional politicians. A considerable minority of female leaders increases their impact. Finally, the visibility of female leaders has a normalising effect: electorates begin associating women with leadership positions and are more likely to vote for women in the future, while more women consider public office as a viable career path when they otherwise would not have put themselves forward for election. Some also argue that reducing the number of men in public office not only addresses the overrepresentation of wealthy men belonging to dominant racial groups in their countries but also reduces the number of underqualified men in office because forcing them to compete for a smaller number of seats intensifies the scrutiny they face.\textsuperscript{4}

**Criticism of quotas**

Sceptics argue that voters have a right to decide their representatives and quotas harm their freedom to choose. They may also argue that quotas lead to less legitimacy for women leaders who are perceived as having achieved their seats at the expense of qualified men. Finally, they may also point to ways in which the quota system may largely benefit women from elite groups, whose interests align with traditionally powerful men, rather than women from marginalized communities or rural areas. The quota system can also be circumvented by parties who technically comply with quota requirements but intentionally field women


\textsuperscript{4} Murray, Rainbow. 2014. "HSS - Politics: It’s Time To Talk About Quotas For Men - Queen Mary University Of London". \url{https://www.qmul.ac.uk/media/news/items/hss/politics-its-time-to-talk-about-quotas-for-men.html}.
candidates who are weak and unlikely to win or winnable but less likely to threaten the party's established agenda.

**Task:**

Rwanda is a commonly cited success story in relation to gender quotas. In 2003, Rwanda mandated that women should occupy 30% of all governmental decision-making bodies. Read more about the Rwanda case. Here are some useful sources:


**Answer the following questions:**

1. Have gender quotas been successful in Rwanda? How is this success explained?
2. Should the success of gender quotas in Rwanda, if at all, mean that quotas will be successful elsewhere? Why or why not?
3. Aside from gender quotas for women in public office, what else can be done to increase women’s political participation?
4. Reflect on whether we can assume that female leaders are necessarily better advocates for women in general. If so, why? If not, what might be the reasons for this? Think about examples such as Theresa May and Margaret Thatcher.