



E-Discussion Summary

Gender Quotas as a Mechanism for Promoting Women in Politics



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Introduction

Despite comprising more than 50 percent of the world's population, women continue to lack access to political leadership opportunities and resources at all levels of government. Women's equal participation in decision-making is not only a demand for simple justice or democracy, but a necessary pre-condition for women's interests to be taken into account. Governance structures which do not result in the equal participation of men and women, or their equal enjoyment of benefits from state interventions are by definition neither inclusive nor democratic.

In 2007, recognizing that over the last century women's gains in the political arena have been slow and inadequate, five international organizations came together to make women's political participation their collective priority and devise a strategy that would scale-up each of the organization's efforts to foster gender equality in politics:

- International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA)
- Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU)
- National Democratic Institute (NDI)
- United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)
- United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM)

The International Knowledge Network of Women in Politics (www.iKNOWPolitics.org) is an online portal, jointly supported by the five partner organizations, that aims to increase the participation and effectiveness of women in political life by utilizing a technology-enabled forum to provide access to critical resources and expertise, stimulate dialogue, create knowledge, and share experiences among women in politics.

In just three years, iKNOW Politics has become the leading website on women's political participation. Building on a library of over 1500 resources, iKNOW Politics has captured the combined experience and knowledge of its 74 global experts and 6000 members from over 50 countries. iKNOW Politics has documented and disseminated the lessons and best practices of women as voters, candidates and elected legislators.

The following is a printed version of one of the most frequently-cited iKNOW Politics knowledge products, based on the combined input from experts and members worldwide. Please visit the iKNOW Politics website to pose a question of your own, contribute to the online discussions, browse the resource library or read additional iKNOW Politics consolidated expert responses, E-discussion summaries, interviews with women leaders, or contact iKNOW Politics at connect@iknowpolitics.org to get in touch with a staff member in your region of the world. iKNOW Politics is available in **English, French, Spanish and Arabic**.

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Launch Message

Gender quotas are a mechanism used to increase women's participation in politics and power-sharing positions. Quotas are becoming more popular around the world as a democratic measure used temporarily to guarantee women's representation in parliaments, governments, party lists, and other elected offices. As described on the Global Database of Quotas for Women, the quota system places the burden of recruitment not on the individual woman, but on those who control the recruitment process ensuring that women are not isolated in political life. (<http://www.quotaproject.org/aboutQuotas.cfm>) According to the data available as of February 2008, women on average occupy only 17.8 percent of the parliamentary seats in the world, which indicates that politics is still a heavily male-dominated arena (<http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm>).

This E-Discussion will focus on strengthening the knowledge base about gender quotas, the implementation of gender quotas around the world, and their impact on women's political representation. It will also provide a forum for the exchange of ideas, experiences, and cases related to the following key issues:

1. Quotas and Their Implementation Mechanisms: What are gender quotas and what types of quotas exist around the world? How necessary are quotas for increasing the representation of women in decision-making and power sharing positions?
2. Quota Types and Electoral Systems: What types of quotas are most effective for increasing women's political participation? What socio-political circumstances and electoral systems have proven most favorable for the introduction of gender quotas? Is there a preferred percentage for gender quotas?
3. Resistance to Quotas and How to Overcome It: What is the main criticism or source of resistance to the implementation of gender quotas? How can such resistance be overcome or counter-balanced? What institutional reforms should be carried out to promote and successfully implement gender quotas? In what ways is changing socio-cultural norms important for the success of gender quotas?
4. Advocating for Quotas: What strategies have been used by women and grassroots organizations to promote the adoption and implementation of quotas? What are the main obstacles encountered by these organizations in their advocacy work?

Discussion Summary

HOW NECESSARY ARE QUOTAS?

Quotas in the broader context

The issue of gender quotas in politics is part of a larger policy debate, which includes affirmative action, human rights and equality. Elia López de Tulipano defines quotas as:

“electoral quotas for women constitute an affirmative action that seeks to correct the inequality on women’s participation in political activities...” [[Cuán necesarias son las cuotas](#)]

Erika Brockmann says that quotas:

“are founded in the principle that in face of unequal realities, there are demands that need the application of unequal measures.” [[Las cuotas no bastan...](#)],

Danielle Moffatt talks about the relationship between women’s political participation and development from a rights-based approach, stating that:

“Women’s involvement in politics is intrinsically linked to development; in that, the latter can not truly exist if the former is not facilitated at a level where it can have an equal effect on policies and legislations.” [[Quota Systems and the Jamaican reality](#)]

Statistics show that quotas work

Most of the participants agreed that quotas are important for increasing women’s political participation and that on average countries that have quotas integrated into their electoral systems have higher numbers of women in politics and public life. Julie Ballington shared the following statistics:

- a) Of the nearly 70 countries with either legislated quotas, voluntary party quotas or reserved seats, the overall representation of women stands at around 22%;
- b) For the countries with no quotas the average stands at around 14%; and
- c) In elections held in 2007: countries with quotas elected 19.3% women on average, as opposed to 14.7% for countries with no quotas. [[Quotas key to increasing representation of women](#)]

Aminata Kasse provided the statistics from Burkina Faso highlighting the success of quotas there:

“In Burkina Faso, during the 2006 local elections, the ruling party has implemented an internal quota, which has increased the representation of women from 8.95% in 1995 to

30% in 2006. At the National Assembly the situation of women has certainly changed, though less dramatic: from 9.1% in 1997 to 15.31% in 2007. The smaller change is probably because the dominant party has not applied any quotas.” [\[Les quotas sont-ils nécessaires?\]](#)

In Panama Elia López de Tulipano notes that after the establishment of a 30% quota law, the number of elected women increased from 7% to 13% [\[Cuán necesarias son las cuotas\]](#).

Sanctions and implementation

Several participants noted the importance of sanctions and clear regulations to make a quota system effective. Gemma Bardají Blasco said that in Costa Rica, where they have a minimum 40% quota for all elected seats and in the political parties, sanctions include a denial of registration of parties that don't meet the quota. She suggested that there are other types of sanctions, including financial penalties, however she cautions that:

“in some cases parties have preferred and chose to pay the fine but not incorporate women. Besides the sanctions, it is fundamental that the quotas laws have clear and accurate regulations defining how quotas will be implemented, otherwise it is quite probable that they could have a null effect.” [\[Tipos de cuotas\]](#)

Success of quotas depends on electoral systems

Some participants raised concerns, suggesting that the type of quotas and electoral system can impact their effectiveness. Lorena Luz Larios Rodriguez [\[Concepto de cuotas de género\]](#), says there are three types of quotas: constitutional, electoral law and voluntary political party quotas. Deb Carlson, former Member of the Alberta Legislature in Canada [\[Quotas - what happens after?\]](#), where there is a first-past-the-post electoral system, suggests that quotas alone are insufficient, and that if women are not properly trained and financed they will not win and thereby create a backlash in the party against the quota system.

Nurgul Djanaeva points out that there can be unintended consequences of mandatory quotas, noting that during the 2007 Parliamentary Elections in Kyrgyzstan some major political parties were denied registration because they were not ready for quotas [\[Quotas, long-term and consistent involvement of women's NGOs\]](#). And Alejandra Massolo raises the point that quotas do not work in races where there is only one winner – for example mayoralty races:

“the hard core of the problem and the huge gender gap is found in...mayoral races. This is the position to which quota mechanisms are not applied, and it demonstrates the need

for them, because the persistently low proportion of women mayors in Latin America calls for some equivalent mechanisms in order to reduce the gap and broaden equal opportunities for women to municipal governments of all sizes and degrees of importance” [\[La cuota sola no basta y ¿qué hacemos con el cargo de Alcaldesa?\]](#)

Quotas alone are not enough

Participants also highlighted some challenges in the successful implementation of quotas where they exist. Rabab Baldo shared her experience in Sudan saying:

“due to the political context (political instability, on-going conflict, dictatorships and deteriorating socio-economic conditions) that resulted in lack of solidarity, coherence, feminist consciousness and mis-trust among the Sudanese women, the realization of the quota system needs more effort to bring the Sudanese women together to build their solidarity and unite them around a common vision to participate in the upcoming election in 2009.” [\[Without Women Solidarity quotas will be a curse, not a blessing\]](#)

Alejandra Massolo cautions that:

“Other legislative and political reforms must therefore accompany the application and the political, social and cultural process of quotas. One risk is that the meaning of quotas may turn into one more piece of “red tape” for “filling out” the number of women on electoral lists.” [\[La cuota sola no basta y ¿qué hacemos con el cargo de Alcaldesa?\]](#)

Erika Brockmann states that in Bolivia quotas:

“had an opposite effect and didn’t influence meaningfully the profound roots of the exclusion that is expressed at the heart of the political organizations...they didn’t have a meaningful impact on the citizens political culture which highly discriminates and that is prone (or has the tendency) to legitimize masculine leaderships.” [\[Las cuotas no bastan...\]](#)

She suggests that other measures should be put in place such as the formation of Women Parliamentary Caucuses, training programs and funding for women in politics. María Eugenia Rojas Valverde highlights a project that provides just this kind of training [\[Transformación de prácticas políticas: Condición necesaria...\]](#).

ADVOCATING FOR QUOTAS

Build alliances

Participants shared their own experiences with advocating for quotas in their countries and regions. Aminata Kasse said that in Burkina-Faso:

“the experience shows that in the fight for a better representation of women, women’s organizations should create alliances with organizations promoting human rights and women’s movements to elaborate common strategies.” [[stratégies?](#)]

Elia López de Tulipano highlighted the role of the National Forum of Women in Political Parties in Panama, an NGO that in 1993 lobbied for the Quotas Law, which was implemented in 1997 [[Incidencia para promover cuotas](#)]. In Paraguay, according to Carmen Colazo, party women’s secretariats and commissions and neighborhood party groups were very active in the process of getting quotas for participation in decision-making positions into the parties’ by-laws [[Cuotas en partidos politicos y código electoral del Paraguay](#)].

Stay informed

Amina Wangari recommended that women

“find relevant statistics and analyze them.” [[2 stratégies pour faire adopter les quotas.](#)]

Florence Hamil advises keeping informed:

“Make suggestions for implementing the policies by keeping abreast of legislation or discussion forums, participating in the forums and assisting in developing strategies for implementing the policies to pave the way for success.” [[Advocating for Quotas](#)]

Awareness campaigns

One fundamental strategy is the sensitization of public opinion toward the importance of gender quotas and women’s political participation. Awareness campaigns and the use of mass media are very important.

“Women without fear of power” was the slogan used a few years ago by women legislators in Brazil who launched a public campaign to increase the number of women in political office, as Lilian Celiberti recalls [[Las tan temidas cuotas](#)],

Carmen Colazo shares the experience of Paraguayan’s use of media which included the following core messages:

“what quotas are; how they are an affirmative action mechanism like any other (which were offered as examples); their political advantages; public policy issues that should be

on the political agenda, but that were not priorities for men; the importance of these issues for making the system more democratic (as an indicator of democracy and development); an explanation of the number of women in parties and how many had reached positions of power without being provided equal opportunity with men”. [[Cuotas en partidos politicos y código electoral del Paraguay](#)]

According to Elia Lopez de Tulipano, the main obstacles encountered by organizations in their advocacy efforts include: limited access to communication media (especially television); scarce financial resources; limited time and lack of knowledge of legal norms [[Incidencia para promover cuotas](#)]

RESISTANCE TO QUOTAS AND HOW TO OVERCOME IT

The nature of resistance

In this section of the E-Discussion, commentators agreed that resistance to the implementation of gender quotas in politics exists in many countries:

“In many countries in Latin America, there is still strong resistance to having women in positions of power in political parties and on the candidate lists that parties draw up to gain public support. This resistance has multiple cultural and institutional roots, and of course it has an impact on women.” Lilian Celiberti [[Las tan temidas cuotas](#)],

Elia López de Tulipano highlights three levels of resistance: resistance by male political leaders, who argue that there is no need for more advantages for women as they do not take the opportunities offered; resistance by women who have reached decision-making power positions without quotas; and the majority of the population who are indifferent and lack information [[Resistencia a las cuotas](#)]. Martha Barriga suggests more research is needed on resistance to quotas among women in politics [[Resistencia a las cuotas](#)].

Counter-arguments and strategies

Although participants acknowledged the importance of some of the arguments made by the opponents of quotas, they generally agreed that quotas are an important measure to increase women's numbers in politics, especially in conservative countries. The participants highlighted the fact that quotas are temporary in nature and that they are only a short-term solution to gender inequality. Nurgul Djanaeva points out:

“because quotas are temporary measures they should be implemented in parallel with long-term, well-funded and widely supported programs aimed at developing capacity and leadership of local women.” [[Capacity building, quotas and breaking double standards](#)]

Alessandra Pellizeri recommended:

“advocacy campaigns based on an objective, preferably economic arguments that demonstrate how a country can hardly progress if half of its population (generally women) is dependent on the other half’s decisions and does not contribute in economic terms to the development of the country.” [Resistance to Quotas and How to Overcome It]

Some participants suggested that the emphasis should be on democracy, rather than on gender alone. Carmen Colazo, suggested that there should also be quotas for youth, original peoples and other groups [[Resistencias y corporativismo](#)], and Gemma Bardají Blasco argues that:

“putting women at the center of the debate distracts attention and is done deliberately. We must place democracy at the center of the debate and question its limitations. The argument that quota laws undermine equality will therefore not carry any weight, since on the contrary, their goal is to try to correct the fact that more than half the human race does not have representation or the opportunity to defend its interests.” [[Argumentos](#)].

QUOTA TYPES AND ELECTORAL SYSTEMS

Proportional electoral systems are better for women

In this section, participants discussed different types of electoral systems and drew parallels between the success of quotas in a specific country or region and its electoral system. Many of the participants agreed that the proportional representation (PR) electoral system is more favorable for the implementation of gender quotas in politics. Charmaine Rodrigues shared her experiences in the Pacific region saying that

“There are some countries in the Pacific which have fared better than others. Most notably, the French territories of the Pacific have much higher numbers of women MPs (often around 30%). Many have suggested this may be because those countries have proportional representation systems which have enabled the use of party and/or list quotas to improve women's representation.” [[Quotas and Electoral Systems in the Pacific](#)]

Alessandra Pellizeri pointed out that:

“the mainly majoritarian electoral system in Mauritania does not facilitate female access to electoral functions. Therefore, women candidates have to be placed at strategic points in their lists (1st or 2nd , 6th, 11th , etc..) in order to be sure to be elected . Proportional electoral systems are in general more suitable to guarantee an easier access to the legislative posts for women.” [[Justification for Quotas and Experience of Mauritius](#)].

Based on experience with municipal councils, Alejandra Massolo suggests that proportional representation systems have facilitated the entry of women into formal political participation [[Sistemas electorales y compilación del Foro](#)].

Niki Johnson analyzes the impact that a quota with a high level of proportionality and closed and blocked lists would have had on recent election results in Uruguay:

“...the application of the minimum quota of one third (mechanism recently approved in the Uruguayan Senate), would have resulted in 2004 in the election of 10 more parliamentarians, taking the female representation rate from 10.8% to 18.5%, a significant increase. But in the elections of 1999 the impact would had been much less: Only three women more would had been elected.” [[Efectividad de las cuotas y sistemas electorales](#)]

Other factors

The majority of the commentators agreed that there are a number of other circumstances that influence the impact of quotas. Gemma Bardají Blasco suggests that factors include:

“the electoral costs, the party law, the electoral financing, the capacity of the electoral organs to offer clear and explicit information on the issue of quotas so that it guarantee the application of sanctions if required, if quotas were legislative or not...the country’s democratic culture will also have an impact, its socio political context and the media, conflicts, cultural diversity, decentralization, among others...” [[El complejo mundo de los sistemas electorales](#)],

José Ángel Aquino Rodríguez suggests that it is the electoral system combined with the nature of the party system that indicates success:

“In some cases, a closed list is advantageous; in others, it is not. The same is true if the list is unblocked, or, in more generic terms, in the case of the preferential vote. These factors in the electoral system correlate with the nature of the party system, its

segmentation and its impact on the distribution of seats.” [[Cuotas y otras acciones de promoción](#)]

Elia López de Tulipano discusses the role of political parties and asks what kind of transformations parties need to embrace to facilitate the election of women candidates [[Tipos de cuotas y sistemas electorales](#)].

CONCLUSION

Participants in the iKNOW Politics E-Discussion forum on gender quotas in politics generally favoured quotas and provided specific examples of cases where women’s representation has improved because of quotas. At the same time, a number of commentators cautioned that quotas alone are not enough, and that women also need essential training and financing, socio-political reforms and public engagement (including a sense of gender solidarity) in order to be successful. There were suggestions that without additional support structures there could be a backlash against quotas and women could face red tape and tokenism.

Some participants emphasized the importance of sanctions and a strong regulatory system in order to make quotas effective, however others cautioned that failing to register parties that do not meet the quotas without giving them the time to make the transition can have unintended consequences.

There was a general consensus that the type of electoral system can have a large impact on the effectiveness of quotas. Most participants preferred proportional representation electoral systems with larger electoral districts, and some pointed out the limitations of quotas where there is only a single winner (ie: mayoralty races). However, the dynamics of the party system and the socio-political context have a significant impact on the effectiveness of quotas.

Most respondents agreed that there is significant resistance to quotas, some of it from women politicians themselves. Participants recommended that one way to overcome such resistance is to put emphasis on democracy, rather than gender, and to explore the fact that quotas are often only temporary measures. Some advice provided for those advocating for quotas include forming alliances, staying well informed and launching awareness campaigns.

While acknowledging the limitations of quotas as a stand-alone measure to promote women's political participation, the e-discussion revealed tangible results of implementing gender quotas in politics, and provided solid advice for those who champion them.



Participants:

During the seven days of the E-Discussion, iKNOW Politics received sixty-seven comments from its members and experts worldwide (26 in English, 31 in Spanish and 10 in French). We would like to thank the following contributors to the discussion:

- Alessandra Pellizzeri, Governance Programme Officer, UNDP, Mauritania
- Amina Wangari
- Aminata Faye Kasse, National Democratic Institute, Burkina Faso
- Barbro Westerholm, Member of Swedish Parliament, Sweden
- Danielle Moffatt, the Caribbean region-Jamaica
- Charmaine Rodrigues, Legislative Strengthening Expert/UNDP, the Pacific region
- Deb Carlson, Former Member of the Alberta Legislature, Canada
- Desy M.Furaha, National President of Femmes Solidaires pour la Paix et le Développement
- Diop Fati

- Drita Kadriu, Member of the Kosova Assembly
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- Rabab M. A. Baldo, Gender Coordinator, UNIFEM
- Rainbow Murray, University of London, United Kingdom
- Regina Mundi, Cameroon
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- Carmen Colazo, Paraguay

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