

The “Great Quotas Debate” from the Fawcett Society.

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Gender quotas are taking off. From **politics** to the **judiciary** via **company boards**, all around the world, quotas are opening doors that were previously shut to women. Yet they remain controversial and regularly face stiff resistance. Why? Here I debunk some of the most popular myths about gender quotas.

'THEY'RE UNMERITOCRATIC'

No-one wants to replace a talented man with a rubbish woman. People should be appointed on merit alone. But what opponents of quotas fail to acknowledge is that quotas are needed precisely because we do not have a meritocracy. Men have long had an unfair advantage that allows less talented men to rise the ranks while excellent women are held back. The many barriers to women are not just social (eg childcare, old boys' networks etc) but also psychological – we tend to evaluate candidates on criteria that favour men, and then recognise men's achievements more readily than women's even when those achievements are identical. If we want a real meritocracy, we should see quotas as a catalyst rather than an obstacle.

'THEY'RE PATRONISING'

No-one likes to be called a “quota woman”. Everyone wants to say they made it on their own. But it's gender inequality and discrimination that are the problem, not quotas. It's even more patronising to exclude women and then blame them for their own exclusion. At least quotas give women the chance to prove that they should have been there all along.

'THEY DISCRIMINATE AGAINST MEN'

Not as much as the status quo discriminates against women. Quotas never give more than half of opportunities to women. That leaves at least half the opportunities for men. That doesn't seem like such a raw deal.

'THEY'RE UNNECESSARY; VOLUNTARY MEASURES ARE BETTER'

Quotas have become popular precisely because voluntary measures don't have the desired effect. The entrenched resistance to feminisation in the upper echelons of power means that soft measures tend not to work. Forcing people's hand is often the only way to make them change. When powerful men have no choice but to appoint good women, they always manage to find them. The women were there all along – the men just needed to be forced to look.

'QUOTAS TACKLE THE SYMPTOM, NOT THE CAUSE'

Actually they do both. Once you get women into power, you can start addressing the many reasons for their long-standing absence. Women get the chance to demonstrate their abilities and normalise the idea of women at the top. They inspire other women to step up. They become mentors and forge networks to develop the next generation of women leaders. They sit on recruitment panels and promote more inclusive working practices. They help to effect cultural change and shifts in mentalities. Women's absence from the top is mostly caused by the attitudes, networks and practices that result from long-term male monopolies of power. Hence, forcibly ending male-domination is the only way to stop the problem from self-perpetuating indefinitely.

Of course, in an ideal world we wouldn't have quotas. It's always better when people do the right thing voluntarily rather than through coercion. But we do not live in an ideal world. We live in a world where women have experienced systematic discrimination at all points in time and in all parts of the world. And there is still widespread acceptance of this discrimination. Changing views and practices that are so deeply entrenched is never easy, and that is why quotas face so much resistance. But without a powerful catalyst for change, women face many more years of being relegated to the sidelines. That would do more harm than quotas ever could.

For information/reference

Members may also find this historic article on the outcome of the 2003 Welsh Assembly election, in terms of gender of equality, an interesting read.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/may/09/gender.uk>