



Research Report

Commission on the Status of Women (CSW)

Issue 2: Promoting Gender Equality

Through the Implementation of Mandatory
Gender Quotas in Parliaments

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Introduction

Despite significant progress in women's rights over the past century, gender inequality in political representation remains a persistent global issue. Women represent nearly half of the world's population, yet they continue to occupy only around 26–27% of seats in national parliaments worldwide, according to data published by UN Women. This imbalance raises concerns about whether democratic institutions truly reflect the populations they serve.

Political representation is not only about numbers; it directly affects policymaking. Studies have shown that increased female participation in parliament often correlates with stronger attention to issues such as healthcare, education, gender-based violence, and child welfare. However, structural barriers such as cultural discrimination, unequal access to campaign funding, limited political networks, and traditional gender roles continue to prevent equal participation.

One proposed solution is the implementation of mandatory gender quotas in parliaments. These quotas legally require a certain percentage of parliamentary seats or candidate lists to be allocated to women. While supporters argue that quotas are necessary to accelerate progress and correct systemic inequality, critics question whether such measures interfere with democratic processes and merit-based selection. As a result, this topic remains highly debated within the international community and requires coordinated multilateral discussion.

Definition of Key Terms

Gender Equality:

The principle that individuals of all genders should have equal rights, responsibilities, and opportunities in political, economic, and social life.

Gender Quotas:

Mechanisms designed to increase women's political representation by requiring a minimum percentage of female candidates or elected representatives.

Mandatory (Legislated) Quotas:

Quotas that are established by national law and are legally binding for political parties or institutions.

Reserved Seats:

A quota system in which a specific number or percentage of parliamentary seats are set aside exclusively for women.

Candidate Quotas:

A system requiring political parties to nominate a minimum percentage of female candidates during elections.

Voluntary Party Quotas:

Quotas adopted internally by political parties without legal obligation from the government.

Tokenism:

The symbolic inclusion of individuals from underrepresented groups without granting them meaningful power or influence.

Background

The struggle for women's political rights has evolved significantly over the past century. In many countries, women only gained the right to vote during the 20th century. While suffrage marked a major milestone, political equality did not automatically follow.

In 1979, the United Nations adopted CEDAW, which encouraged states to eliminate discrimination against women in political and public life. Article 7 of the convention specifically calls on states to ensure women's equal participation in the formulation of government policy and the holding of public office. However, implementation has varied greatly among member states.

The 1995 Beijing Declaration further reinforced global commitments to gender equality in leadership. Since then, the Commission on the Status of Women has regularly reviewed progress and highlighted persistent disparities in political representation.

In response to slow progress, many countries introduced gender quota systems in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. These systems differ widely in design and effectiveness. For example, Rwanda implemented a constitutional reserved-seat system after 2003, leading to women holding over 60% of parliamentary seats, the highest percentage in the world. Meanwhile, countries such as France introduced legislated candidate quotas requiring political parties to present equal numbers of male and female candidates, with financial penalties for non-compliance.

However, quotas are not universally accepted. Some governments argue that cultural, social, or political differences must be considered before implementing mandatory systems. Others fear that quotas may lead to accusations of unfair advantage or undermine public trust if not implemented carefully.

Today, over 130 countries use some form of gender quota, either legislated or voluntary, yet global gender parity in parliaments remains far from achieved. The issue has therefore shifted from whether women should participate in politics, which is widely accepted, to how governments can ensure meaningful and equal representation.

Major Countries and Organizations Involved

Rwanda

Rwanda is often highlighted as a global leader in female parliamentary representation due to its constitutional reserved-seat system. The country views quotas as an essential tool for post-conflict reconstruction and inclusive governance.

France

France enforces legislated candidate quotas and imposes financial penalties on parties that fail to comply. It supports gender equality but still faces challenges in achieving full parity in high-level political positions.

Sweden

Sweden relies on voluntary party quotas rather than mandatory legislation. It is often considered a model for gender equality due to strong social support systems and political culture.

United States

The United States does not have national gender quotas and emphasizes electoral competition and merit-based selection. Women's representation has increased gradually but remains below parity.

UN Women

UN Women supports policies that enhance women's political participation and provides technical assistance to member states implementing quota systems.

Possible Solutions

One possible solution is the phased implementation of mandatory quotas. Countries could begin with lower percentage requirements and gradually increase them over time. This would allow political systems and societies to adapt while still moving toward parity.

Another approach involves strict enforcement mechanisms. Without penalties or monitoring systems, quota laws may not be effectively implemented. Financial sanctions, rejection of non-compliant candidate lists, or public transparency measures could strengthen enforcement.

Additionally, quotas could be combined with broader gender equality policies. These might include campaign finance support for female candidates, leadership development programs, mentorship initiatives, and public awareness campaigns to challenge gender stereotypes.

Member states could also encourage regional cooperation. Sharing best practices between countries with successful quota systems and those considering implementation could improve effectiveness and reduce political resistance.

Finally, some countries may choose hybrid systems that balance national sovereignty with international standards. For example, voluntary party quotas combined with state incentives could provide flexibility while still promoting progress.

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