

Shifting the gender quota debate from underrepresentation of women to overrepresentation of men within diplomacy

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Abstract:

While some progress has been made towards gender equality in diplomacy, women remain underrepresented in ambassadorial positions worldwide. Quotas have been effective in boosting nominal representation of women but critiques focused on quotas being tokenistic and harming meritocracy place a double burden on women. However, even the current system is not meritocratic, as men benefit from a historical advantage and assumed competence, while women must justify their presence, prove their worth and disprove gender stereotypes. Therefore, this brief suggests that focusing on overrepresentation of men instead of underrepresentation of women, as suggested by Rainbow Murray (2014), would improve representation for all and create a more fair and merit-based system.

Despite the fact that modern advancements challenge patriarchal structures, diplomacy as a profession still adheres to outdated notions of gender, leading to power dynamics that reinforce gender inequality and the marginalization of women (Cassidy, 2017). Worldwide, the glass-ceiling for women in diplomacy remains in place, with women still under-represented in ambassadorial positions. Only around 23.1 percent of all ambassadors, arguably the most coveted diplomatic appointment, are women, which leads to an estimated 38 years until parity in representation. While it could be expected that this number decreases in time, it has actually increased by 8 years in 2022 (SheCurity Index, 2022). The situation is slightly better in the EU with 18 years until parity in 2022 compared to 26 years in 2021, but the number remains unsatisfactory (ibid). In Slovakia, only 15.7 percent of all ambassadors are women (Women in Diplomacy Conference, 2022), which is far below both the world and EU average. Conversely, men remain to be overrepresented in the field of diplomacy, at the rate of 84.3 percent in Slovakia and oscillating at around 75 percent in the EU as such.

In recent years, a number of countries have created institutional mechanisms to increase the nominal representation of women in diplomacy, including through programming, training and budget development (Bigio and Vogelstein, 2020). One of such solutions is gender quotas, which has been a controversial issue in many countries, and remains so especially in more conservative societies of Central Europe.

While quotas may appear as a rigid solution, evidence shows that it is the only effective way to prioritise equality and diversity within diplomatic institutions (Pande and Ford, 2012; Cassidy, 2017). Quotas are effective in increasing the representation of women in diplomacy because they address the systemic barriers that prevent women from achieving equal representation. These barriers include societal and cultural biases and stereotypes, lack of role models, and lack of support networks. One of the most prominent advantages of quota system is that by setting tangible, measurable and time bound goals, they help bring about change in a relatively short period of time. Quotas may be a very effective tool especially in Central European countries, in which the issues of inclusion and diversity either remain invisible or even vilified. In Slovakia, for instance, no state institution has adopted gender quotas so far (Women in Diplomacy Conference, 2022). With most international exposure and the duty to report on gender equality in foreign policy and diplomacy, Ministries of Foreign Affairs could actually be in-country trend-setters, and by being the first to adopt gender quota, lead other state institutions by example.

On the other hand, critics argue that quotas can be seen as tokenistic and can lead to the appointment of unqualified women. It is important to note that when the quota system is criticised, the arguments focus solely on women, often questioning their skills, ambitions or expertise. Moreover, even though 'gender' is not synonymous with 'women' (Carver, 1996), the debate on gender quotas frames the underrepresentation of women in diplomacy as a problem and sees quotas as a solution, which creates a lasting link between quotas and women. Research shows that this is true even when gender quotas are framed neutrally, which should mean both genders. However, because men have not been a subject of historical marginalisation, even neutral framing or wording of quota remains synonymous with 'women'. This link between 'gender quota' and 'women' means that any critique of the quota system automatically places an additional burden on women to prove themselves and justify their place in diplomacy. At the same time, men are not held to the same examination (Murray, 2014).

One of the most commonly cited arguments against quotas is the belief in a merit-based system, claiming that quotas may favour the appointment of underqualified women

at the expense of more professionally superior men. Because gender quotas are usually quotas on women or neutrally framed quotas associated with women mostly anyway, women seeking to establish themselves in diplomacy face the challenge of proving their merit (Murray, 2014). Men, however, benefit from the historical advantage and assumption of competence. The most persuasive way to demonstrate competence is by performing the required task, and since men are already in positions of power, their abilities are taken for granted (Neumann, 2008). As a result, men's qualifications and traits are not often subject to as close an examination as women's. Therefore, the belief that the current system is meritocratic and objective, is questionable at best. Women are often required to prove their worth by disproving gendered stereotypes and preassumptions of inadequacy. The burden of proof falls on them, which means a double disadvantage (Murray, 2014). Not only are they less likely to have their competence taken for granted and more likely to be expected to justify their positions, they also have fewer opportunities to do so (Neumann, 2008).

Opponents of quotas often assume that, based on meritocracy, the overrepresentation of men is a fair and accurate outcome. The proponents of quota system, however, challenge this notion, arguing that women must be more qualified than men to overcome the barriers preventing their presence. When the criteria for demonstrating merit are based on the privileged group, it becomes even more difficult for those outside that group to prove their merit (Murray, 2014). And despite research showing the opposite (Besley et al., 2017), women appointed to high positions, not only in diplomacy, remain undermined by the assumption that their achievements can be attributed rather to quota than to their ability and expertise (Murray, 2014). Evidence therefore may not be sufficient to even the field in diplomacy and a prevalent number of academics and experts emphasise that the public debate needs to be reframed from underrepresentation of women to overrepresentation of men (Besley et al., 2017; Cassidy, 2017; Murray, 2014).

While increasing representation of marginalised groups is important for achieving greater equality, focusing solely on underrepresentation can obscure the fact that overrepresentation of certain groups, is actually the problem. Gender quotas are typically

seen as a way to increase the representation of marginalised groups, in this case women, rather than as a way to limit the number of individuals from already overrepresented groups. By focusing on the underrepresentation of women, it implies that men are the default or normal group, while women are seen as "other." This puts the burden on women to prove their worth and justify their presence, while men are not held to the same standards (Murray, 2014).

By shifting the quota debate to include a focus on overrepresentation of men, we can more effectively address the systemic issues that lead to the underrepresentation of women in diplomacy and other fields. Overrepresentation of a particular group in any field, including in diplomacy, can be a problem for several reasons. It reinforces societal biases and stereotypes, strengthens existing power imbalances, perpetuates discrimination, leads to a lack of diversity in decision- and policy-making, decreases the quality of representation, and leaves marginalised groups voices unheard, just to name a few.

However, the lack of public discourse on overrepresentation does not mean that it is not an important issue that needs to be addressed. Similarly, the underrepresentation of certain groups was also not widely debated until campaigns for quotas for women highlighted the democratic shortcomings caused by excluding certain groups from power. It is now necessary to focus on overrepresentation to expose the lack of meritocracy in current power imbalances and to initiate a conversation on how to improve representation (Murray, 2014). Setting quotas for men would raise public awareness of a problem that is often ignored or denied, particularly by those who benefit from maintaining the status quo.

Murray (2014) proposes that gender quotas focus on establishing ceilings for overrepresented groups instead of floors for underrepresented groups. For instance, a quota for men would set a limit on the maximum number of men in ambassadorial positions, ideally around 60% or 50%. Some researchers propose 70 percent (Cassidy, 2017), however Murray warns that having an overly generous ceiling could result in allowing for such a margin which resists any significant change. As this approach can be applied to any overrepresented group, it has potential to improve representation beyond just gender

equality. Even though it may be received with some resistance by conservative governments and traditional societies, it would open a debate on the problems that come with overrepresentation and what role fair representation plays in democracy.

Furthermore, as it has been proven that men do not have a natural superiority of talent (Murray, 2014), we can assume that most qualities are randomly distributed in population. Limiting the talent pool to men only means losing half of the best talents. Limiting the pool therefore results in a less competitive process and the selection of suboptimal candidates, who would not have been selected if competition was open to everyone. This means that the current system allowing for homosocial environment in diplomacy is not meritocratic, as it may actually let in individuals not because they are the best people for the job, but because they are the standard gender to do it (ibid). Such a system leads to an inefficient use of available talent, and inferior quality of representation, which affects the whole population, not just women.

Looking at it from the perspective of overrepresentation, the introduction of a quota ceiling can tackle the issue of too many candidates selected from one limited subsection of the talent pool while overlooking talent from others. A quota system for men would limit their numbers to ensure only the most qualified advance. It would contribute towards a fairer and actual merit-based selection (Murray, 2014). Widening the pool of capable and qualified individuals is crucial in addressing current challenges (not only) in international relations and foreign policy.

Furthermore, quotas solely for women may create internal pressures and tension within departments, which then affects women who face prejudice when selected through the quota system. Quotas focused on the overrepresented group would shift the debate from overexamining the capabilities and expertise of underrepresented groups to those that benefit from overrepresentation. If this burden of having to prove their worth is lifted, we may see more women and individuals coming from marginalised groups applying for leadership positions, and therefore improving the demand side of the issue.

In conclusion, despite some advancements in promoting gender equality, the underrepresentation of women in ambassadorial positions prevails. Quotas have been shown to be an effective solution in increasing the nominal representation of women. However, they face additional backlash criticising the approach for being tokenistic or compromising meritocracy. Still, the notion of the current system being meritocratic is flawed as men continue to benefit from historical advantage and assumption of competence. At the same time, women need to justify their presence and disprove gender stereotypes. It is important to note, however, that despite this additional burden, it is better to have gender quotas on women rather than have none, as gender quotas are beneficial by giving women the opportunity to demonstrate their competence by performing the role. However, this study would like to put forward research by Rainbow Murray (2014), who recommends that quotas focus on the overrepresentation of men instead of the underrepresentation of women. This would improve the quality of representation for everyone and contribute towards a more just and meritocratic system.

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