

Gender quotas work in 'tight' cultures, says new paper

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Quotas probably won't get more women into the boardroom in places like the U.S. and Canada.

They have a better chance however in countries such as China or Germany where people place a higher value on obeying authority and conforming to cultural norms, say a pair of researchers at the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management. Their conclusions are published in the journal *Organizational Dynamics* and in a blog for the *Harvard Business Review*.

It all comes down to a culture's "tightness" or "looseness"—the degree to which a culture maintains [social norms](#), adheres to authority structures and tolerates deviations from them, say Profs. Soo Min Toh and Geoffrey Leonardelli. Global organizations seeking to expand their female leadership ranks need to understand which kind of culture they're operating in to take the right approach, the authors suggest.

"It's certainly an issue that has the attention of a lot of corporations right now," says Toh, an associate professor of [organizational behaviour](#) at the University of Toronto Mississauga's Institute of Management & Innovation, who is cross-appointed to the Rotman School. "There has been very little change in the last few years."

Tight cultures such as those in China, Germany, and Pakistan have a lower tolerance for deviation from cultural norms and may even impose severe sanctions for doing so. Loose cultures, such as in the U.S., New

Zealand and Hungary, tend to be more open to change, and experience higher rates of change than tight cultures.

Tight cultures tend to have the worst rates of female leadership, but the compliance they command can be used to advantage, making gender quota strategies much more effective, say the researchers. Norway, considered a tight culture, achieved a target of 40% of women in director positions at public companies by 2007 through a quota that included dissolution of those firms that failed to meet the threshold.

"It's easier for tight cultures to implement policies like that because of the top-down approach to policy-making," says Prof. Toh. "In a loose culture however, it's very hard to say, 'This is how we're going to do it, so there.'"

Loose [cultures](#), although exhibiting higher rates of gender egalitarianism overall, may be at a disadvantage for advancing the cause because of problems getting agreement on how to translate egalitarian principles into practice.

The researchers speculate that in those cases, showcasing women leaders as role models may be a more effective way of changing the perceptions of decision-makers and women themselves about what leadership looks like, resulting in more women stepping forward and being chosen for leadership roles. In one experiment, women who were exposed to pictures and biographies of prominent female leaders were more likely to subsequently see compatibility between [women](#) and leadership.

Provided by University of Toronto

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