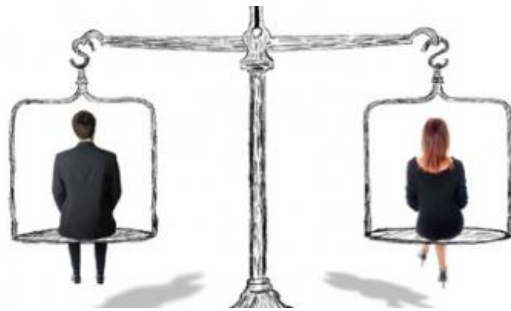


# Gender quotas are often misconstrued as they invoke emotional rather than rational responses

March 24 2016, by George Wigmore

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Gender quotas are often misconstrued as they invoke emotional rather than rational responses according to the first major review of the literature carried out by academics at City University London and Kelley School of Business, Indiana University.

The new paper, which is published in *Business Ethics Quarterly*, also shows that the current research on gender quotas is confused and often just descriptive.

Gender quotas are a highly topical issue in the business world, with 15 countries now having adopted gender board quotas and a further 17

implementing some sort of voluntary measures, but they are often seen as controversial.

Speaking about the study, co-author Dr Ruth Sealy, Senior Lecturer in Organisational Psychology at City University London, said:

"Gender quotas are often misconstrued as undemocratic and discriminatory - usually invoking emotional rather than rational responses - but can also be considered a very rational 'last response' to an intractable problem of [gender imbalance](#) in the upper echelons of the corporate world."

Despite 40 years of equal opportunities policies and more than two decades of government and organisation initiatives, women are still seriously underrepresented on corporate boards and face significant barriers to career progression. In the UK, women currently account for 26% of FTSE 100 board members and still less than 10% of executive directors.

To investigate these tensions in the literature, the authors reviewed more than 120 articles, book chapters, white papers and working papers from over 50 scholars globally, from a diversity of fields including ethics, law, management and psychology.

Dr Sealy said: "The goal of our paper was reviewing existing literature, enlightening and advancing theoretical debates for and against quotas. What we found is that the academic evidence on quotas is mostly descriptive and often conflicting. We highlight three areas of tension and conflict when looking at quotas: around motivations for board gender quotas, the legitimacy of quotas, and the outcomes of quotas.

"These all bring up ethical issues and questions about the role of business and organisations in society. Quotas are a solution to address the ethical

issue of gender inequality on boards, but are usually met with huge resistance as they offend our belief in meritocracy. But what is interesting is how refuting the use of quotas has allowed the use of gender targets across organisations to become acceptable and normalised within the business world. So many of our largest organisations are publicly announcing [gender](#) targets at board level and below – it's a real sign of progress."

Provided by City University London

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