

3Qs: Breaking into the boardroom

March 15 2012, By Brenna Eagan



Laura Frader, professor of history, examines the issues over the European Union considering legislation that would create quotas for women in corporate management roles. Credit: Mike Mazzanti

Last week, a debate began over the European Union considering legislation that would create quotas for the number of women in in top business positions. Northeastern University news office asked Laura Frader, professor of history and associate dean of faculty in the College of Social Sciences and Humanities, to explain why women are still underrepresented in business and how legal action might accelerate gender equality.

For decades, women have been working for increased equality and empowerment in the workplace, particularly in business. Why are many women still

having trouble breaking into the top echelons?

Cultural perceptions of gender difference and the practices to which they lead are crucial. Although in Europe, as in the United States, there is general acceptance of [women](#)'s labor force participation, beliefs about what constitutes appropriate work for women still restrict the kinds of jobs to which women are directed from a relatively young age.

In Europe as in the United States, beliefs about men's "innate capacity" to lead are also part of cultural perceptions of gender divisions; these perceptions have concrete effects on women's ability to achieve positions in the top echelons of the business world as well as in the political world.

The notion of the boardroom as a kind of men's club is a product of beliefs about gender difference and men's reluctance to share power with women.

What potential backlash and benefits could result from this potential EU legislation?

The proposal for quotas responds to a recent report showing that women constitute less than 14 percent of the members of corporate boards and just over 3 percent of the chairs of major corporations.

There is already a debate brewing about the value of affirmative action, and some will surely resist quotas if they are imposed. Many Europeans – especially corporate leaders – resent being required to conform to European norms.

Women stand to benefit from EU support that will allow them to get a foot in the door of the boardroom. Paying attention to the representation

of women means that corporations will draw on a larger pool of talent. Quotas are far from ideal, but data show that they do have a positive effect in breaking down barriers to gender (and other forms of) equality over time.

What are some options to foster societal and cultural changes that help women break through the "glass ceiling?" Are quotas a viable option to delivering genuine equality in the workplace?

Quotas are not enough – a culture of social solidarity is also critical. Both France and Norway illustrate that measures to support gender equity on corporate boards and in the labor force overall must be accompanied by robust social support for women's equal participation such as day care, paid maternity leave and equal pay.

A strong tradition of women's political representation also helps. In Norway, for example, women constitute close to 40 percent of the members of parliament –one of the highest proportions in Europe – so Norwegians are used to seeing women in leadership positions more generally. Political and economic equality are mutually reinforcing.

Provided by Northeastern University

Citation: 3Qs: Breaking into the boardroom (2012, March 15) retrieved 19 September 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-03-3qs-boardroom.html>

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