

JANUARY 2016

**GENDER
QUOTAS**

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DEBATING MATTERS
TOPIC
GUIDES

MOTION:

**“GENDER QUOTAS IN
THE WORKPLACE
ARE GOOD FOR
EQUALITY”**

ABOUT DEBATING MATTERS

Debating Matters because ideas matter. This is the premise of the Institute of Ideas Debating Matters Competition for sixth form students which emphasises substance, not just style, and the importance of taking ideas seriously. Debating Matters presents schools with an innovative and engaging approach to debating, where the real-world debates and a challenging format, including panel judges who engage with the students, appeal to students from a wide range of backgrounds, including schools with a long tradition of debating and those with none.

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KEY TERMS

[Electoral quotas for women](#)

[Equality Act 2010](#)

[Glass ceiling](#)

[Non-executive & executive directors](#)

[Quota](#)

INTRODUCTION

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In March 2015 the German parliament voted to implement a new law requiring over 100 listed companies to allot 30 per cent of seats on non-executive boards to women [Ref: [Reuters](#)]. Noting that other European countries have introduced similar legislation in recent years – and with the European Commission considering a directive for a mandatory 40% gender quota - campaigners have argued that the UK should follow suit - with less than a third of seats on FTSE 100 boards and parliamentary seats currently held by women and to help close the infamous ‘gender pay gap’ [Ref: [Gov.uk](#)]. Supporters of such measures argue that, while the Equality Act 2010 ended much official discrimination in the workplace, quotas are ‘an unfortunate, but necessary’ [Ref: [The Week](#)] instrument to tackle discrimination at elite levels of society, and that better representation of women at a political level will enhance the goals of social equality [Ref: [LSE](#)]. Some suggest such moves may even have a beneficial effect on how such institutions are run beyond affirming a commitment to equality [Ref: [Telegraph](#)]. Yet critics of quotas argue that such enforced measures can have a detrimental effect, leading to an over-promotion of unsuitable candidates due to a need to meet targets, and a cynicism towards women who have earned elite jobs on merit [Ref: [New York Times](#)] which could potentially undermine social trends towards gender equality. Do gender quotas undermine important values of meritocracy and equality, or are they a necessary intervention to correct structural unfairness?



THE GENDER QUOTAS DEBATE IN CONTEXT

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Just a numbers game?

In 2011 the UK government's Davies Report highlighted that the rate of increase of women on FTSE 100 boards – 12.5% in 2010 – was too slow, and argued that there was a 'clear business case' for improving diversity in corporate governance by challenging the 'group-think' associated with all-male boards drawn from similar backgrounds [Ref: [BBC News](#)]. The report concluded however, that it was better for companies to act voluntarily rather than face governmental sanction through actively challenging the barriers to women accessing executive positions. In 2015, an annual report declared a success in increasing the figure to 25%, and set a new target of 30% by 2020. Some argue that this change has only come about due to the threat of legislation and that therefore, official measures would only accelerate this trend further to the benefit of contemporary women [Ref: [IB Times](#)]. Yet others argue that the experience of Norway and elsewhere suggests the link between economic success and gender balance is not straightforward, even if they support its general aims [Ref: [Economist](#)]. Both supporters and critics of quotas agree that the question is not fundamentally one of pragmatism but principle: should companies be compelled by law to improve gender diversity or should this be left to the forces of social pressure and cultural change [Ref: [Financial Times](#)]?

From the boardroom to beyond?

Critics argue that gender quotas simply do not provide a wider social benefit, creating a so-called 'golden skirt' effect where a small number of female executives benefit from well-paid positions, creating resentment from male and female co-workers [Ref: [The Times](#)] and undermining the principle of meritocracy in the workplace. In addition, they observe that the gender pay gap is driven by complicated social factors, and that elevating the pay of a few women at the top will do little to change this in the long-term, because ultimately "replacing privileged men with privileged women doesn't seem to pay any diversity benefits" [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. Yet supporters of quotas argue that it is more important to effect a cultural change at senior level in order to alter self-perpetuating practices which deter women from applying, and aspiring, to roles traditionally occupied by men [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. Moreover, they also see quotas as a necessary tool to break through the 'glass ceiling' which holds women back from senior roles, and therefore acts as a corrective to structural inequalities which largely benefit the male-dominated status quo [Ref: [The Parliament Magazine](#)]. On this point, one writer notes that whilst "In an ideal world, quotas would not be necessary", after generations of structural and societal unfairness in favour of men, "quotas may be the only way of achieving, eventually, a world where quotas are obsolete." [Ref: [New Statesman](#)]



THE GENDER QUOTAS DEBATE IN CONTEXT CONTINUED

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A 50:50 parliament?

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau won international attention last year for insisting on a gender balanced cabinet on the grounds that “its 2015” [Ref: [Global News](#)]. While the proportion of women in the UK parliament rose to a third in 2015, it is argued that a representative democracy should have a full gender balance [Ref: [50:50 Parliament](#)]. The Labour Party used all-female shortlists for safe seats to increase the number of female MPs in 1997 and 2005, but its use has been controversial both internally and in other parties [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. Feminist campaigners argue that countries where political gender quotas are common tend to offer more robust support to women on sex-specific issues such as reproductive rights, discrimination in the workplace and childcare, and therefore balanced parliaments are more democratic [Ref: [New Statesman](#)]. Yet some question whether the use of enforced quotas to advance political ends is itself illiberal, and whether imposing tokenistic targets distracts from challenging gender inequalities across the rest of society. As critic Sabine Beppler-Spahl argues, they “have nothing to do with democracy or equality... (because) The number of women on boards is not the root of any problem” [Ref: [spiked](#)]. Do quotas undermine genuine equality, giving women “special privileges granted to them from above” [Ref: [spiked](#)]? Or should we accept that they are an important way of ensuring fairness in the workplace? Are gender quotas good for equality?



ESSENTIAL READING

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FOR

[Why we need gender quotas for women on boards](#)

Vicky Pryce *Guardian* 23 November 2015

[Diversity quotas are meritocracy in action](#)

Laurie Penny *New Statesman* 18 September 2015

[Business could do with the feminine touch](#)

Martin Vander Weyer *Telegraph* 27 March 2015

[EU gender equality legislation key to breaking the glass ceiling](#)

Věra Jourová *The Parliament Magazine* 15 December 2014

AGAINST

[Germany's gender quota: illiberal and divisive](#)

Sabine Bepplar-Spahl *spiked* 20 August 2015

[Feminists today are too obsessed with their own elite, metropolitan lives](#)

Alison Wolf *Guardian* 21 January 2015

[Boardroom quotas won't help women](#)

Carrie Lukas *New York Times* 7 December 2014

[Women make different choices. That's not bias](#)

Ruth Lea *The Times* 7 January 2013

IN DEPTH

[Do more women on the board mean better results?](#)

Renuka Rayasam *New Yorker* 19 November 2015

[Are gender quotas needed?](#)

Financial Times 14 June 2015

[Should there be all-women shortlists?](#)

Guardian 22 August 2014



BACKGROUNDEERS

[Equal Pay Day: analysis reveals the 'pay gap' is not really a gap at all](#)

Kate Andrews *International Business Times* 9 November 2015

[Lord Davies report: can gender quotas get more women on boards?](#)

Lydia Smith *International Business Times* 29 October 2015

[Women on boards: 5 year summary \(Davies review\)](#)

Department of Business, Innovation and Skills 29 October 2015

[Quotas: the key to gender equality?](#)

Gemma Williams *Institute for Government* 26 October 2015

[The right way to tackle gender inequality in the legal profession](#)

Guardian 27 September 2015

[Mind the pay gap: will Cameron's proposals achieve workplace equality?](#)

Oyvind Skorge *LSE Politics & Policy* 27 July 2015

[Closing the Gender Pay Gap: government consultation](#)

Government Equalities Office 14 July 2015

[Gender diversity on boards: do quota systems work?](#)

Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development June 2015

[Gender quotas: vital for equality or mere tokenism?](#)

The Week 15 May 2015

[Promoting gender equality is business critical](#)

Hannah Lynn *Lexis Nexis* 26 March 2015

[Diversity quotas in the law – the issues](#)

Monidipa Fouzder *Law Gazette* 6 November 2014

[Gender quotas in hiring drive away both women and men](#)

Meir Shemla & Anja Kreienberg *Forbes* 16 October 2014

[Across the board opposition to all-women shortlists](#)

Will Jordan *YouGov* 28 August 2014

[Gender quotas feel coercive but appear to work](#)

Claer Barrett *Financial Times* 15 May 2014

[The spread of gender quotas for company boards](#)

Economist 25 March 2014

[The biggest myth about the gender pay gap](#)

Derek Thompson *Atlantic* 30 May 2013

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NOTES

ORGANISATIONS

[30% Club](#)

[50:50 Parliament](#)

[Catalyst](#)

[Close the Gap](#)

[Equality Trust](#)

[Fawcett Society](#)

[UK Government Equalities Office](#)



IN THE NEWS

[Proof that women in boardrooms quotas work](#)

Telegraph 13 January 2016

[Gender pay gap almost unchanged, says ONS](#)

BBC News 18 November 2015

[Trudeau's gender equal cabinet makes headlines around the world, social media](#)

Global News 5 November 2015

[Gender pay gap details to include bonuses](#)

BBC News 25 October 2015

[Former Lib Dem minister speaks out against gender quotas on boards](#)

Politics Home 22 October 2015

[Women's Equality Party calls for quotas for female MPs](#)

BBC News 20 October 2015

[LSE study calls for gender quotas to place women in positions of power](#)

Guardian 13 October 2015

[Rush for gender equality with top judges 'could have appalling consequences for justice'](#)

Martin Bentham *Evening Standard* 21 September 2015

[Jeremy Corbyn's 'top' team: criticisms over lack of women](#)

Channel 4 News 14 September 2015

[Record numbers of female and minority-ethnic MPs in new House of Commons](#)

Guardian 8 May 2015

[German parliament approves legal quotas for women on company boards](#)

Reuters 6 March 2015

[All-women shortlists bid to end boardroom bias](#)

Scotsman 23 December 2014

[Conservatives rule out all women shortlists for the general election](#)

City AM 30 June 2014

[EU defends women-on-boards plans](#)

BBC News 12 October 2012

[Davies report calls for more women in the boardroom](#)

BBC News 24 February 2011

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NOTES

AUDIO/VISUAL

[Launch: Gender, Inequality and Power Commission](#)

LSE Gender Institute 20 October 2015

[The case against gendered hiring quotas](#)

Mary Callahan *Forbes* 2014

[Should there be quotas for women on boards?](#)

BBC Radio 4 23 October 2012



ADVICE FOR DEBATING MATTERS

DEBATING MATTERS
**TOPIC
GUIDES**

www.debatingmatters.com

FOR STUDENTS

READ EVERYTHING

In the Topic Guide and in the news - not just your side of the argument either.

STATISTICS ARE GOOD BUT.....

Your opponents will have their own too. They'll support your points but they aren't a substitute for them.

BE BOLD

Get straight to the point but don't rush into things: make sure you aren't falling back on earlier assertions because interpreting a debate too narrowly might show a lack of understanding or confidence.

DON'T BACK DOWN

Try to take your case to its logical conclusion before trying to seem 'balanced' - your ability to challenge fundamental principles will be rewarded - even if you personally disagree with your arguments.

DON'T PANIC

Never assume you've lost because every question is an opportunity to explain what you know. Don't try to answer every question but don't avoid the tough ones either.

FOR TEACHERS

Hoping to start a debating club? Looking for ways to give your debaters more experience? Debating Matters have a wide range of resources to help develop a culture of debate in your school and many more Topic Guides like this one to bring out the best in your students. For these and details of how to enter a team for the Debating Matters Competition visit our website, www.debatingmatters.com

FOR JUDGES

Judges are asked to consider whether students have been brave enough to address the difficult questions asked of them. Clever semantics might demonstrate an acrobatic mind but are also likely to hinder a serious discussion by changing the terms and parameters of the debate itself.

Whilst a team might demonstrate considerable knowledge and familiarity with the topic, evading difficult issues and failing to address the main substance of the debate misses the point of the competition. Judges are therefore encouraged to consider how far students have gone in defending their side of the motion, to what extent students have taken up the more challenging parts of the debate and how far the teams were able to respond to and challenge their opponents.

As one judge remarked *'These are not debates won simply by the rather technical rules of schools competitive debating. The challenge is to dig in to the real issues.'* This assessment seems to grasp the point and is worth bearing in mind when sitting on a judging panel.



**“WORLD REQUIRES
THE CAPACITY
TO MARSHALL
CHALLENGING IDEAS
AND ARGUMENTS”**

**LORD BOATENG, FORMER BRITISH HIGH
COMMISSIONER TO SOUTH AFRICA**