

Norms and Social Hierarchies:

Understanding International Policy Diffusion “From Below”

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ABSTRACT The aim of this article is two-fold, one theoretical and the other empirical. The theoretical ambition is to propose a rethinking of the operation of norms in international society. Norms do not simply homogenize state behaviors, as is conventionally argued – norms draw on and set up hierarchical social orders among states as well. The empirical aspiration is to use this insight to help account for the international policy diffusion of legal sex quotas, a policy to increase the level of female legislators which developed first among ‘developing’ states rather than among the so-called core of international society. The article shows that the norm of 30-50% female legislators is understood and advocated by its main global governance proponents in terms of the hierarchy between ‘traditional’ statehood and ‘modern’ market democracy. Understood this way, there is considerably more pressure on ‘less developed’ states to undertake change. By pointing to the link between norms and social hierarchy, the article helps account for policy diffusion ‘from below.’

With two decades of scholarship demonstrating that norms matter in international politics, it is no longer controversial to make this claim. It furthermore appears clear that we study international norms in large part to better understand order and patterned outcomes in world politics. But what kinds of outcomes do norms produce? And how, more specifically, do norms actually help generate order? The aim of this article is to address these two central questions about norms, by offering a theoretical argument that links norms with hierarchical social orders as well as an empirical illustration of the operation of this link. Let me begin by laying out a policy diffusion puzzle which suggests that we need to take seriously the link between norms and social hierarchy.

One illuminating case of policy diffusion can be found in the adoption of sex quota legislation to change the make-up of national legislatures across the world. Around fifty states have adopted legal quotas to increase the level of women in the national legislature, including countries on every continent and in virtually every region of the world (see Table 1). These legal quotas involve constitutional or electoral laws which reserve a certain number of legislative seats for women or regulate the make-up of the party lists or candidate pools of the political parties that want to participate in the national electoral process, generally demanding that women make up between 20 and 50% of the lists. What distinguishes these measures from the voluntary quotas that individual parties may choose to adopt is that they are mandated at the national level. Any political party that wants to participate in the national electoral process is required by law to include women on their lists or as candidates. Legal sex quotas are thus a national policy, centering on the national electoral system as such. The world-wide emergence of this new national policy has been remarkably rapid, taking place only during the past fifteen years. Today, not only have prior formal bans against female political representatives been lifted but an increasing number of states are adopting sex quota laws to actively raise the ratio of female legislators in national assemblies.

The swift emergence of quotas has been paralleled by an equally impressive growth in quota scholarship within the subfield of women and politics.¹ Almost all of the existing literature interested in the adoption of quota laws has been focused on the relative importance of various domestic factors.² And yet as Krook (2006) points out, there are also crucial international dimensions to the rapid emergence of quota laws in different parts of the world, dimensions which are largely overlooked and certainly understudied in the quota literature. In turn, the study of legislature sex quotas helps expose weaknesses in the rather large international relations (IR) literature on why and how new policy measures emerge world-wide. A common theme running through much of this IR work is that international norms are a key component in policy diffusion. As we will see below, even realist and rationalist liberal approaches give some credence to the role of standards of behavior in the spread of new policy measures. A shared assumption among all those interested in norms is that, when effective, norms homogenize state behavior and organizational forms. Norms and standards even out divergences among states by providing instructions for what activities and policy measures are appropriate, normal, or effective for reaching specified goals. The central puzzle in the diffusion of sex quotas has indeed been why so many states of such different economic, social and political circumstances are suddenly behaving in similar ways.

This puzzle, of the world-wide standardization and homogenization of states, is certainly interesting as well as plausible. States are now adopting similar quota laws across the world, and previous scholarship has convincingly shown that norms are one important component in the explanation of policy diffusions. And yet there are crucial empirical challenges that should make us rethink the claims about state similarity and, in extension, how norms work and the orders they produce. In the diffusion of quotas, the rationales and motivations for adopting quotas – the understandings of why such behavior is desirable – have consistently rested on identifying certain kinds of states as inferior to others. Exhibiting a larger share of female legislators is seen as one indication of a state being ‘advanced’ and ‘modern,’ more specifically as a sign of being a developed democracy with political institutions that are conducive for investments and market-based growth. Importantly, these modern states are distinguished from more ‘traditional’ ones that presumably have not yet overcome age-old and backwards political practices that serve as a barrier to democratic justice and an impediment to investment and growth. As we will see below, a state’s placement in the social hierarchy between the ‘modern’ and ‘traditional’ provides the framework and much of the urgency for passing quota legislation.

The quota puzzle, then, is not simply one of explaining an outcome of similarity. It is also a puzzle of accounting for the rank ordering of states, in this case of distinguishing among states along a spectrum from traditional to modern in a neoliberal context. This ranking dynamic is not

¹ E.g. Ballington 2004, Bauer, 2008; Dahlerup and Freidenvall, 2005; Dahlerup 2006; Tripp 2003.

² Ibid. For exceptions, see e.g. Ballington and Dahlerup 2006; Lovecy 2002.

coincidental, this article contends, but rather an intrinsic aspect of normative orders and how norms operate. As standards for assessing behavior, norms necessarily involve comparative judgments among actors which position them in hierarchical social orders. A more adequate analysis of the diffusion of state policies needs to take into account both the homogenizing *and* the stratifying dimension of norms. The central aim of this article is thus to propose a rethinking of the operation of norms and to challenge some of the orthodoxies that have developed regarding how such standards work and the orders they produce.

In addition to making a case for seeing social hierarchies as integral to the operation of norms, an understanding of the link between norms and social rank provides new and crucial insights to how and why state practices such as the adoption of sex quotas diffuse world-wide. Firstly and most importantly, a focus on rank helps better account for the context of meaning within which a new behavior becomes understood as suitable and proper. In other words, this focus helps us better understand *how the benefits or appropriateness of new state practices are understood and framed*. The article argues that a new policy has to be understood and legitimated in terms of a state's rank, so that it is clear why a state of a certain standing rather than another should adopt a behavior. Any actor, whether a state, international organization, transnational social movement or other, invoking norms in advocating for a new policy must refer to and grapple with international social hierarchies. In the case of sex quotas, as this article will show, a state's standing in the hierarchy between 'modern' market democracies and 'traditional' society provides meaning to and importance for increasing the level of female legislator via national quota legislation.

Secondly, the focus on norms and rank also helps us better explain *among which states new policies may first emerge*. The present surge of quota legislation developed primarily out of Latin America in the 1990s, where the great majority of countries passed such laws during the past decade. African and Asian states are now following suit, including several Islamic states such as Djibouti, Pakistan, Morocco, Indonesia and Jordan (see Table 1 below). The use of such quotas is still rare in Western Europe and North America, including only Belgium, France, Portugal and, most recently, Spain. The fact that the use of national quota laws did not originate in the states of Western Europe or North America is notable, since there are strong assumptions in political science that gender equality measures are tied to liberalism and the West.³ To help account for the adoption trajectory of quota laws, this article argues that new state policies may start off "from below," among states identified as lesser and inferior in international society, in attempts to rise in rank (or as a challenge to the interpretations that form the basis of a ranking order). This is an important corrective to existing scholarship, which presumes new state behaviors to emanate from the liberal and Western core of international society, particularly with

³ E.g. Inglehardt and Norris, 2003.

regard to women's rights. To account for the unexpected trajectory of policies such as quotas, one must address the link between norms and rank.

**Table 1. Adoption of Quota Measures for National Assemblies
(Single/Lower house), 1990-2010**

Year	State	Mandated % women (seats or candidacies)
1989	Uganda*	17%
1990	Nepal	5%
1991	Argentina	30%
1994	Eritrea	30%
1994	Belgium	33%
1995	Philippines	20% women <i>and others</i>
1996	Costa Rica	40%
1996	Mexico	30%
1996	Paraguay	20%
1997	Bolivia	30% and 20%
1997	Brazil	25%
1997	Dominican Republic	25%
1997	Ecuador	20% - 50%
1997	Kenya	3%
1997	Panama	30%
1997	Peru	25% - 30%
1998	Venezuela	30%
1999	Guyana	33.3%
1999	Armenia	5%
2000	France	50%
2000	Niger*	35%
2000	Tanzania	20%
2000	Sudan*	9.7%
2001	Bosnia and H	30%
2001	Somalia*	10%
2002	Djibouti	10%
2002	Morocco	10.8%
2002	Macedonia	30%
2002	Niger	10%
2002	Pakistan	17.5%
2002	Serbia	30%

2003	Jordan	5.5%
2003	Indonesia	30%
2003	Rwanda	30%
2004	Afghanistan	27%
2004	Bangladesh	13%
2004	Burundi	30%
2004	Iraq	33%
2004	Korea, Republic of	30-50%
2004	Uzbekistan	30%
2005	Angola	30%
2006	East Timor	25%
2006	Mauritania	50%
2006	Portugal	33%
2006	Slovenia	35%
2007	Kyrgyzstan	30%
2007	Spain	40%
2008	Albania	30%
2009	Burkina Faso	30%

*Unless noted by *, the table is assembled from data provided by IDEA (2010). Provisions may have changed since initial adoption, generally demanding a larger percentage. * Tripp (2003)*

The main contention, then, is that international norms necessarily both generate and draw upon social rank, the ordering of states as superior and inferior. This link between norms and social hierarchies manifests in how new policies are understood, legitimated and thus framed, and it also helps account for the international diffusion trajectory of a new policy. To develop the argument, the article proceeds as follows. First, the international relations literature on the diffusion of state policies is discussed, highlighting some of the shared assumptions about the role of norms among what are in other respects dissimilar or incongruent approaches. After pointing to some shared problems in the understanding of norms in this literature, the article proceeds with a conceptual discussion of the nature of norms. The article then turns to the international diffusion of national sex quota laws, showing how the link between norms and rank operates empirically. The article ends with a concluding discussion **about what?**.

Approaching Norms and Policy Diffusion

There is an enormous literature puzzling over the swift emergence of similar state policies or organizational forms among a large number of countries across the world, asking how and why we have come to live in a world of such similarity. Virtually all scholars addressing this puzzle agree that the rapid and world-wide emergence of similar new policies cannot be explained with

reference to domestic factors in isolation, as if state policies emerged independently of the international context. Instead, there is recognition of the complex interdependence of international and domestic factors in national change.

With IR scholars focusing primarily on international dimensions, one issue in particular has been of central interest: the *process* of international policy diffusion. Although their theoretical approaches vary, a large number of scholars have asked, how is the character of the international interaction by which policies spread best conceptualized and described?⁴ The diffusion scholarship has produced useful taxonomies to characterize the process, pivoting on four main concepts. Processes of *coercion* (the imposition of policy change) and *persuasion* (inducing policy change through argumentation and tactics other than overt material coercion) place heavy emphasis on the role of intentional efforts by external actors to produce change in state policy.⁵ The remaining two processes are more decentralized. The process of *learning* (gaining new beliefs about proper ends and about causal relationships) emphasizes the fact that policymakers may actively reflect upon and draw lessons from changes in other countries. The process of *mimicry* (automatic emulation), finally, draws our attention to how cues from the external environment may prompt changes in state policy without much reflection or debate. At the risk of glossing over important theoretical differences among diffusion scholars, the literature on the whole has demonstrated effectively that there are multiple kinds of international interactions by which policies can emerge world-wide – there is no one master process that can account for all cases of policy diffusion.

Regarding the spread of sex quotas, Krook (2006) has argued rather persuasively that several of these processes were at work. For instance, after the introduction of a 30% sex quota in Argentina in 1990, policymakers in other Latin American countries learned about the benefits of quota measures or were socialized by women's organizations with international connections to accept the new policy. In other cases, quotas were imposed by international actors. In Afghanistan, for example, the insertion of a 25% quota for women in the lower house and a 17% quota in the upper house in the 2004 constitution were the result of massive pressure from the UN Special Mission to Afghanistan.⁶

⁴ Meyer 1980, Bennet 1991, Finnemore 1993 and 1996, Dolowitz and Marsh 1996 and 2000, Meyer et al 1997, Ramirez, Soysal and Shanahan 1997, Frank and McEneaney 1999, Berkovitch 1999, Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, Checkel 2001, Kelley 2004, Drezner 2005, Weyland 2005, Sharman 2008, Simmons, Dobbin and Garrett 2006, Elkins, Guzman and Simmons 2006, Swank 2006, Lee and Strang 2006, Gleditsch and Ward 2006, Krook 2006 and 2009.

⁵ Some (e.g. Finnemore and Sikkink 1998) distinguish between *persuasion* and *socialization*, using persuasion to refer to the initial promotion by activists and socialization for the subsequent efforts by others to induce norm compliance. Here, persuasion and socialization are used interchangeably.

⁶ See also Bauer 2002.

In many accounts of the diffusion process, norms – as standards of behavior for states⁷ – serve a key function in explaining the international spread of a new policy. The concept of norms is of course primarily associated with the broad set of constructivist approaches to IR, as a number of constructivist scholars have made norms central to their explorations of the social nature of international politics. Norms are used to account for behavior governed by social rules and they are primarily held to entail a mode of interaction based on a “logic of appropriateness.”⁸ Within this logic, state actors behave as they are instructed to, as being of a certain identity and as the ideational context calls for. Constructivist policy diffusion explanations thus hold that states come to adopt similar policies across the world because of the spread of new standards of behavior, new expectations about what states are supposed to do.⁹ There is a great deal of disagreement among constructivists about how and why new norms emerge, change and spread, however. Some trace the initial change back to the intentional manipulation by actors,¹⁰ whereas others assume change to be inherent to and continual in normative systems and thus trace normative change to largely unintentional discursive changes and historical contingencies over time.¹¹ Explanatory disagreements aside, constructivists who have looked at policy diffusion all place norms at the center of analysis.

In the diffusion literature, the concern with norms as standards of behavior is not only of importance to constructivists, however. Realist diffusion scholars also rely on the concept to advance claims about hegemonic socialization as an explanation for similar state policies.¹² This view focuses on attempts by hegemons to change the policies of others through the creation and manipulation of international rules and standards of behavior. In a slightly different vein, Drezner (2005) and others have looked at the competitive ‘standard-setting games’ of economic powers in efforts to establish and enforce the rules of the game for economic interaction, standards which then help shape the policies of other states. There is some recognition that major powers contend with the social and meaning-laden dimensions of world politics in their manipulation standards that guide state behavior. Norms are thus seen as an important intervening variable which help major powers diffuse policies internationally.

Liberal rationalist diffusion approaches also often rely on the concept of norms, if implicitly. Diffusion scholars who foreground the importance of learning (as a rational process of assessing new information about means to an end) generally assume bounded rationality, i.e. that policymakers are means-ends oriented but that their calculations are bounded by the information

⁷ Katzenstein 1996, 5.

⁸ See March and Olsen (1989).

⁹ E.g. Finnemore 1993 and 1996, Berkovitch 1994, Ramirez and McEneaney 1997, Ramirez, Soysal and Shanahan 1997, Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, Frank and McEneaney 1999, McNamara 2002

¹⁰ E.g. Finnemore 1993, Berkovitch 1994, Finnemore 1996, Keck and Sikkink 1998.

¹¹ E.g. Price 1997, Sandholtz 2007.

¹² E.g. Gilpin 1981, Ikenberry and Kupchan 1990, Hira 1998, De Nevers 2007.

available and by cognitive factors.¹³ In other words, there is no presumption that policy choices necessarily converge on ‘the truth’ – policymakers can learn a faulty theory or take mistaken lessons from another state.¹⁴ Policymakers develop ideas about the efficacy of a policy and learn about behaviors presumed to lead to a certain outcome, which then serve as the basis for policy change. Norms can thus be a crucial component in this learning process, as their rationales communicate shared understandings of why a policy is appropriate.

There is a general recognition, then, in the diffusion literature as a whole, that norms matter in the international spread of new policies. It is indeed difficult to account for the world-wide diffusion of policies ranging from women’s suffrage to central bank independence or non-use of chemical weapons without some recognition of the importance of social standards of behavior. An adequate conceptual understanding of what norms are and how they operate is thus crucial. However, there are certain general shortcomings in the study of norms that hamper the understanding of policy diffusion. First, the belief that norms simply standardize behavior and thus bring about an order consisting of similarity among states is mistaken, for conceptual and empirical reasons. This shortcoming is related to a second major problem, namely how norms are studied. Rarely do diffusion scholars actually examine standards of behavior in terms of their meaning and formulation. And yet if we take the role of norms seriously, then we must take the social stuff of world politics seriously, paying attention to inter-subjective meanings and ideas. In studying the spread of legal sex quotas, for instance, norms scholars must ask: what are the rationales and motivations for sex quota laws? How does it appear reasonable for states to adopt such policies? What pre-understandings (about ends, causal relationships, etc) must be in place so that it makes sense to ration women into national legislatures? In short, what *is* this standard that helps bring about wide-spread policy change?

Only when we study the meaning of norms can we assess whether norms in fact create a world of more similar states. If norms help homogenize states, then the understanding and meaning across the world of new policies such as national sex quotas should point in that direction. As this article argues, the rationales and motivations for sex quotas have consistently rested on identifying certain kinds of states as inferior to others. This indicates a crucial but overlooked dynamic of norms, namely that of social ranking. The next section will provide a theoretical discussion of norms that makes clear the conceptual link between norms and social rank.

Before we turn to the conceptual discussion of norms, I want to point to a third problematic assumption in the existing diffusion literature: the claims about where, among what states, new policies first take root and from where they subsequently spread. In reading the diffusion literature, it quickly becomes clear that there is a shared view that new state policies first take root in the liberal and Western core of international society. There are various theories for why

¹³ E.g. Dolowitz and Marsh 2000, Stone 2000, Weyland 2005, Simmons et al 2006

¹⁴ Rose 1991, Majone 1991, Dolowitz and Marsh 2000:14, Simmons et al 2006:796-797.

this is the case. Some contend that these states are the economically and militarily dominant ones, and as such they have the ability to pressure or socialize weaker states to adopt policy approaches similar to their own.¹⁵ Others point to the importance of the policy success of these countries as a source of learning and mimicry among others.¹⁶ In other words, "the poor and weak and peripheral copy the rich and strong and central."¹⁷ Yet others highlight the liberal ideational nature of international society and the new policy ideas that develop among its actors, arguing that such (liberal) policies are most easily and readily adopted by liberal states.¹⁸

Although these claims are not without merit, one possibility has been overlooked: new policy measures do not necessarily take root first among the states that form the liberal, Western core of international society. The diffusion of quotas is an excellent illustration of this possibility. As was stated in the introduction and as will be further elaborated below, national sex quota laws first took hold across Latin America, to then emerge across Africa, Asia and – with fewer cases of adoption – in Europe. There has been little if any discussion of passing a quota law to increase the number of female members in the US Congress. The diffusion of sex quotas is not a case of hegemonic socialization, of the poor and peripheral copying the rich and central, nor of the core liberal states adopting and promoting a new liberal standard. Extant approaches have not addressed this kind of diffusion trajectory and they would clearly have difficulty doing so. One of the reasons lies in the conceptualization of norms and the neglect of the importance of their link to social ranking. We turn to the conceptual link between norms and social hierarchies next.

The Conceptual Link Between Norms and Social Ranking

Most studies of norms adapt Katzenstein's widely used definition and approach international norms as social standards for the proper behavior of states of a stipulated identity.¹⁹ A norm is thus not a mere generalization of regular practices but rather refers to recognition of relations between specified behaviors and a stated identity. In other words, norms help set the terms for what can be said and done as a certain kind of actor. They also set out what has to be said and done in order to be regarded as a certain kind of actor. This process of connecting behavior with identity is inter-subjective, or socially shared.²⁰

Norms are essentially about *value*, meaning that they validate certain kinds of behavior for specific sorts of actors and devalue other sorts of behavior. The assignation of value is key to understanding the operation and effectiveness of norms – indeed, the assignation of value gives norms much of their force. Whereas prior studies of international norms recognize their value-

¹⁵ E.g. Gilpin 1981, Ikenberry and Kupchan 1990, Hira 1998, Simmons 2001, Drezner 2005, De Nevers, 2007.

¹⁶ E.g. Rose 1991, Dolowitz and Marsh 1996 and 2000.

¹⁷ Meyer et al 1997, 164.

¹⁸ E.g. Keck and Sikkink 1998, Risse and Sikkink 1999, Checkel 1999, Thomas 2001.

¹⁹ Katzenstein 1996, 5.

²⁰ E.g. Cancian 1975, Laffey and Weldes 1997.

laden nature, the implications of this fact have not been drawn out. Indeed, the role of norms in generating and drawing upon social hierarchies have been almost entirely overlooked. The society of states thus seems at odds with any other known human society as it is portrayed as devoid of patterned relations of *social* hierarchy and the norms productive of such relations. This is particularly curious given that one of the most central questions within the sociological study of society – from which constructivist IR borrows rather heavily – has been that of social stratification. The discussion that follows thus makes use of scholars who have elucidated the role of norms in generating and drawing upon social hierarchies.²¹

Social hierarchy, which I use synonymously with social rank, concerns *the ordering of actors as superior or inferior to one another in socially important respects*.²² German social theorist Ralf Dahrendorf is a particularly helpful source for thinking through the concepts of social hierarchy and norms.²³ A wide array of scholars, he argues, presume an original state of equality and ascribe to property, mode of production or division of labor the crucial role in destroying this equality. Positing a period of equality, whether a state of nature or primitive communism, it is possible for thinkers as different as Rousseau and Marx to approach inequality as a historical phenomenon whose elimination is conceivable.

Dahrendorf, in contrast, traces the origin of inequality to the very nature of societies as value-laden communities. Although it is possible to eliminate particular kinds of inequality, such as class, the eradication of social inequality as such is unachievable unless there is a full state of indifference and absence of assessment. In short, his argument runs as follows. He begins with Durkheim's famous premise that every society is a moral community, constituted and regulated by established and inescapable evaluative expectations – norms – which are “always related to concrete social positions.”²⁴ Societal norms, in turn, necessarily entail some sort of tacit or overt sanctioning of behavior according to the level of conformity to the norms for that identity. Norms assess better and worse practices, desirable and undesirable behavior, what is normal and abnormal, for a particular kind of actor. Given that norms always entail sanctioning evaluative criteria, Dahrendorf concludes that in any given historical society,

whatever symbols they may declare to be outward signs of inequality, and whatever may be the precise content of their social norms, the hard core of social inequality can always be found in the fact that men as the incumbents of social roles are subject, according to how their roles relate to the dominant expectational principles of society, to sanctions designed to enforce these principles. (Dahrendorf 1968:167).

In other words, whereas norms change contextually and over time, all societies are characterized by some form of social hierarchies. Inequalities are built into the very fabric of society and are an inescapable effect of the existence of norms. Contrary to what existing studies of international norms assume, norms do not simply generate a more homogeneous society of like units – they

²¹ Particularly Dahrendorf (1968) but also Cancian (1975) and Giddens (1979).

²² Paraphrased from Parsons (1951):69.

²³ Dahrendorf (1968).

²⁴ Dahrendorf (1968):167.

simultaneously help differentiate and hierarchically order actors. Homogenizing and stratifying tendencies are mutually implicated in norms.

The link between norms and social hierarchies has implications for the policy diffusion process in at least two ways. First, social hierarchies shape how new policies are understood and legitimated. Below, this article will show that new state practices such as sex quotas are framed in terms of the unequal standing of states generated by existing norms. Proponents of change must make clear how and why it makes sense for a state of a certain rank to change its behavior towards women. Second, social hierarchy can help us understand from where new state policies emerge and spread. Previous scholarship has shown policies to emerge in the liberal, Western “core” of international society to then spread elsewhere, though without reference to social hierarchies to help explain why other states presumably engage in policy mimicry. However, states that are low in rank may also become the first to develop and adopt a policy, attempting to rise in rank within a given order or as a challenge to or rejection of that order. Crucially, then, linking norms with international social hierarchies helps us understand why new state behaviors may first emerge among states considered less advanced. There may indeed be particular pressure on states that are considered lacking or inferior to change, so much so that it should come as no surprise that being at the margins may serve as a catalyst for change.

The remainder of the article provides an empirical analysis of the international spread of legal sex quotas. It does so by addressing questions about the meanings and rationales of sex quotas. The empirical section begins with a brief overview of the international trajectory of policy change and the main transnational actors involved. The article then examines the overall problematic that these actors understand quotas to address, namely the democratic and market character of modern states. The analysis then moves to the ranking dynamics involved in setting up national sex quotas as a standard of behavior, drawing on and generating a hierarchy between the ‘advanced’ and the ‘traditional’ world. A careful and broad reading of the voluminous body of documents involved in the global quota campaigns provides a basis for the argument that increasing the levels of female legislators is now understood as a crucial component in the construction of ‘modern’ states as these move away from undemocratic and market unfriendly traditions. The article then provides an examination of how exactly women as a category are believed to help move states from ‘tradition’ to ‘modernity.’

Norms, Social Hierarchy and the Diffusion of Sex Quotas

The Adoption and Advocacy Trajectory 1989-2010

The current trend of adopting quota measures for national assemblies began in 1989 and really took off in the second half of the 1990s (see Table 1).²⁵ Whereas the first few adopters were spread across the world, virtually every state that passed sex quotas in the second half of the 90s was Latin American. The trend is quite remarkable – ten Latin American countries passed quota laws between 1996 and 1998. Since 2000, another thirty-some countries followed suit in every part of the world. It is clear that neither Western Europe nor North America was the leader in this policy change, contrary to what political scientists would predict. As has been stated before, very few countries in these regions have passed quota laws.

The attention world-wide to women in decision-making was fairly quickly embraced by established international organizations in collaboration with other actors, after an initial period of promotion by women activists. The UN Decade on Women (1976-1985) had heightened the interest in the status of women, though the recommendations and treatment of women in political decision-making were vague and general.²⁶ During that period, efforts to increase the numbers of women in political parties and legislatures developed in a number of states across the world, initially with most success in the Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands.

Transnational mobilization advocating affirmative action then quickly emerged among Latin American states in the second half of the 1980s, at the outset particularly stimulated by Social Democratic debates on internal party quotas in Europe.²⁷ The party quota debates of the *Partido Socialista Obrero Español* in 1987 and 1990 were closely followed by the parties of the left in Latin America.²⁸ Two Socialist International conferences were crucial for establishing the notion that quotas are the most effective way to bring women into decision-making. In 1986, at the XIII Congress of Socialist International Women held in Lima, Peru, the participants rejected the idea of gradual reform in favor of affirmative action: “Only the Scandinavians, who had modified this [gradual] strategy with that of quotas (40%) had finally had a relative success: the election in Norway of a female prime minister and seven ministers.”²⁹ The Socialist International itself endorsed affirmative action as a principle for gender equality at its XVIII Congress in Stockholm in 1989, an endorsement which was crucial for the initiation of the quota debate in Argentina that same year.³⁰ In 1989, bills demanding that a certain percentage of all party candidacies be reserved for women had been proposed in Costa Rica, Argentina and Paraguay. In 1990, the *V Encuentro Feminista Latinoamericano y del Caribe* declared itself in favor of such quotas and *la*

²⁵ There were a few cases of reserving around 5% of the legislative seats for women prior to 1989, e.g. Pakistan (1954), Bangladesh (1972) and Egypt (1979).

²⁶ The 1952 Convention on the Political Rights of Women simply spells out the legality of women holding public office. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, in turn, does not directly advocate increasing female levels of representation but rather establishes the legality of affirmative action.

²⁷ E.g. Htun and Jones (2002).

²⁸ Lubertino Beltrán (1992):28

²⁹ *Mujer y Sociedad* (1986):11, my translation.

³⁰ Lubertino Beltrán (1992):30

Red Latinoamericana de Feministas Políticas was formed to promote their promulgation across Latin America.³¹

In 1990, the year of the *Encuentro* and the formation of the Latin American feminist network, sustained and focused international action to enhance the levels of women in parliaments took off among global governance organizations. That year, the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women named equality in political participation and decision-making a priority theme, and recommended that quotas be used as an interim measure to increase the levels of women in elected office.³² Three states in very different parts of the world – Uganda, Nepal and Argentina – passed quota legislation in 1989, 1990 and 1991 respectively. In the next few years, various international organizations began urging political parties to put forth female candidates, demonstrating a heightened concern with women in political decision-making but falling short of advocating legislative quotas.³³ The work intensified in 1995 on the occasion of the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. The Conference as well as the processes leading up to it generated discussions and recommendations on how to increase the levels of women in public office.³⁴ Crucially, the *Human Development Report 1995*, prepared by the UNDP for Beijing, argued for targeted measures such as quotas to attain a short-term threshold of 30% women in national assemblies, a goal the UNDP subsequently increased by calling for 50% women by 2005.³⁵ The Beijing Platform for Action, while not binding, saw 189 governments commit to taking measures to increase the levels of women in political decision-making, if necessary through positive action.³⁶ By the second half of the 1990s, international organs came to argue more forcefully that *affirmative action* was the preferable manner of achieving “gender balance” in decision-making.³⁷

³¹ Lubertino Beltrán (1992):39.

³² The Division for the Advancement of Women held a preparatory Expert Group Meeting in Vienna in 1989, recommending that “as an interim measure, substantial targets, such as quotas or similar forms of positive action to ensure women’s candidacy for office and participation in political party posts, should be adopted” (E/CN.6/1990/2, annex, para. 22), (UN Office at Vienna 1992). See also UN Commission on the Status of Women 1990:21 and ECOSOC Resolution 1990/4.

³³ E.g. the 1992 UN Commission on the Status of Women resolution “Women in Decision-Making Bodies” and the 1994 IPU Plan of Action to Correct Present Imbalances in the Participation of Men and Women in Political Life, presented at the Beijing Conference..

³⁴ The 1992 resolution “Women in Decision-Making Bodies,” put forth by the UN Commission on the Status of Women, asked that the regional group meetings pay attention to women in decision-making, and all of the 1994 Regional Platforms prepared in anticipation of the Beijing Conference subsequently named insufficient participation of women in public decision-making as one of the critical areas of concern. At Beijing, a Parliamentary Declaration was made, urging states to establish legislative measures for equal participation of women and men in politics.

³⁵ UNDP (1997).

³⁶ Strategic objective G.I. 190 of the Platform of Action calls on Governments to “(b) take measures, including, where appropriate, in electoral systems that encourage political parties to integrate women in elective and non-elective public positions in the same proportion and at the same levels as men.”

³⁷ For instance, the Commission on the Status of Women called for “positive action, including such mechanisms as establishing a minimum percentage of representation for both sexes” for the first time in 1997.

The landscape of organizations, networks, states and campaigns involved in increasing the number of women in decision-making is now enormous to the point of dizzying, spanning the globe from Latin America to Asia. A series of large international and regional conferences have been convened³⁸ and development projects initiated.³⁹ Certain organs stand out as crucial nodal points in this web of activities, however, including the inter-governmental organizations UNDP, the UN women's agencies, the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), the International Institute on Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) and the World Bank; the foreign ministries of the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden, and the transnational NGO the Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO). Connected to all of these organs are regional initiatives and networks of domestic and transnational NGOs, development banks, IGOs and other actors.

This explosion of activity leads us to the main analytical question of concern to this article: what do these main proponents understand quotas to be about? In what ways do they find it reasonable and appropriate for states to adopt such laws? In short, what *is* this norm?

Quota rationales: the Challenges of 'Modern' Market Democracy

Quotas are unmistakably being championed in a global context of capitalist restructurings of states. However, there are many ways that higher levels of women in decision-making could be interpreted and promoted even within our contemporary environment of free market orthodoxy: as a matter of human rights, a step in eradicating men's domination of women, as democratic representation, or a matter of market-led growth. There are multiple interpretive possibilities, in other words. More female legislators have nonetheless overwhelmingly become understood to be related to two particular ends: as a question of promoting democratic institutions, which in turn is presumed to be central for a functioning market economy.

When quotas are discussed as a question of democratic representation, increasing the levels of female legislators is presented as a question of justice that constitutes a cornerstone of 'modern democracy.' As Mexican Senator Carvajal Moreno Gustavo explained at a 1997 IPU conference: "What is at stake is not just the inclusion of women in Parliaments but democracy as such: our countries want to grow, our countries want more justice. Women are key actors for the renewal

³⁸ E.g. IPU "Towards Partnership Between Men and Women in Politics" New Delhi, India, 14-18 Feb 1997, UNDP "Governance and Sustainable Equity" New York, US, 28-30 July 1997, Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs "Women and Good Governance" Harare, Zimbabwe, May 1998, UN Economic Commission for Africa. "African Women and Economic Development: Investing in Our Future," April 28 – May 1 1998 (Recommends Affirmative Action); UNDP "Women and Political Participation: 21st Century Challenges," New Delhi 24-26 March 1999; SADC Gender Unit "Beyond 30 percent in 2005: Women in Politics and Decision Making in SADC," Botswana May 1999.

³⁹ E.g. the Belgian government approved a \$6 million *Program for Strengthening Parliaments* in 1998 for UNDP implementation in 12 pilot countries, a program which gives preference to activities targeted to redressing gender imbalances in parliamentary representation (UNDP 2000:96). The UNDP funded a \$4 million governance program in Bangladesh, entitled *Strengthening Parliamentary Democracy*, which allegedly resulted in the extension to 30 reserved seats from women in 1997 from the prior 7 and a promise to increase the seats to 30% that are directly elected (rather than present indirect election) (UNDP 2000:97). The organ also co-financed a similar project in Vietnam together with the Dutch government.

of democracy.”⁴⁰ As a matter of democratic justice, the very essence of the meaning of ‘modern’ forms of representation are debated, centering on whether allegedly disembodied interests or embodied identities are the proper object of representation and the implications for the composition of national legislatures. The growing body of primarily European and Anglo-American scholarship on women and representation bears testimony to the changing conceptualizations of modern democracy, as does the content of the national debates on quotas across the world. Modern democracies, all sides in the debates publicly agree, do not mistreat women. Modern democracies, the quota proponents argue, in fact take affirmative measure if need be to provide just representation for women by bringing some of them into the legislature. In the words of Argentine Senator Margarita Malharro de Torres, those who oppose higher levels of women legislators “hold women back in the name of old, traditional prejudices more worthy of a feudal era than of modern times, than of an *aggiornado* and firm democracy that is founded on the representation of all.” In passing the quota bill, on the other hand, “the Senate [is] taking the advanced, modern, *aggiornado* step of transitory quotas to incorporate women into the legislative powers as they deserve.”⁴¹

A second understanding of the importance of women legislators for ‘modern’ states has come to predominate over democratic representation, namely that gender-balanced institutions are conducive for market economies and particularly for market-led development. Since quotas were embraced by the major global governance organs in the mid- to late 1990s, the democratic justice arguments have receded into the background in favor of arguments that emphasize the advantages of women legislators for the market economy, allegedly benefiting women as well as general humanity. In a global market economy, global governance organizations hold, states simply cannot afford not to bring more women into national assemblies:

Today, all our countries face global, political and economic challenges that are partly beyond our control, and many are undergoing radical institutional and structural changes whose long-term social, political and economic effects are extremely hard to manage in view of an unsatisfactory international order and insufficient economic co-operation. In such a context, no country can any longer afford to overlook any portion of its human resources. This means redirecting our perspectives and policies. Our domestic policies must henceforth, at all levels, be shaped and applied not just by men but with the full and equal participation of women. (*Beijing Parliamentary Declaration 1995*)

A larger percentage of women legislators is thus a “critical dimension of the UNDPs efforts to help meet the overarching goal of halving world poverty by 2015,” as the very first introductory sentence of the landmark *Women’s Political Participation and Good Governance: 21st Century Challenges* reads. Rather than as an end in itself or as a strategy for Human Rights and Democracy, the significant *Road map towards the implementation of the United Nations Millennium Declaration* tellingly lists “supporting the inclusion of women in government and other decision-making bodies at a high level” as a strategy for the goal of Development and

⁴⁰ As cited in IPU (1997):9.

⁴¹ Fundación Friedrich Ebert (1992):73, my translation.

Poverty Eradication.⁴² “Disparities between males and females in power” the subsequent *Strategy for Action* claims, “act to undermine economic growth.”⁴³ In a surprisingly sharp tone, the World Bank similarly emphasizes that “Gender Equality is an issue of development effectiveness, not just a matter of political correctness or kindness to women,” as an introduction to “The Business Case for Mainstreaming Gender.”⁴⁴ Senior WB economist Andrew Mason (co-author of the groundbreaking 2001 WB report *Engendering Development Through Gender Equality*) states that “societies that discriminate on the basis of gender pay a significant price in greater poverty, slower economic growth, weaker governance, and a lower quality of life.”⁴⁵

Democracy, to the extent that it is mentioned in the UNDP and World Bank elaborations, takes on a particular meaning, namely the creation of public institutions that are conducive for so-called good governance. A “gender-balanced representation,” one is told time and again, is a matter of “good governance.”⁴⁶ For those unfamiliar with the concept, the UNDP defines governance as “the exercise of economic, political and administrative authority to manage a country’s affairs at all levels,”⁴⁷ and it centrally involves “providing an enabling environment for private sector activity.”⁴⁸ After a period of skepticism about the importance of state institutions for the market economy, democratic political institutions have come to take center stage in the production of such an enabling environment.

Summing up the significance of good governance, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan has declared that “a new consensus is emerging on the nature, role and function of official institutions,” concluding that “we are moving from old ideologies to a new pragmatism.”⁴⁹ With alternatives to the market economy apparently not only defeated but also relegated to the world of old ideologies, a higher number of women legislators is becoming part and parcel of the new, ‘modern’ pragmatism of good governance. Precisely *what* women are made out to be in order to bring about democracy and economic growth as office-holders will be more carefully analyzed below, after an examination of the operation of the hierarchy between the modern world and traditional society in the discussions around quotas. It is this hierarchy, I contend, that provides leverage and dynamism to the global governance organs and activists in their efforts to promote quotas.

Social Rank and Quota Norms: Overcoming ‘Tradition’ in the Development of ‘Modern’ Market Democracies

⁴² Section III, §125, p 25.

⁴³ World Bank (2002):4.

⁴⁴ World Bank’s (2002).

⁴⁵ As cited in Mutume (2001).

⁴⁶ E.g. Karam (1998):15, UNDP (2000):24,

⁴⁷ UNDP (2000):iii. The UNDP launched its Global Programme for Governance in 1997.

⁴⁸ UNDP (2000):29.

⁴⁹ Annan (1997).

In the brief section above, I introduced the notion that quotas are promoted as a component in the construction of ‘modern’ capitalist democratic statehood. In contrast with the diffusion literature which sees such developments as a simple case of homogenization, I argue that the ranking dimension inherent in norms has helped give dynamism to the quota debates. Having become embedded in the production of ‘modern,’ capitalist democracy, much of the drive of the quota debates across the world derives from the efforts to move away from ‘tradition’ and its associated practices. ‘Modern’ statehood is thus articulated together with ‘less advanced’ or ‘traditional’ polities or groups of humans on a single scale of development and success. The quota struggles thus draw upon and are constitutive of two broad categories of states and the hierarchical relations between them: those which have already attained the ‘modern’ status (generally so-called developed states) and those that are understood to still be ‘developing’ away from ‘tradition’ and in the direction of meeting the demands of the global economy. Understood this way, there is clearly greater urgency for and pressure on developing states to adopt modernizing measures such as sex quotas, a fact which helps account for the adoption trajectory “from below.” We will now turn to a more careful examination of this social hierarchy.

‘Cultural tradition’ is widely identified as the primary causal force behind low levels of female representation. Poor and wealthy states alike have managed to increase the numbers of women legislators, it is argued, demonstrating that the wealthy part of the world does not have monopoly on the political empowerment of women. The *UNDP Human Development Report 1995* showed that women’s political empowerment does not depend on “national income or wealth,” a claim which has since been widely reproduced and presumably accepted.⁵⁰

The primary cause of the problem is instead thought to reside in *culture*, a concept carefully separated out from the economy and politics. It is through cultural development, the move away from ‘traditional’ society towards ‘modern’ state institutions, that women are empowered in decision-making. Contrasted against modernity, culture is understood as a set of national beliefs, values and customs that have been passed down from pre-modern eras and which hinder economic and democratic advancement. As states “modernize,” we are expected to see a “weakening of traditional values” and therefore “changes in perceptions regarding the appropriate role for women – all factors that increase women’s political resources and decrease existing barriers to political activity”⁵¹ according to IDEA’s quota website. “Traditional understandings of space as private and public, women generally being relegated to the former” we are told by the UNDP, “lie at the very heart of most of the difficulties women face entering politics.”⁵² SADC and others agree that “at the heart of the under representation of women in politics are age old attitudes and stereotypes that assign women to the private, and men to the public domain.”⁵³ It is important to note that these understandings represent a total reversal from

⁵⁰ E.g. UNDP (1995), Karam (1998):2, UNDP (2000):23 and 72, Lowe Morna (2000):4, UNDP (2002):2.

⁵¹ Matland (1998) on the IDEA website.

⁵² UNDP (2000):23.

⁵³ Lower Morna (2000):12.

those of the early twentieth century, when much of the non-European world was chastised as primitive for *not* maintaining separate spheres and for *not* keeping women out of political power.⁵⁴ Indeed, in the early twentieth century, the ban on women's political participation was seen as indicative of the advancement of Western Europe (in contrast with 'less advanced' societies where women had political authority). Now, organizations such as the Inter-American Commission on Women argue that it is "socio-cultural patterns" that inhibit women from taking part in "modern society." "Prejudices and customs" – as low levels of women legislators are now interpreted – "limit [women's] participation in public life."⁵⁵ These alleged customs have been institutionalized as "traditional practice in many political parties and government structures."⁵⁶

Operating in this framework, the Latin American quota debates centered on cultural deficiencies as the source of women's under-representation. "[The low level of female deputies] demonstrates clearly that a patriarchal and *machista* political culture is responsible for the fact that of a total of 2031 parliamentarians, only 84 have been women," Peruvian deputy quota legislation author Luz Salgado argued in 1997 like many of her colleagues.⁵⁷ "The nature of the discrimination that we are debating is cultural and it permeates Argentine society profoundly," the Argentine Minister of the Interior likewise claimed during the 1991 quota debates.⁵⁸ His fellow legislators agreed:

"the law that we are debating today arises from the problematic of a society which has suffered a strong cultural retrocession, because if this had been a democratic people which had long ago overcome authoritarianism and discrimination, we would not need to discuss the 30% female representation for electoral lists. The fact that we are debating how to protect women through affirmative action shows that we in some way accept that there is a problem in Argentine society." (Deputy Carlos A. Alvarez, Argentine debate in the Chamber of Deputies, Nov 6 1991, from Fundación Friedrich Ebert 1992:87. My translation.)

Such an understanding of the problem leads to certain preferred solutions: quotas are understood as transitory electoral reforms that serve as one step in "achieving a transformation in the political culture of society,"⁵⁹ in "overcoming the sociocultural obstacles that impede or limit [women's] participation."⁶⁰ Once such cultural change has taken place, quotas will no longer be needed. States that are truly 'modern,' that have progressed towards a modern national culture, would have no need for such measures as half of the legislature would automatically be female. Swedish statesmen often point out with pride that the Swedish legislature and cabinet attained their high levels of women without 'coercive' quotas. Furthermore, whereas the transfer of *economic* resources from rich to poor states is not seen as a solution within this schema, the transfer of 'modern' *values* and the eradication of 'traditional culture' is. Women, as we are

⁵⁴ Towns 2009.

⁵⁵ Inter-American Commission of Women (1994): no page numbers. Section on "Participation of women in the Structures of Power and Decision-Making."

⁵⁶ Inter-American Commission of Women (1999): Section 2:4.

⁵⁷ Congress of Peru (1997:2520).

⁵⁸ Fundación Friedrich Ebert (1992):107. My translation.

⁵⁹ Inter-American Commission for Women (1999), Section 3.I "Cultural Change."

⁶⁰ Inter-American Commission for Women (1994), Section 1.B.1.

about to see, are simultaneously an important component in and beneficiary of this cultural transformation.

How Women Legislators Advance the State from a Traditional to a Modern Polity

In the 1991 quota debates, Argentine delegate Cecilia Lipszyc cited nineteenth century French Utopian Socialist Charles Fourier's famous thesis: "*Social progress and historic changes occur by virtue of the progress of women toward liberty, and decadence of the social order occurs as the result of a decrease in the liberty of women.*"⁶¹ Even though general progress from traditional to modern statehood is understood to be the fundamental force behind the political empowerment of women, an increase in women legislators, as this quote suggests, is concurrently thought to bring about general progress. State officials and quota debaters are thus faced with an apparent tautology, a chicken-and-egg situation for which quotas appear as a good intervention. General 'modernization' is understood to be beneficial for women, while at the same time the changing status of women allegedly bring about general progress. For quotas to be promoted as a matter of modern democratic justice across the globe, *women* must obviously be understood to form an at least partially homogeneous group that will be represented in some sense by the few women that end up in parliament. Similarly, for women legislators to stabilize and enhance market economies, they must be conceptualized as a group united by some sort of common traits amenable to capitalism. Reflecting on the issue of *how* women legislators advance the state thus involves the prior question: *what* is it that allegedly unifies 'women'? How have 'women' been constructed as a category so that quotas (asking for *anyone* sharing the female label) appear as a feasible measure?

Most fundamentally, the discussions of quotas rest on a base conceptualization of women and men as two mutually exclusive sexes whose difference is rooted in allegedly natural biology, a biology which is understood to provide the base for gender as socially constructed identities and behaviors. As 'half of humanity,' quota proponents argue, women are entitled to half the legislative seats, making 'a gender-balanced representation' and 'getting the balance right' goals for the composition of legislatures. In many cases, to be sure, a lesser portion than half may be advocated as more politically feasible in the short run.

Gender is approached as the cultural interpretation of biological sexual difference, and is as such notably *not* represented as an effect of politics or the economy.⁶² As a cultural construct, gender-based separation of the two sexes – in fact, *gender itself* as anything other than natural and biological difference – becomes understood as something traditional, a remnant of a superstitious and prejudiced past that modern democracies and modern economies leave behind.⁶³ Using an excerpt from the World Bank that is representative of the approach, gender

⁶¹ Fundación Friedrich Ebert (1992):60.

⁶² E.g. Lambsdorff (1999:13), Swamy et al (1999:53), World Bank (2002:2),

⁶³ E.g. Swamy et al (2001), World Bank 2002, Lambsdorff (1999)

“refers to *culturally* based expectations of the roles and behaviors of males and females. The term distinguishes the socially constructed from the biologically determined aspects of being male and female. Unlike the biology of sex, gender roles and behaviors can change historically, sometimes relatively quickly, even if aspects of these roles originated in the biological differences between the sexes. Because of the *religious or cultural traditions* that define and justify the distinct roles and expected behaviors of males and females are strongly cherished and socially enforced, changes in gender systems often is contested.” (World Bank 2002:2, emphasis added)

Gender, as any distinction between males and females that cannot be attributed to allegedly natural differences stemming from sex, is thus itself rendered suspect and understood as a potential source of inequality between men and women. Such cultural difference between men and women often becomes understood as a limiting and perverting prejudice that lock men and women into unnatural roles. In fact, were it not for gender, (the “culturally based expectations of the roles and behaviors of males and females”) the female sex would allegedly not have been under-represented in national assemblies to begin with. However, as we will see below, the fault-line between gender and sex is markedly ambivalent, and many of the participants in the quota debates express uncertainty about whether to attribute observed differences between men and women to gender or to sex. What is more, gender is sometimes seen as beneficial, if temporary, traits for democracy and growth.

Few of the actual quota proponents approach the issue of increasing the number of women in parliament as a mere head-count, as simply assuring that half of the legislators are of female sex. If women were thought to share nothing more than genitalia, making the case that bringing a few such reproductive organs into a legislature is a source of justice for *all* women of a state would be difficult. Skeptics such as Peruvian feminist Maruja Barrig have asked “Can [some] women, by the simple fact of being women, represent all women? Personally, I believe that whatever sisters me with Margaret Thatcher is nothing but a biological accident.”⁶⁴ Such skepticism about the politically relevant unity of the sexual category women necessarily rare among quota proponents, however. Quotas are advocated as a manner of looking after ‘women’s interests’ via “the difference that is made, as a result of having women in politics.”⁶⁵ According to the Beijing Platform for Action “women’s equal participation in decision-making is not only a demand for simple justice or democracy but can also be seen as a necessary condition for women’s interests to be taken into account.” A UNDP policy paper explains the rationale: “The basic idea behind why women can contribute differently is that women share men’s lives anywhere in the world, yet they have their own experiences, specificity’s [sic], attitudes, and life-styles, which are reflected in different approaches, needs, insights, and goals from politics and decision-making. As the other half which shares life and planetary interests, women are also a different half with different life-experiences.”⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Barrig (1990):44, my translation.

⁶⁵ Karam (1998):iv.

⁶⁶ Karam (1998):16

Having analyzed the unification of women as a category, we can now turn to the primary question of *how* such women legislators advance and modernize the state. While furthering women's interests is a goal of quota proponents, bringing more women into legislatures is expressly *not* about furthering women's interests at the expense of men. As we saw above, more women legislators are said to be good for everyone, men and women alike, in a world of no inherent conflicts of interest. How, then, are women in national legislatures supposed to bring about general welfare? Firstly, by enhancing general economic development, a feature central for modernity and the quest away from tradition. Interestingly, if the level of a state's economic development is not an important determinant of women in decision-making, the reverse is certainly said to hold true: the number of women in decision-making has been positively related to a state's level of economic development. The landmark 1997 UNDP conference on *Governance for Sustainable Growth and Equity* – the first global UN conference on governance which officials from more than 153 Member States attended – highlighted a close relationship between the low number of women parliamentarians and the high number of women in poverty. A close relationship between low numbers of women parliamentarians and high level of general poverty has been established and underscored time and again.⁶⁷

Empowered as a distinct category with unique experiences and interests, women legislators are valued for contributing towards poverty eradication by bringing their difference into the policy process. Women's interests, such as equal opportunity for education and employment, reproductive health, nutrition and child care are understood to benefit the economy as a whole. The "failure to include women in the political running of societies is regarded by the IPU as a major impediment to development," the Secretary General of the IPU proclaims in unison with other quota proponents.⁶⁸

If the pursuit of women's interests is said to be an important strategy for the welfare of all, women are even more predominantly celebrated in a second manner, as the honest sex. Allegedly less corrupt and less selfish, women have become ideal for the construction of transparent states. The honest sex has come to play a crucial part in the struggle to lessen corruption, the lessening of which is thought to advance markets and, in extension, purportedly reduce poverty, all according to relatively recent discoveries by global governance organs. A series of studies show strong positive correlations between women and good governance, arguing as a rule that "the greater the representation of women in parliament, the lower the level of corruption."⁶⁹ The World Bank explains that "good governance is critical for sustainable development. A growing body of evidence suggests that gender equality in rights and resources is associated with less corruption and better governance."⁷⁰ In a widely cited study

⁶⁷ E.g. UNDP 1999, Asplund 2003.

⁶⁸ IPU (1997c):4.

⁶⁹ Dollar et al (2001:1). See also Frey Nakonz (1999); UNDP (2000), UN Development Fund for Women (2000), World Bank (2001) and (2002); Swami et al (2001) Stückelberger (2003).

⁷⁰ World Bank (2002):9.

commissioned by the World Bank, we learn that “numerous behavioral studies have found women to be more trust-worthy and public-spirited than men. These results suggest that women should be particularly effective in promoting honest government.”⁷¹ The authors of the study elaborate:

Men are more individually oriented (selfish) than women... women will be less likely to sacrifice the common good for personal (material) gain. This may be particularly relevant for the role of women in government since, almost by definition, one of the most significant difficulties faced by public bureaucracies is designing institutions that discourage their agents from acting opportunistically, at the expense of the public. (Dollar et al 1999:1)

Such representations of selfless women are echoed time and again across the world. “Women have stabilized politics in a way because they tend not to be so opportunistic. They tend to go after the interests of stability. They’re not so reckless as men,” Uganda’s president Museveni stated in 2000.⁷² “Women generally refuse corrupt behavior and are less inclined to adopt corrupt behavior than men,” the Swiss protestant aid organization Bread for All declared in 2003.⁷³ Peruvian delegate Luz Salgado, co-author of the quota bill that won approval in 1997, explained in the parliamentary debates that

being a woman gives us a special condition that doesn’t simply consist of a having a different color, stature or texture. We women have different life experiences from men. The quota system will put things in order, like they should have been from the beginning...politics will be clean when there are clean characters, when there are transparent characters, when there is a decision to work, when there is solidarity. (Segunda Legislatura Ordinaria de 1996, 18 June 1997:2521. My translation.)

Some quota debaters are still unsure whether such honesty is inherent to women’s sex or a malleable matter of ‘gender:’ “the reasons are unclear, various hypothesis [sic] could be established, such as socialization, less access to the networks of corruption, less access to the ‘corruption currencies,’ less know-how of corrupt practices.” Whatever the verdict, women are presently understood at a minimum as important for the fight against corruption in the short run: “...efforts to promote the involvement of women in public life could at least in a short term represent an effective strategy to fight corruption.”⁷⁴

As Luz Salgado’s statement above suggests, women legislators and politicians have been active proponents of the understanding of women as more honest in politics. The surge in interest in the honest sex as well as in women’s issues may, in turn, have importantly helped create an opening for women to enter political office. Mexican senator Maria Elena Chapa argued in 1997 that “because citizens in Latin America are increasingly demanding a more virtuous political system, new opportunities may open for women in the political arena.”⁷⁵ A number of women legislators or candidates have indeed stepped into this speaking position, campaigning on platforms of greater honesty and promoting anti-corruption measures once elected. For instance,

⁷¹ Dollar et al (1999):cover page.

⁷² As cited in Simmons and Wright (2000).

⁷³ Stückelberger (2003):47.

⁷⁴ Stückelberger (2003):47-8.

⁷⁵ As cited in UNDP (1997):86.

Peruvian presidential candidate Lourdes Flores Nano used her status as a woman to launch herself as an anti-corruption candidate in 2000. Margaret Dongo in Zimbabwe, Wangari Maathai and Charity Ngilu in Kenya and Winnie Byanyima in Uganda have come forward as among the most ardent opponents of corruption in their respective countries.⁷⁶ In arguing in favor of quotas, Argentine deputy Lubertino, while skeptical of the natural origins of women's honesty, claimed that "having been left on the sidelines of power... each one of us women, from our distinct ideologies, would like to move ahead without frivolities, corruption, in-fighting."⁷⁷ The Women's Caucus of the Ugandan Parliament furthermore initiated "transparency measures" by pushing for making government disbursement information available to the public.⁷⁸ Women are understood to literally help advance states by bringing their different life experiences into the policy-making process and by reducing corruption, both aspects which are seen as key in the development of 'modern,' market-led economies that have moved out of 'tradition.'

If women quite literally help advance the state and general welfare through making use of their different characteristics, they also do so symbolically by serving as a crucial marker of modernity. Since neither the economy nor politics are approached as important in generating higher levels of women in national legislatures, only 'traditional' states governed by 'culture' are expected to exhibit low levels of female representation. As was stated above, the causal relation between the political status of women and cultural advancement is circular – general progress away from tradition allegedly benefits women, and the advancement of women via quotas brings general progress away from tradition. Quotas, as a quick fix for bringing more women into national assemblies, help mark states as 'modern,' a point which has clearly not been lost on state officials. So when Ugandan parliamentarian Beatrice Kiraso claims of the quota legislation that "women are now the main instruments of modernization in Uganda. We're also leading the way for women in Africa – It's hard to believe we've come so far,"⁷⁹ she suggests that Uganda has inched closer to 'modernity' simply by passing the quota law, before the women legislators have had time to have their expected effects. Senior WB economist Mason explains that a higher level of female political representation "signifies a country that is more open in general, with more transparent government and a more democratic approach."⁸⁰ In other words, having produced more women legislators, the country must be more modern – transparent and democratic. In a world where being ranked as corrupt has serious effects for a country's total capital inflows, such symbolic representations could be consequential.⁸¹

Conclusion

⁷⁶ Tripp 2003: 23.

⁷⁷ Fundación Friedrich Ebert (1992):57, my translation.

⁷⁸ UNDP (2000):4.

⁷⁹ As quoted in Simmons and Wright (2000).

⁸⁰ As cited in Moline (2002).

⁸¹ For instance, Lambsdorff (1999) shows in a cross-section of 65 states that being labelled 'corrupt' decreases capital inflows at a 99% confidence level.

In a brief sentence, the new sex quota norm could be summed up as “modern market democracies should have a significant share of female legislators.” Female representatives are believed to help bring a state in this direction in a number of ways. First, gender balanced legislatures are held to stimulate economic growth and to serve a function in poverty eradication. Female legislators are believed to better represent so-called women’s interests (in reproductive health, nutrition and child care, as well as equal opportunities for employment and education), and various global governance and development actors have shown the importance of attending to these interests in the fight against poverty and in the quest for economic growth. Gender balanced legislatures are now also seen as a matter of good governance, as women are believed to be less corrupt and less selfish and thus ideal in the construction of transparent state institutions (which in turn is believed to bring better functioning markets). Finally, a larger share of female legislators serves an important symbolic function for states, demonstrating the existence of a modern, just form of democratic representation and the leaving behind of cultural traditions. There are thus multiple strong reasons at play for including more women in national legislatures.

These understandings of the norm, of what quotas are and what quotas do, rest on and help reproduce a social order that validates the ‘modern’ over the ‘traditional.’ As we saw above, this hierarchy is the taken-for-granted foundation from which the arguments for quotas derive much of their force. One can question whether the modern/traditional hierarchy is indeed the most appropriate and fair way to understand quotas and higher levels of female legislators.⁸² However, the association of quotas with hierarchy as such should not be taken as a critique of the quota norm, as social ranking is a requisite component built into the logic of all norms. Norms inevitably generate comparative judgments of some sort. As states take on meaning by being ranked and assessed in relation to others, norms help order actors hierarchically. Almost forty years ago, Ralf Dahrendorf therefore concluded that “the origin of inequality is thus to be found in the existence in all human societies of norms of behavior.”⁸³ In short, norms need to be understood and studied in conjunction with social ranking and not simply as productive of homogenization.

Connecting norms with social hierarchy helps better account for the role of norms in policy diffusion. First, social stratification helps account for the origin in international society of new world-wide state behavior. New policies may originate with states that abide by norms and are high in rank, in order to maintain that standing. Whether admired or envied, their rank – being seen as superior to other states in some regard – then helps prompt other states to follow suit. In a context of modern/traditional hierarchy, linking norms with social rank helps explain why new policies may spread from states considered most modern to those considered less developed and thus traditional.

⁸² See e.g. Towns 2010.

⁸³ Dahrendorf (1968):169-170.

But change does not exclusively emerge out of the so-called core of international society. States that are low in rank may also become the first to change their behavior, attempting to rise in rank within a given order or as a rejection of that order. Crucially, new state policies may develop “from below,” as in the case of legal sex quotas. Given how higher levels of female legislators are interpreted, there is clearly more pressure on developing states to take action and it is thus not surprising that quotas are adopted more extensively everywhere but Western Europe and North America. However, it seems feasible that a new policy which has developed from below could generate a competitive dynamic among states higher in rank, who may feel a need to follow suit in order not to be outperformed. In any case, since policy change can emerge from states that are high or low in rank, my claim about social hierarchies and the origin of change obviously does not help us predict where new policies will develop and from where they will spread in a law-like manner. The analysis nonetheless helps us explain the origin of change in the sense of better understanding the causal dynamics at work. Ranking is an important and overlooked force for initiating change on a world-wide scale.

The second claim of the article concerns the process of change: social hierarchies shape how new policies are understood, advocated for and legitimated, in short how they are framed. When activists or political party officials try to make a state engage in a new behavior, they need to make clear why that state *as a being of a certain kind and rank* should do so. In other words, they have to invoke the normative ranking orders in which a state is positioned. Arguments must be developed to explain why, for instance, a “traditional” state should engage in “modern” behavior. Getting a state to behave in ways considered typical of states seen as inferior is particularly difficult. In contemporary Western Europe, for instance, it would be ludicrous to advocate for a new gender policy by suggesting that the policy is emblematic of “traditional” or “developing” states. Arguments about change have to take into consideration the rank of the state in question in a particular interpretation of hierarchy. Proponents of change must make clear how and why it makes sense for a state of a certain rank to change its behavior towards women. Crucially, social hierarchies are part of the norms story, all the way, of how new policies develop to become world-wide in scope.

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