Relevance and Practices of Political Gender Quotas

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Abstract: Representation of women and inclusion of their perspectives and experiences into the decision making processes can result to the solutions that satisfy larger number of the society. Economic and social empowerment of women is greatly reliable on their integration into the political decision-making process through involving them in the political and public offices. Women can enjoy their political and civil rights through political representation and/or participation in the public life, as ensuring women’s political participation is essential to bring legitimacy to the government and establish democracy in a practical sense. Women remain under-represented in the executive and political leadership positions mostly in the world regardless of their advanced educational levels and political participation. Adoption of political gender quotas is related with attitudes about women within a particular country, calling for increased levels of democratic freedoms to improve women’s access to public and political decision making positions. Proportional (descriptive) representation systems offer greater opportunities of gaining political access for women. Gender quotas are good policy tool to achieving equitable representation of women in the policy-making positions. They facilitate the process of change for women’s political inclusion in the political arena. They can increase female leadership; influence policy outcomes, and reduce gender discrimination. Thus, introduction and adoption of political gender quotas in the political and public service offices do increase female leadership in both political and executive/public offices. The basic objective of this paper, therefore, is to reveal the necessity and existing practices of political gender quotas to pave the way for future women’s political empowerment/representation in the public and political decision-making positions in line with creating conducive conditions for policy implications (“National Gender Equality Policy”) in Ethiopia at large and its specific regional states.

1. Introduction

It is conventionally true that women had obtained the right to vote in 96% of the world countries by 1994 and had been the beneficiaries of parliamentary gender quotas since 1981. However, women remain underrepresented in the executive and political leadership positions mostly in the world regardless of their advanced educational levels and political participation. In response to such a situation, policy-makers have responded through the introduction of ‘gender quota’, the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action (BPA) and the 2000 Beijing+5 update, for females’ representation in the government and corporate boards in many countries of the world since adoption of gender quotas is related with attitudes about women within a particular country (Pande and Ford 2011). From descriptive representation aspect, in the political arena, there is no evidence that women are unwilling to participate in leadership contests and no instances of countries having to disband quota systems for the reasons of not finding enough leaders from women. This, therefore, calls for increasing levels of democratic freedoms to improve women’s access to public and political decision making positions. On the other hand, the structure of the electoral system for political quotas and the sanctions for non-compliance in both the political and corporate/executive is critical. It is obvious, in politics, that party and voters’ concerns of women’s worse leadership and/or the desire to protect the male incumbents has been restricting the success of candidate quota systems in women representations, similar to the concerns of firms’ senior management tactics to circumventing the quota law (Pande and Ford* 2011, p16). Despite the globally pervasive moments towards democratization processes in most countries of the world, females are still widely underrepresented at most levels of governments. Higher levels of women’s legislative representation correlate with the passage of more women-centered policies and increase in the representation of women in political, public, and civil society organizations as well (Fallon, Swiss and Viterna 2012).
2. Empirical Literatures

2.1 Necessity/Relevance/ of Political Gender Quotas

There is no evidence that women are unwilling to participate in leadership contests and no instances of countries having to disband quota systems for the reasons of not finding enough leaders from women. Increasing levels of democratic freedoms to improve women’s access to public and political decision making positions may be sought from any corner in the world (Fallon, Swiss and Viterna 2012).

Political gender quotas are good policy tool to achieving equitable representation of women in the policy-making positions. Gender quotas can increase female leadership; influence policy outcomes, and reduce gender discrimination in the long-term. Thus, introduction and adoption of gender quotas in the political and public service offices do increase female leadership in both political and executive/public offices and influence policy outcomes (Pande and Ford* 2011p3).

Gender quotas have impacts towards equity and efficiency. They can improve both descriptive and substantive representation of women by enabling more equitable representation of women and improving representation of women’s policy interests respectively. Quotas can also improve efficiency by overcoming taste discrimination, and changing attitudes and social norms in the short and long-terms respectively. Political quotas can also have direct effects on participation in politics in addition to increasing women’s number in leadership positions towards running for election as a candidate, voting as a constituent, or voicing one’s political references as a citizen (Pande and Ford* 2011pp11-13).

Political gender quotas can be in the forms of “voluntary party quotas” adopted by the political parties to nominating certain percentage of women candidates for electoral lists; candidate quotas required by the law (constitution) of a country and stipulated for a certain number of candidate positions reserved for women in the parliament; and reserved seats (positions) for only female candidates-used as a more direct way of regulating the number of women in elected positions. From the world countries with current gender quotas, 61% have voluntary party quotas, 38% have legislated candidate quotas, and 20% have reserved seats for women’s representation in both legislative and executive bodies (Pande and Ford* 2011, p8).

Though political experience is relevant for effective leadership, lack of experience does not preclude effective leadership for women. Even though women without previous political experience may perform worse than men or senior politicians; the gap can be absorbed after very few months or years of leadership exercise. Their leadership experience also does not translate into worse policy-making as well (Pande and Ford* 2011, pp25-26). Therefore, on the basis of such facts, there should be an effective temporary measure to allow the avoidance of false negative attitudes of senior men and women political leaders acting as barriers to descriptive representation of both men and women for the long-term effect.

2.2 Strategies and Practices for Political Gender Quotas

According to Whelan and Wood (2012), a more balanced representation of men and women in leadership and decision-making roles will mean that organizations are making better use of the full range of available talent and better meeting the needs of both men and women at work. The authors articulated that improving gender balance is both smart economics and good human rights (Whelan and Wood 2012, p4).

There is a wide spread evidence that specific, measurable and challenging targets are heavily utilized and highly effective in the areas of leadership and managerial work. The authors argued that assigned gender targets or quotas for which leaders and managers are held accountable and, where appropriate, rewarded for achievement, would be similarly effective. Further, they valued that effectiveness of targets would be further enabled if accompanied by organization specific support strategies and organizational efforts to remove constraints on the acceptance and commitment to gender targets due to mindsets, culture, systems and processes (ibid).

2.2.1 Scope and Usage of Political Gender Quotas

The use of quotas is far from creating a consensus among people, neither among its potential beneficiaries nor among the others. Nevertheless, from one country to another, quotas have been used in education, mainly to support affirmative action and therefore focusing on race, or in the political scene, since that time focusing on gender. The implication of gender quotas relies on its effectiveness to be used within the political system by countries to legitimize equal representation by female and male legislators in government. The insertion of political quotas is
used by different countries to prove their commitment to gender equality in the political system (http://www.wikigender.org/index.php).

Gender quotas are used to create equal representation among genders within legislation to contribute to the promotion of gender equality, and ease the access of women into positions of government, definitely public and political decision-making positions. Gender quotas in the legislature are important for the represented group and for the polity as a whole. Instituting gender quotas is meant to increase the number of women who hold political power. Before 1970, only five countries adopted quotas, whereas today over one hundred countries have done so. Several Latin American countries passed some legislation requiring between 20 and 40% of women candidates at the national elections in the years 1990. Argentina was the first to pass legislation on gender quotas in 1991 (ibid).

2.2.2 Types of Political Gender Quota Policies

According to Sunn (2011), there are three dominant types of gender quota policies that are adopted by numerous countries:

1. Reserved Seats: the established seats that only women are eligible to compete for.
2. Party Quotas: the pledges (privileges) by individual parties to aim for a particular proportion of women among their candidates to the public and political office positions.
3. Legislative Quotas - the mandatory provisions that apply to all political groupings that require a certain proportion of female candidates to address party selection. Soft quotas stimulate or encourage but not guarantee the election of women to various kinds of political bodies. The policies which countries choose are determined by the political citizenship of that country and the extent to which gender quotas are pursued.

2.2.3 Application and Legislation of Gender Quotas

Gender quotas on paper demonstrate a country's intentions to embrace different groups in the political process and are attractive to countries that deal with underrepresentation. Countries can apply gender quotas in different ways, at times creates debate as to whether political gender quotas that are adopted are legitimate and changes representation in the required spheres (Melanie M., 2005).

As Bush stated, there are a number of countries that have included gender quotas in their Constitutions. Some countries, among the others, include:

1. Several Latin American countries: They have passed some legislation requiring between 20 and 40% of women candidates at the national elections in the years 1990, Argentina being the first to pass legislation on gender quotas in 1991.
2. Uganda: the 1995 Constitution reserves one parliamentary seat from each of the 39 districts for women (13% quota).
3. India: 33% of the seats in local municipal bodies have to be occupied by women.
4. France: 50% of the members of a list forwarded for election have to be women.
5. Tunisia: the running lists at the elections of the Constituent assembly (scheduled on July 24, 2011) have to represent both sexes equally. Women and men have to appear alternatively on the lists.

2.2.4 Gender Quotas and Political Participation

Gender quotas were adopted by international influence and inducements. International actors promote gender quotas in the legislature by using the modality of peace operations in post-conflict countries. As a result, this has allowed new constitutions to be written and new policies to be implemented in relation to gender quotas. Political leaders may also use the implementation of gender quotas as a strategy to show the international community their commitment to democracy. However, inducements and incentives that inspire gender quota adoption depend on a country’s current cultural climate which truly dictates whether or not they legitimately accept gender quotas. However, the United States is being as an example where the word quota implies the denial of individual worth, fair competition, and merit (Dahlerup and Freidenvall, 2005).

3. Conclusion

There is an increasing level of democratic freedoms to improve women’s access to public and political decision making positions from any corner in the world, including Ethiopia. Political gender quota to achieving equitable representation of both men and women in the policy-making positions is a rewarding policy tool. Thus, introduction and adoption of gender quota in the political and public service offices do increase female leadership in
both political and executive/public offices and influence policy outcomes.

Even though political experience is relevant for effective leadership, lack of experience does not preclude effective leadership for women, as the political leadership gap can be absorbed after very few months or years of leadership exercise of women.

Therefore, it is appropriate and possible to adopt political gender quotas in the forms of either: a) “voluntary political party quotas” adopted by the political parties to nominating certain percentage of women candidates for electoral lists; b) “candidate quotas” required by the law (constitution) of a country and stipulated for a certain number of candidate positions reserved for women in the parliament; and reserved seats (positions) for only female candidates—used as a more direct way of regulating the number of women in elected positions. This can be practiced in democratic countries like Ethiopia as well as its respective national regional states to enhance democratic freedom, socio-economic development and governance.

4. Acknowledgements

This work was supported in part by a grant from the Ethiopian Civil Service University, Gambella Peoples’ National Regional State of Ethiopia, and the Regional Prisons Administrative Agency. Thus, my deepest heartfelt thanks goes to these institutions. I also extend my appreciation to those who collaborated for the success of this study in the Ethiopian Civil Service University and/or outside, my colleagues, friends and family members as well.

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