

# Gender Quotas, Context, and Substantive Representation: a Literature Review

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## ABSTRACT

This paper provides a comprehensive review of the link between descriptive and substantive representation, as well as the challenges associated with the context in which gender quotas exist. Gender quotas have become a global phenomenon, now extending to sub-national levels, such as provincial and local levels. This review paper evaluates the descriptive-substantive link, explores the concept of women's interests, and analyzes whether gender quotas produce equal outcomes across different contexts. Drawing from a vast body of literature, this paper delves into multifaceted impacts of gender quotas, assesses different perspectives on women's interests, and analyzes quota performance across various contexts, including developing countries and sub-national levels, while considering the contextual dynamics involved. The key findings of this review suggest that a higher number of women in parliaments tends to advance women's interests; however, such gains are not universal and highly context-sensitive. After outlining the temporal and spatial gaps in the research on the substantive representation of women and highlighting the importance of gender quotas at sub-national levels, this review provides several suggestions and identifies some understudied avenues to further deepen the understanding of the contextual dynamics involved in the substantive representation of women.

**Keywords:** contextual dynamics; gender quotas; women's interests; substantive representation; sub-national levels.

## Cuotas de género, contexto y representación sustantiva: una revisión de la literatura

### RESUMEN

Este artículo ofrece una revisión exhaustiva del vínculo entre la representación descriptiva y sustantiva, y los desafíos asociados con el contexto en el que existen las cuotas de género. Las cuotas de género se han convertido en un fenómeno global, que ahora se extiende a niveles subnacionales, como los niveles provinciales y locales. Este artículo de revisión evalúa el vínculo descriptivo-sustantivo, los conceptos de los intereses de las mujeres y analiza si las cuotas de género producen ganancias sustantivas iguales en todos los contextos. Basándose en una amplia colección de literatura, este artículo profundiza en los impactos multifacéticos de las cuotas de género, evalúa diferentes perspectivas sobre los intereses de las mujeres y analiza el desempeño de las cuotas en varios contextos, incluidos los países en desarrollo y los niveles subnacionales, y la dinámica contextual involucrada. Los hallazgos clave de esta revisión sugieren que el mayor número de mujeres en los parlamentos ayuda a promover los intereses de las mujeres, pero tales ganancias no son universales y altamente sensibles al contexto. Después de esbozar las brechas temporales y espaciales en la investigación sobre la representación sustantiva de las mujeres y la importancia de las cuotas de género a niveles subnacionales, esta revisión proporciona varias sugerencias e identifica algunas vías poco estudiadas para profundizar aún más la comprensión de la dinámica contextual en la representación sustantiva de las mujeres.

**Palabras clave:** dinámica contextual; cuotas de género; intereses de las mujeres; representación sustantiva; niveles subnacionales.

## Cotas de gênero, contexto e representação substantiva: uma revisão da literatura

### RESUMO

Este artigo oferece uma revisão abrangente da relação entre representação descritiva e representação substantiva e os desafios associados ao contexto em que existem cotas de gênero. As cotas de gênero tornaram-se um fenômeno global, agora se estendendo aos níveis subnacionais, como os níveis provincial e local. Este artigo de revisão avalia o vínculo descriptivo-sustantivo, os conceitos relacionados aos interesses das mulheres e analisa se as cotas de gênero produzem ganhos substantivos equivalentes em diferentes contextos. Com base em uma extensa coleção de literatura, este artigo investiga os impactos multifacetados das cotas de gênero, avalia diferentes perspectivas sobre os interesses das mulheres e analisa o desempenho das cotas em vários contextos, incluindo países em desenvolvimento e níveis subnacionais, e as dinâmicas contextuais envolvidas. Os principais achados desta revisão sugerem que o aumento do número de mulheres nos parlamentos ajuda a promover os interesses das mulheres, mas esses ganhos não são universais e altamente sensíveis ao contexto. Ao delinear lacunas temporais e espaciais na pesquisa sobre a representação substantiva das mulheres e a importância das cotas de gênero nos níveis subnacionais, esta revisão proporciona sugestões e identifica lacunas ainda pouco exploradas para aprofundar ainda mais a compreensão da dinâmica contextual na representação substantiva das mulheres.

**Palavras-chave:** dinâmica contextual; cotas de gênero; interesses das mulheres; representação substantiva; níveis subnacionais.

## Gender quotas, context, and substantive representation: a literature review

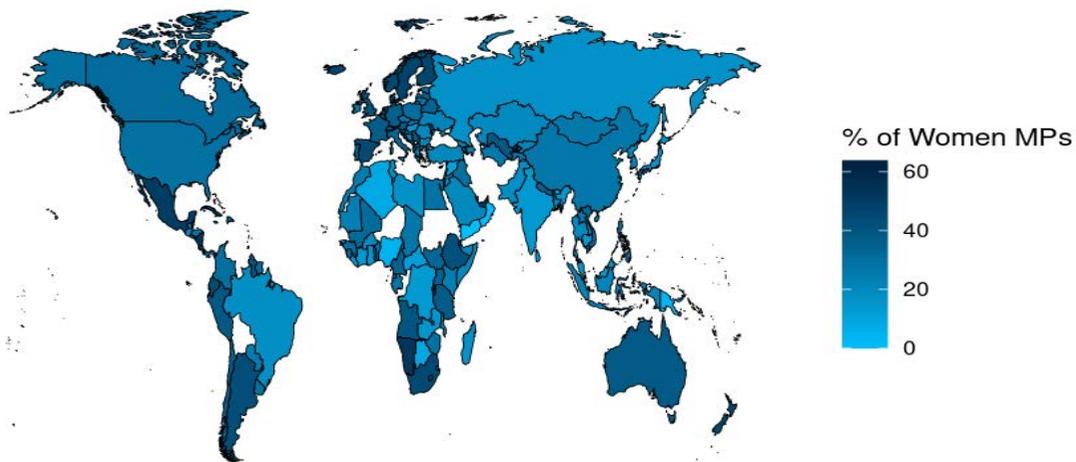
In the aftermath of the 1995 World Conference on Women in Beijing, gender quota laws surged, bringing a wave of women into parliaments. Gender became a central focus in the literature on the concept of representation (Pitkin, 1967), unlike median voter theory (Downs, 1957), where gender remained irrelevant. In this milieu, gender quotas drew the attention of scholars toward investigating the phenomenon of representation and its different manifestations (Hughes et al., 2017). Quotas emerged as a necessary antidote to the soaring gender inequalities at the policy level. Complemented by the theory of presence, critical mass theory, the concept of critical actors, and substantive representation as process and outcomes, the descriptive-substantive saga has undergone modifications, followed by intelligent inquiries to unveil the impacts of gender quotas. Gender quotas have favorable results that transcend descriptive representation, as captured by the expanding literature today.

Gender quotas are introduced at all levels of governance, i.e., national, provincial, and local government levels. Today, 138 countries have one or more of the three types of quotas: candidate quota, reserved quota, and/or party quota. As reflected in Figure 1, 180 countries have women in their lower house, i.e., Vanuatu has the lowest at 2% and Rwanda top ranked at 63,8% (IPU, 2024b). There are 89 countries with gender quotas at the sub-national level (IDEAS, 2024). The fast-track policies of gender quotas allowed countries like Rwanda, Mexico, and Andorra to outpace Sweden, Finland, and Denmark—once regarded as champions of gender equality—in record time. This also accounts for the increasing number of women in the rank and files of legislators around the world, which reached 27% in 2024 (IPU, 2024c). Women’s inclusion in decision-making bodies increased the likelihood that women’s issues would be acknowledged and addressed within legislatures.

Finland, the first country to elect women to its law-making bodies in 1907 (Paxton et al., 2020) and Pakistan, electing the first women to the legislature in 1977 (Bashir & Jan, 2018), depict two different contexts that shape women’s political journeys uniquely. The current research on gender quotas has unfolded through interdisciplinary approaches investigating the substantive benefits of gender quotas in different contexts worldwide. As gender quotas proliferated, research efforts intensified to uncover anomalies regarding their

impacts. In the same pursuit, this paper answers the following questions: How does descriptive representation impact substantive representation of women? Are those impacts homogeneous across different regions? How do contextual dynamics influence women's interests? How does context influence the substantive representation of women?

The subsequent sections of this paper are organized as follows: Section 2 outlines the definition and approaches to women's political empowerment, traces the origin of research on representation, and presents competing theories. Section 3 constitutes the largest part of this paper and cites a wide range of research on gender quotas from multiple perspectives. This section also provides details on the limitations and instances of backlash. The following section discusses the dilemma of the conceptualization of women's interests. Section 5 assesses the North-South divide and theoretical imbalance concerning the research on gender quotas. At the end of this section, the researcher pinpoints the under-researched condition of quotas at the sub-national and citizen levels. The final section concludes by underlining some key issues in the literature on gender quotas and sets out suggestions for upcoming research.



**Figure 1. Percentage of Women MPs in National Legislatures (Lower/Single House) as of December 1, 2024**

Note: Map of women's representation in their lower house across 180 countries. Countries on which data is not available or have no women in the lower/single house are shown as white spaces.

Source: Created by the author using the latest data from IPU.

## Women's political empowerment

Women's political empowerment is a hallmark of democracy that acknowledges and upholds women's human rights. Although women's empowerment encompasses a broad spectrum of indicators and determinants, women's political empowerment is one of its critical dimensions. According to the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project, women's political empowerment implies elevating women's capacity, thereby increasing their choices and participation in societal decision-making processes (Sundström et al., 2015). This empowerment bolsters women's ability to partake in political rallies and protests, exercise their voting rights freely, contest political office, and participate actively in policy deliberations (Adamu, 2023).

### Empowerment and gender quota

To acknowledge the indispensable presence of women in policy-making bodies and meet the demands for democratic governance, two approaches are proposed to empower women and advance their participation in the political process: the incremental-track approach and the fast-track approach (Dahlerup & Freidenvall, 2005). Both approaches concur on the common goal of women's empowerment. However, incremental-track policy believes in slow development in contrast to the fast-track policy that plummets gender inequality by introducing gender quotas. This is also called fast-track empowerment. Gender quotas specify a designated share of women in legislatures, either through selection or election processes (Dahlerup & Gaber, 2017). As noted by Hughes et al. (2019, p. 220), "electoral quotas are policies that specify a threshold—typically a percentage of women that must be selected or nominated to a political decision-making body."

Quotas have the immediate impact of impelling law-making bodies by, first, stimulating pro-women behavior among lawmakers. This initiative signals that the ongoing gender imbalance in representation is a burning issue requiring immediate attention, referred to as the normative effect (Fernández & Valiente, 2021). Secondly, achieving power through numbers, a defining feature of the democratic process, can not only alter the policy preferences of legislators but also proffer opportunities to achieve favorable legislative outcomes for women (Clayton & Zetterberg, 2018).

Gender quotas enabled countries to make significant strides in women's political empowerment. In this context, the foundational work of Hanna

Pitkin (1967) redirected the epicenter of scholarship toward the dilemma of representation itself. Subsequently, scholars concentrated on studying the different ways in which the interests of women are represented and assessing their effectiveness.

### Concepts of Representation

Following Hanna Pitkin's typology in her seminal work, *The Concept of Representation* (1967), scholars developed a keen interest in digging into the connection between descriptive and substantive representation, which Pitkin defined as "acting in the interests of the represented in a manner responsive to them" (Pitkin, 1967, p. 209). In the late 20th century, the literature on women's substantive representation transitioned from theoretical discussions to empirical investigations, partly prompted by Critical Mass Theory (Dahlerup, 1988; Kanter, 1977) and the Theory of Presence (Phillips, 1995). These efforts were intended to gauge the consequences of the increasing number of women in politics (Allen & Cairney, 2015). In her foundational work, Pitkin classified representation into four types: (1) Formal Representation, (2) Symbolic Representation, (3) Descriptive Representation, and (4) Substantive Representation. The former two types received less attention from researchers, whereas the latter two—descriptive and substantive representation—became central to subsequent research. The former refers to the number of representatives holding seats in representative bodies and how they identify with the gender, race, and class of those they represent (Belknap & Kenny, 2023). Descriptive representation is generally expedited through gender quotas, which are classified into three types: voluntary political party, reserved, and legislated candidate quotas. The latter form of representation, known as substantive representation, accounts for the actions taken by legislators to advance the demands and interests of those they represent and translate them into law (Childs & Lovenduski, 2013).

### Manifestations of Substantive Representation

Since the introduction of quotas and the growing demand for inclusive democracy, legislatures have seen an increasing number of women—a trend generally referred to as descriptive representation, as shown in Figure 2. As women constitute almost half of the global population, their presence in the decision-making apparatus gained importance. To understand this phenomenon, scholars have become thoroughly interested in investigating the impacts

of women's descriptive presence from multiple perspectives, some of which are analyzed in detail in the following sub-sections.

### Substantive representation as process and outcome

In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, substantive representation was largely understood as a process. Franceschet and Piscopo (2008) classified substantive representation under two indicators: process and outcome. In the decisive analysis, they examined bill introduction as the process and legislative success as the outcome in the Argentinian Parliament. Substantive representation as a process involves agenda-setting or the inclusion of women's interests in the parliamentary agenda, while the outcome manifests as transforming or enacting women-friendly policies.

This classification was followed by a plethora of research exploring the descriptive-substantive link either as a process, an outcome, or both. Such studies focused on legislators' women-friendly attitudes and behaviors to determine critical actors (Childs & Krook, 2009). In this context, quantitative content analysis of parliamentary speeches in Serbia, accounting for substantive representation as a process, by Đorđević (2023) reported critical actors among male and female Members of Parliament (MPs), focusing more on family and childcare. Surprisingly, this was true for both genders, with male MPs dominating the stage. In contrast, a study analyzing parliamentary speeches from 2000-2018 in five Western European parliaments, i.e., Spain, Germany, Sweden, Ireland, and the Netherlands, reported opposite results. The authors found that women MPs spoke differently than men on issues they often care about, such as health, education, and unemployment, in all five parliaments (Wäckerle & Castanho Silva, 2023). Likewise, another study demonstrated that women are more likely to sponsor bill related to women's interests in the Chilean Chamber of Deputies. Additionally, women members from the left focused more on feminist women's interests than rightist women, who prioritized traditional women's interests (Dockendorff et al., 2022).

Similarly, Lloren's (2015) study of the MP's voting behavior on feminist bills reported similar results, with the logistic fixed-effect regression model showing high statistical significance ( $\beta = 1.069$ ) at  $p < 0.001$  for gender (female in this case) with the voting behavior. While comparing the plenary debates of the Romanian delegation in the European Union (EU) Parliament and the Romanian National Parliament, Garboni (2015) noted that female MPs in the EU Parliament

substantively represented women's interests more than their male colleagues. However, this pattern receded in the case of the national parliament, citing a lack of critical mass.

While some authors approached the problem of substantive representation through a cross-national analysis, Tusalem (2022) conducted a time-series cross-sectional study of 64 developing countries, understanding substantive representation as an outcome in this milieu. Utilizing data on women's empowerment and human development from 2005 to 2019, the author demonstrated that the descriptive representation of women is highly correlated and statistically significant ( $p < .01$ ) with women's empowerment, including gender equality, gender equity, social inclusion, poverty reduction, and human resource development. Similar findings were reported by Asiedu et al. (2018) as a result of their cross-national analysis of 159 developing countries. The descriptive representation was found to be highly significant ( $p < .01$ ) and positively correlated with gender-sensitive laws in all the countries. As the two aspects of substantive representation remain a point of contention among scholars, a wide range of studies has accounted for both aspects of representation to capture the fuller picture of the impacts of gender quotas.

The difference between these two aspects of representation is vividly reflected in a study conducted by G. Park & Österman (2021) investigating the impacts of descriptive representation in the 20th National Assembly of the Parliament of Korea. The author indicated that female MPs demonstrated greater engagement in initiating bills related to feminist women's interests than in securing their passage. More robust results were reported in terms of the passage of bills related to traditional women's interests, even though the introduction of such bills was less consistent (G. Park & Österman, 2021). Even more astonishing results were reported in a recent study by Wang (2023), indicating that only quota women acted in favor of women's interests—both in initiating and passing bills—while non-quota women showed no such engagement. Given this, S. Park (2023) analysis of 169 countries on the Women Political Empowerment Index (WPEI) and Gender Inequality Index (GII) from 1990 to 2017 found that the output (% of women in legislatures) is positively associated with the outcome, i.e., an upsurge in the WPEI and a decline in the GII were observed across all the countries studied during the period. The above studies give reason to argue that substantive representation fluctuates with the context and the concept of women's interest which is further analyzed in a latter section.

Apart from studying legislative and non-legislative behaviors of MPs inside the legislative chambers, some authors investigated the experiences of lawmakers to uncover trends related to the impacts of gender quotas. While studying the experiences of Nepali female politicians, Yadav (2024) noted that gender quotas positively affected the perception of women’s participation in politics. It was also observed that women prioritized issues like gender-based violence (GBV), primarily ignored in a patriarchal setup, which is why more GBV cases were reported when women occupied mayoral positions. Similar views were shared by Joshi & Echle (2023) after interviewing women MPs in Japan, noting that female MPs are more likely to represent women’s interests in parliament.

As quota law implementation led to increased inclusion of women in law-making bodies and the passage of pro-women legislation, the focus of empirical studies partially shifted toward examining the tangible impacts of women’s presence—such as government spending priorities on health, education, antenatal and reproductive care, childcare, poverty alleviation, and the gender pay gap.

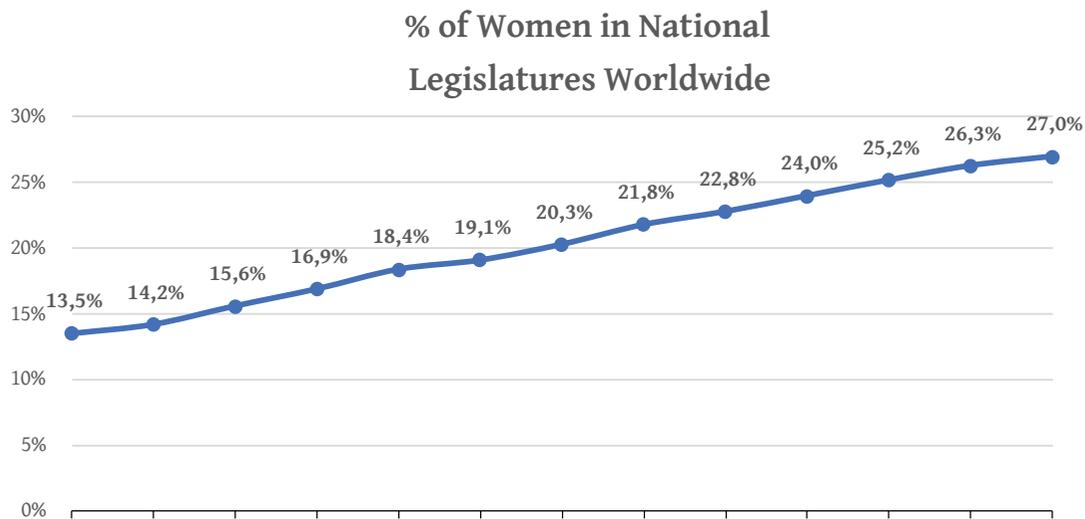


Figure 2. Worldwide Percentage of Women MPs in Lower and Upper Houses Combined (2000-2024)

Note: The above data is accurate as of October each year from 2004 to 2024, as reported by CRS (2024), except for 2000 and 2002, which refer to March.

Source: Created by the author using data from IPU.

## Funding Women’s Issues

Increased women's representation and women-friendly policies can translate into greater budgetary priorities centered around women's issues. Allocating resources to issues related to women promotes equity and closes gender gaps, which is why women are anticipated to favor policies that enhance health, childcare, education, and redistribution (Chen, 2021; Enns-Jedenastik, 2017; Funk & Philips, 2019). Similarly, Clayton and Zetterberg's (2018) analysis of a dataset of 139 states from 1995 to 2012 reported a 0,56% average increase in health spending in countries where women's representation increased by 10%. Moreover, a recent study of a global sample of 191 countries spanning from 1990 to 2020 by Acheampong et al. (2024) indicated that a single-point increase in women's representation increases gender parity in primary, secondary, and tertiary education by 0,4%, 0,5%, and 1,7%, respectively. Other studies also show that a higher number of female legislators is positively associated with greater maternal employment and development aid (Hicks et al., 2015; Weeks, 2017). Another cross-national time-series regression analysis of 49 Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) countries found a negative association between descriptive representation and infant mortality and child mortality ( $p < 0,01$ ) based on the years 1958-2015 and 1969-2015, respectively (Mechkova & Carlitz, 2020). Similarly, Cunial (2021) found an inverse relationship between increasing women's representation—resulting from legislated gender quotas—and infant mortality across the 23 provinces of Argentina.

Furthermore, Baskaran & Hessami (2019) reported similar findings based on a survey conducted across 1632 municipalities in Bavaria, Germany's largest state. It was reported that female candidates' victories pushed childcare provision by 40% compared to male candidates. Along similar lines, Bhalotra and Clots-Figuera (2014) found that a 10-percentage point rise in women's representation was associated with a 2,1% reduction in neonatal mortality across the 16 state legislatures of India. However, this does not absolve India's health sector from prevailing inequalities, as increased local female political representation did not mitigate male dominance or the pro-male bias within the sector (Dupas & Jain, 2024).

It is important to note that government spending priorities have predominantly been researched in the context of traditional women's interests (education, public health, childcare and so forth), while feminist policy areas have generally missed the spotlight. It highlights the need for future studies to extend the scope of such investigations to feminist policy areas as well. More-

over, the above findings are not universal and take a flip in regions marked by toxic societal norms and poor governance, further explored in the “Bubble Effects” section.

As a result of gender quotas, women found their roles in democratic political institutions like political parties and women parliamentary organizations, as assessed in the adjacent sub-sections.

### The role of political parties

The role of political parties assumed critical importance in enhancing the political visibility of women and became a focal point for empirical studies. Political parties play a crucial role in, both the descriptive and substantive representation of women and in determining their status in androcentric political structures. As noted by Goyal & Sells (2024) in the case of Brazil, the descriptive representation of women helps reduce gender gaps within political parties by increasing female membership. In line with this, Belknap and Kenny (2023) noted positive trends in descriptive feminization: enforcement of rules improving the selection and/or election of women as candidates and MPs, and substantive feminization: the women-friendliness of the parties’ manifestos and policy pledges, in the 2021 elections to the Scottish Parliament. Generally, the parties sitting on the opposition benches take on the role of preserving women’s interests and keeping the government accountable, as Tam (2019) observed while studying the male-female divide on women’s interests in Singapore’s parliament.

Other studies uncovered contrasting trends while studying the role of party affiliation in the substantive representation of women. Rashkova (2021) indicated that women act more for women’s issues than their male counterparts in Radical Right Parties (RRP) in Slovakia. Meanwhile, Rashkova and Zankina (2017) reported that both genders of RRP acted for women in the Bulgarian Parliament compared to MPs from other parties. On the other hand, Celis and Erzeel (2015) showed opposite results from their analysis of 10 European countries. They indicated that, among the one-third of total members studied, male critical actors affiliated with right and center-right parties outnumbered their female counterparts within the same parties. In contrast, Lambert & Pineda Moquete (2025) noted that female politicians from both center-right and center-left parties, elected as a result of legislative candidate quota at local level in Dominican Republic, showed greater commitment to act for women’s interests than their male counterparts. Moreover, Bektas

and Issever-Ekinci (2019) also found that both right-wing and left-wing female MPs sponsored bills related to women's interests. Right-wing MPs focused more on children and family, while left-wing MPs prioritized women's rights and equality issues understood with a feminist accent. The difference in the preference of policy issues is also demonstrated within parties, as Slegten and Heyndels (2020) reported in the case of Flanders, Belgium.

This clearly shows that findings from one country could be prone to false generalization if applied to another country. It also indicates that the substantive representation of women can neither be associated with feminist and/or leftist parties nor with a single gender. Furthermore, parties do not always act affirmatively toward the substantive representation of women, which assumes a topic for future study and is explored in the latter section of this review.

### Women Parliamentary Organizations (WPOs)

Women Parliamentary Organization (WPO) is defined as: "a regularized but not necessarily formal association of legislators formed to sustain women's presence in the political institution, and, or to engender women's representation, descriptive, substantive, and symbolic" (Allen & Childs, 2019, p. 9).

It is a crucial site for critical actors, serving as an arena for the substantive representation of women (*ibid*). These crucial sites are more likely in countries with gender quotas (Adams et al., 2019). Such bodies, generally called Women Parliamentary Caucuses (WPCs), Women Legislative Caucuses (WLCs), or feminized parliamentary bodies, may exert pressure or influence policymakers in numerous ways, such as through cosponsoring legislation (Barnes, 2016) and engaging with NGOs (Sawer & Turner, 2014) that hold the government accountable directly or indirectly. Notably, the Inter-party Women's Caucus in Uganda made remarkable efforts by halting all legislation until the government increased the budget for maternal and neonatal health (Clayton, 2021). In another instance, the Status of Women Caucus (SWC) in Australia successfully persuaded a minister to incorporate domestic violence provisions in the "Fair Work Act" (Sawer & Turner, 2016). Such bodies provide a legitimate forum to address issues related to gender, as reported by Sawer et al. (2013) in the case of Sweden. In the US and the UK, the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Women recommended the establishment of Women and Equality Committees (Piscopo, 2014; Sawer & Turner, 2016).

However, these bodies are not immune to backlash, male dominance, and the centripetal forces of political parties (Khan & Naqvi, 2020), particularly in developing countries where women's agency tends to be weaker. Apart from that, the literature on WPOs provides a collective assessment of pro-women bodies that deviates from the traditional approach to studying individual MPs' behaviors. Hence, studying the WPOs provides an opportunity to uncover trends that are hidden otherwise. Notably, such bodies have not attracted the desired attention so far, especially the WPOs at sub-national levels, women's groups in local bodies, and, more importantly, how these relate to the WPOs at a national level, which offers insightful case studies for future investigations.

### Women's Political Leadership

Women's Political Leadership (WPL) can be instrumental in substantively representing women's interests in many facets. For instance, women in ministerial positions or serving as committee chairs may redirect the government's or lawmakers' focus toward addressing and legislating on women-related issues. Therefore, women attaining leadership roles is construed as a substantive gain that defies the traditional norm that leadership roles are generally reserved for male MPs. In this respect, Joshi and Goehrung (2018) investigated WPL in Asian countries through the Women Political Leadership Index (WPLI). It was found that WPLI positively correlated ( $r = 0,57$ ) with the number of female members in parliament. It has been observed that citizens in countries that have adopted gender quotas show higher support for increasing women's political participation (Fernández & Valiente, 2021). Another study analyzing data from 48 democracies around the globe found that citizens living in countries with gender quotas supported women as political leaders 1.99 times more than those where no gender quota is implemented (Allen & Cutts, 2018).

Similarly, it was observed that during *gram sabhas* meetings—the constitutionally mandated assemblies in rural India—female villagers were more likely to be recognized and receive policy-relevant responses from women council leaders (Parthasarathy et al., 2019). This is why Iyer et al. (2012) found that crimes against women were reported on a larger scale in councils reserved for women in India. They argue that women's willingness to report such crimes is stipulated by the belief that those crimes will not go unnoticed under the leadership of women. Moreover, O'Brien and Rickne (2014) demonstrated that the perception of female politicians being regarded as qualified for leadership positions increased due to gender quotas on candidate lists in Swedish municipalities.

The above pieces of evidence show the positive effects of women's ascent to power as a result of gender quotas. However, the descriptive representation is not a win-win game but is contingent on the context and the concept of women's interests and the consequences vary from salience effects to backlash effects.

### Bubble Effect of Gender Quotas

Studies across different regions corroborate the argument that women are more likely than men to support policies related to poverty and healthcare (Bhalotra & Clots-Figueras, 2014; Clayton et al., 2019; Gottlieb et al., 2018; Westfall & Chantiles, 2016). Although in some cases women's agency can challenge patriarchal norms, it may still leave them unable to survive within male-dominated circles. Women's attempt to stand against the deep-rooted hegemonic masculinities, powered by gender quotas, can provoke a negative response from men's quarters, generally referred to as the 'bubble effect' (Piscopo, 2006).

### *Backlash Effect*

In this line, Matfess et al. (2023) undertook a quantitative analysis of women's descriptive representation in Kenya and the instances of political violence. Shockingly, the number of violent events targeting women MPs rose from 1,919 to 19,518 as their representation in parliament increased from 7,14% to 19,1%. Moreover, repulsive forces in the form of backlash exist inside the political parties. This situation was observed by Carrión-Yaguana et al. (2023) in the legislative election of 2013 and 2017 in Ecuador. The authors cited bias against women in top placements on ballot-list from party gatekeepers as the driving force behind women electoral fortunes. Radojevic's (2023) survey study of the subjective effects of gender quotas in Austria, Switzerland, and Germany revealed that the party gatekeepers from radical right parties are not only averse to quotas but also to those entitled to such quotas. Such instances of backlash culminate in Gender-motivated Political Violence (GMPV) (Muhammad et al., 2020), or what is also termed Gender-Based Political Violence Against Women (GBPVAW), especially at the local level in Mexico, where women often lack agency and face structural barriers (Serrano Oswald, 2023). These findings contradict the studies, cited in the previous section, that reported RRP as more women-friendly. Furthermore, Mufti and Jalalzai (2021) indicated that women in Pakistan remain entangled in patriarchal norms, where party gatekeepers often question the qualifications of quota women to contest direct

elections on non-reserved seats, which tends to sideline competent women politicians and opens the door for women from influential political families, thereby reinforcing dynastic politics.

Similarly, Turnbull (2021) demonstrated that parties in India tend to limit women candidates to the reservation lists and discourage their attempts to contest elections, especially against male opponents, outside the reserved quota. Moreover, Castorena (2023) found that party decisions undermined the potential impact of role model effects in the candidate selection process during Mexico's congressional elections. Having said this, women MPs may collaborate with the androcentric behaviors rampant in masculinist political systems and give up the very idea of advocating for women's interests. This was demonstrated in the recently conducted time-series cross-sectional analysis of 180 countries by Mechkova et al. (2024), reporting that women's descriptive representation is positively associated with infant mortality rates in countries where corruption is widespread, though the results take an opposite flip in countries where the corruption index is low. Instances of backlash are more pronounced in democracies characterized by dominant patriarchal norms and poor governance. In the case of India, Brulé (2020) indicated that daughters' and sisters' inheritance of familial property declined significantly after the reform that reserved village council leadership positions for women. Moreover, women faced hindrances from their political parties regarding spending budgets on issues they preferred at municipal level in the Dominican Republic (Lambert & Pineda Moquete, 2025). Trends parallel to the above studies have also been documented in Morocco, Kuwait, and Jordan (Barnett & Shalaby, 2021; Shalaby, 2016). Such evidence of backlash suggest that descriptive representation does not necessarily guarantee substantive representation (Fokum & Fonjong, 2018).

### *No Effect*

The ineffectiveness of gender quotas is not limited to developing nations. To mention a few, the increase in descriptive representation of women in Sweden failed to change government spending priorities in terms of elderly and childcare, and cultural spending (Högström & Lidén, 2024). Similarly, the 40% gender quota on local executive boards in Norway led to neither spillover effects nor any additional spending on the policy areas that women tend to prefer, i.e., the social policy area (Geys & Sørensen, 2019). Moreover, a recent study by Yamada (2024) found that the increase in female representation at the

municipality level in Japan did not correlate with increased childcare provisions, whereas, the p-value was found to be consistently larger than 0.05 across all models in the multilevel analysis. These findings contradict the insights provided by Joshi and Echle (2023) in case of women MPs in the national parliament of Japan. Astonishingly, a study conducted in Taiwan revealed that non-quota women, unlike their quota counterparts, refrained from advancing women's issues in the legislative process. Moreover, the implementation of quotas did not produce any spillover effects on male MPs (Wang, 2023).

Similar trends were noted in other regions. For instance, the 18% increase in the fraction of female local councilors did not result in increased public expenditure in Italy (Baltrunaite et al., 2019). This was also demonstrated in the US and India, where no spillovers were seen as a result of the election of female mayors and female legislators, respectively (Bhalotra et al., 2018; Ferreira & Gyourko, 2011). In Spain, candidate quotas could not ensure women's ascent to leadership positions, even after three rounds of local elections (Bagues & Campa, 2017).

It is essential to note that instances of extreme backlash are more common in the developing world, particularly in the Global South, where the socio-cultural norms of the public-private divide (Bari, 2017; Latif et al., 2015) and dynastic politics and elitism are rampant (Fleschenberg & Bari, 2015), holding prominent insights for upcoming investigations.

## Dilemma of Interests

From the late 20<sup>th</sup> century till date, the debate on the dilemma of women's interests has occupied a huge part of the literature on substantive representation of women. In the 1980s, Sapiro (1981) argued that women's interests were inherently and entirely homogeneous. This notion of universal women's interests was challenged by Phillips (1995), based on the fact that different women have different experiences in different societies, shaping different interests for women (Och & Joshi, 2021). This argument was further supported by Williams (1998), who suggested caution while deciding on the universal interests of women. She further argues that encouraging diverse women's perspectives in politics can lead to the complete abolishment of gender inequality and greater substantive representation of women in politics (Phillips, 1998; Young, 2000). While scholars have agreed on the idea of the diversity of women's interests, debate pertaining to women's interests persists in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as to which

interests are specific to the substantive representation of women. In such a scenario, women's interests made sense to researchers in terms of the context in which they take shape. Celis and Childs (2012) make an important contribution to this debate. They argued that: "empirical studies often subjectively define women's issues as either those traditionally associated with women (such as childcare and the family), or those with a 'feminist accent' (such as abortion or domestic violence)" (Celis & Childs, 2012, p. 213).

For example, the above literature used diverse interests, such as health and crimes against women in India (Dupas & Jain, 2024; Iyer et al., 2012); gender equality, violence against women, and work-family balance in Italy (Weeks & Masala, 2023); education and welfare in Taiwan (Wang, 2023), child, family (Bektas & Issever-Ekinci, 2019), and the pay gap, and women's participation in the labor force (Bulut, 2020) in Turkey; gender parity, sexual harassment, and reproductive freedom in Latin America (Vidal-Correa, 2020); infant mortality in Argentine provinces (Cunial, 2021) etc. Some studies undertook a mixed approach to operationalizing women's interests, including feminist and traditional ones, such as Piscopo and Jennifer M.'s (2014) study of the Mexican parliament and Dockendorff et al.'s (2022) study of the Chilean Chamber of Deputies. Moreover, Gwiazda (2019) also applied a mixed approach, operationalizing childcare and gender pay gap as women's interests, to study substantive representation in Poland. However, the diversity, heterogeneity, and subjectivity of women's interests were largely ignored due to insufficient representation of women's interests in these empirical studies.

As evidenced, the above approaches to understanding women's interests are less extensive, less representative, and notably vary among different countries. This approach to conceptualizing women's interests led to three issues. First, it led to group essentialism or homogeneity effect (Celis & Childs, 2012; Đorđević, 2023; Williams, 1998). Second, the less generalizable findings cannot be extended to all the women within the same country, particularly in regions where women live under different socio-cultural conditions and adhere to diverse socio-cultural and political philosophies. Third, the predetermined understanding of women's interests has compromised women's subjectivity (Celis & Childs, 2012), privileging the interests of certain women (Childs & Celis, 2018) at the expense of others, thereby increasing the risk of bias (Smooth, 2011). This lack of congruity arises from the neglect of contextual factors that shape women's experiences, opinions, ideas, and understanding

of their interests different from their fellow women in other contexts. Hence, it is essential to note here that the concept of women's interests is not one-size-fits-all, but contextual dynamics play a greater role in shaping women's interests (Paxton et al., 2020), as already mentioned in the earlier sections. For Example, the 0,7% decline in Southern Asia and/or the last rank of MENA countries on the sub-index of Political Empowerment in Global Gender Gap Index as compare to the EU countries ranking at the top reflects completely different experiences of women in those regions that shape women's idea of their interests differently (World Economic Forum, 2024b).

Even so, the interests dilemma is so subtle that it differs in the context of two developed countries or among MPs in the same parliament, as noted previously in section 3.3. This pattern prompts a question, of whether this divide in the understanding of women's interests is shaped by the constituents' subjective preferences or the legislators' personal choice of what interest they prefer to represent, which constitutes an important point to be considered in the representation research. This discrepancy in the conceptualization of women's interests underscores the need to consider the specific contexts in which the notion of women's political empowerment emerges. Considering the contextual dynamics that influence women's political life will prudently explain the diverse impacts of gender quotas on women living in different social, political, economic, and cultural spectra within a country and around the world.

## Global South, Theoretical Imbalance and Sub-national Quotas

Some scholars argue that quotas have accomplished their purpose by propelling women into the legislatures (Barnes & Holman, 2019). This argument can undoubtedly be associated with Western democracies or EU countries, but countries in the developing world tell a different story.

Over the past few decades, research on representation has expanded remarkably, encompassing comprehensive studies from various perspectives. However, the majority of this empirical focus has been on the developed world (Höhmman, 2020). This has led to an imbalance in the two hemispheres, with countries in the Global South, especially Muslim-majority countries (Bulut, 2020) and Asian countries (Shim, 2021), lacking the researchers' attention.

Recently, the percentage of women in Asian parliaments declined from 21,6% in 2020 to 21,4% in 2024. Countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and South Asia show dismal performance regarding gender parity, ranking lowest among all regions but the Pacific Islands (IPU, 2024a). This disparity was also recently demonstrated in the Global Gender Gap Report, where the MENA region, and Southern Asia fell in the lowest ranks (World Economic Forum, 2024a). On the other hand, European and American countries have achieved the critical mass of 30%. Especially in Latin America, where many countries have crossed the critical mass threshold after implementing legislative quotas, with Mexico having 50% of women and Nicaragua 53,8% women in their legislatures (IDEA, 2024). Sub-Saharan Africa is swiftly heading toward gender parity in its parliaments (Barnes & Burchard, 2013). Rwanda, an SSA country, secures the top spot, with women exceeding the number of male legislators (Dyvik, 2024).

The Asian continent and the MENA region offer great case studies on the plight of women. The diversity and uniqueness in terms of socioeconomic, cultural, and political factors in those regions change women's experiences compared to their fellow women in developed countries (Paxton et al., 2020). Women's political visibility in developing countries is often hindered by violence (Joshi et al., 2020), financial constraints (Mufti & Jalalzai, 2021; Piscopo et al., 2022), the political glass ceiling (Handelman Howard, 2019), social stigma (Naz & Ahmad, 2012), discrimination within parliaments (Zakar et al., 2018), and tokenism (Baskaran & Hessami, 2018; Moberand, 2019), all of which impede women's political advancement. These factors, accompanied by weak quota provisions (Kim & Fallon, 2023), allow patriarchy to permeate political institutions, thereby transforming legislatures into unequal playing fields (Fernández & Valiente, 2021). Such situations culminate in women discouraging women's entry into politics (Liu, 2018). For example, Joshi & Echle (2023) demonstrated that none of the women politicians preferred standing for the interests of their fellow women in South Asian countries.

The above situation manifests itself more robustly in crisis-stricken developing countries (Mosier et al., 2022), as mentioned in the case of South Asia. Economic vulnerabilities and political crises make the just allocation of resources almost impossible, further entrenching inequalities among the marginalized sections of society. Asia, home to the world's largest population, claims a larger share of overall gender inequalities. The patterns of gender

discrimination and male dominance continue to obstruct the realization of a more gender-equitable world. Greater representation of women in parliaments is crucial to ensuring an egalitarian society (Syed & Tabassum, 2014) and advancing gender equality (Prihatini, 2019) around the globe. Therefore, it is imperative to divert the focus of upcoming research to the Global South in general, and poverty-stricken nations in particular. Moreover, apart from extending the empirical coverage outward to the developing world, it is also important to expand them internally to subnational levels within the countries.

According to a report, 89 countries have implemented some form of gender quota at the sub-national level—such as candidate quotas, reserved quotas, or combinations thereof (IDEAS, 2024). However, fewer studies have researched the impacts of quotas at the sub-national level. Therefore, we lack an understanding of how those quotas translate into substantive gains in women’s political empowerment (Clayton, 2021), both in the developing world and globally. A comprehensive study on the Quality of Governance (QoG) in 206 regions of the 24 European countries at the sub-national context demonstrated that legislatures at the sub-national level are more prone to masculine norms, bad governance, and corruption in comparison to national legislatures (Charron et al., 2015), as also indicated by Weeks and Masala (2023) in their research on local gender quotas in Italy. In certain cases, national-level quotas cannot signify the complete picture of the activities in the shadow. For example, studying national quotas in countries where states or provinces are autonomous, having devolved the subjects of health, education, childcare, and others to the federating units, cannot uncover, not at least the direct impacts, how the national-level quotas impact those subjects. Therefore, the sub-national quotas assume greater importance in such cases.

Moreover, there is a pressing need to shift the focus toward critical actors outside of national parliaments—particularly within local bodies—where constituents interact directly with their representatives at the municipal or union council level (Björkdahl & Somun-Krupalija, 2020). Empowering women from the grassroots level can serve as an industry for emerging and young female politicians. Local body quotas offer the most favorable opportunity for women to gain political experience, build a voter base, develop social capital, and—most importantly—contest elections without requiring deep financial resources. Additionally, Coffé (2013) found that women are more likely to

participate in local politics than their male counterparts. According to UN Women (2024), 35,5% of seats in local governments are held by women globally. As illustrated in Figure 3, 88 countries have legislated gender quotas at the local government level (UN Women, 2023). This makes the local-level quotas a critical spot for future studies. Next, understanding how quotas interact at different levels of government inside a country requires intranational comparative studies of quotas, to further narrow down the approach to studying the impacts of gender quotas.

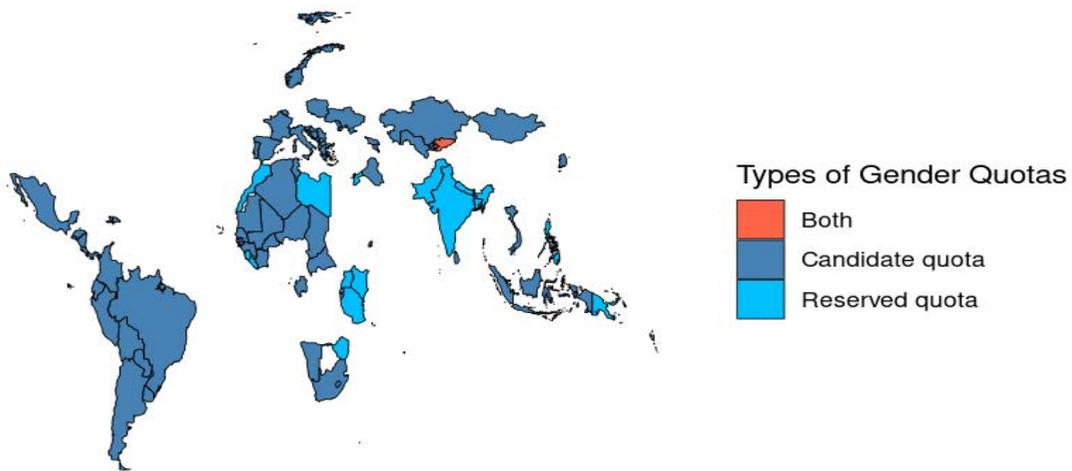


Figure 3. Distribution of Local Elections Gender Quotas Worldwide

Note: This map shows only those countries that have implemented either of the two types of gender quotas at the local government level.

Source: Created by the author using data from UN Women.

## Conclusion

Gender quota laws played a crucial role in increasing women's participation in politics and government at both national and sub-national levels of government. The diffusion effect of quotas among political parties at the national and local levels, and among nations at regional and international levels, has had a boosting effect on making decision-making bodies more accessible and inclusive to women. Today, more women are serving as heads of states and governments than ever before. This literature review surveyed extensive research on the multifaceted concepts of substantive representation of women in various contexts, such as cross-national, regional, national, and subnational levels. Many studies have sought to address the core of the gender, politics, and representation issue by studying MPs' attitudes

and behaviors in national and cross-national contexts, and policy priorities, by employing observational and quasi-experimental research methods with correlational and causal designs. Nevertheless, the theoretical gaps in research on substantive effects of female representation still remain unfilled, especially in the developing world. This is true for subnational gaps, though globally in this case. These are the two patent avenues for future research to extend current research designs, to collect empirical evidence from other regions of the world and from the lower tiers of governments at national level.

The studies analyzed in this review, however, show some clear patterns. The literature indicates that women MPs prefer women's issues more than their male counterparts, specifically in case of the five Western European countries of Spain, Germany, Sweden, Ireland, and Netherlands (Wäckerle & Castanho Silva, 2023). A similar pattern follows for Romania (Garboni, 2015), Nepal (Yadav, 2024), Japan (Joshi & Echle, 2023), and Latin America (Cunial, 2021; Dockendorff et al., 2022; Goyal & Sells, 2024; Lambert & Pineda Moquete, 2025), a region that has played a pioneering role in implementing legislated candidate quotas for women. The descriptive representation of females leads to women empowerment in terms of gender-sensitive laws, gender equality, gender equity, social inclusion, poverty reduction, and human resource development in developing countries (Asiedu et al., 2018; Tusalem, 2022). Moreover, the rise in health spendings (Clayton & Zetterberg, 2018), gender parity in education (Acheampong et al., 2024), greater maternal employment, development aid, reduced infant, neonatal and child mortality (Bhalotra & Clots-Figueras, 2014; Mechkova & Carlitz, 2020), and increased childcare in Germany (Baskaran & Hessami, 2019) are obvious substantive effects of the descriptive representation of women. Other impacts of higher female representations are the feminization of political parties (Belknap & Kenny (2023), women parliamentary bodies (Adams et al., 2019), and higher support for women as political leaders (Fernández & Valiente, 2021; Joshi & Goehring, 2018).

However, these trends are not consistent across all countries and regions. In some countries, the presence of women led male parliamentarians to favor women's interests far more than their female colleagues, as in the case of Serbia (Đorđević, 2023) and right and center-right parties in 10 European countries (Celis & Erzeel, 2015). In the case of Sweden, Norway, Italy and Japan, the substantive effects were absent at local levels (Baltrunaite et al., 2019; Geys & Sørensen, 2019; Högström & Lidén, 2024; Yamada, 2024), and in the case of

Austria, Germany, and Switzerland, male attitudes were found antagonistic to the presence of quota women (Radojevic, 2023). Yet, in the case of Kenya and India, the results turned violent and led to extreme behaviors of backlash (Brulé, 2020; Matfess et al., 2023). These patterns call for an inquiry into what causes male MPs to become highly supportive of women's interests in some political contexts, while exhibiting hostility toward their female counterparts in others. Moreover, the extreme cases of backlash are more common in developing countries. This has ranged from male-dominant political circles, political glass ceiling, and tokenism, to physical violence against women in politics (Krook & Sanín, 2020). Such instances boldly manifested in countries like Pakistan (Khan & Naqvi, 2020), India (Turnbull, 2021), Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka (Joshi & Echle, 2023), Afghanistan (Joshi et al., 2020), Kenya, and Cameroon (Fokum & Fonjong, 2018; Matfess et al., 2023). The uniqueness of these countries in socio-cultural aspects requires specific contextual analysis of women's experiences in these regions.

Such insidencies are also evident in defining and representing the different streams of interests. For example, the above studies conceptualized women's interests as either feminist, conservative or mixed. In line with this, it is pertinent to explore what prompts women legislators to engage more diligently in pursuing substantive representation—both as a process advancing feminist interests and as an outcome addressing traditional women's concerns, as mentioned in the case of Korea (G. Park & Österman, 2021). Other than that, the implementation of women-friendly policies and laws shows different patterns than the legislation of the same policy. This was reported by Dupas and Jain (2024) through their inquiry into the health insurance program (Bhamashah Swasthya Bima Yojana) in India. The authors found an enormous gap between legislation and the implementation of the same policy. Therefore, women-friendly legislation needs to be investigated from this dimension as well. Lastly, since citizens form the base of the political stratification pyramid, investigating the impacts of gender quotas through a bottom-up approach—as opposed to a top-down perspective—can offer critical insights into the dynamics of substantive representation.

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