

Can women choose politics?

The current national debate on gender quotas in the political sphere is bringing to the fore the question of having a balanced representation of women and men within our decision-making institutions. The fact that this issue is being widely discussed is already a positive development as it points to an increased awareness that policy and legislative decisions in this area will have a significant bearing on the future of our country. In this discussion, we should always keep in mind that gender-balanced representation in politics concerns two fundamental aspirations essential to a just society and a healthy democracy: the aspiration to gender equality in practice and in every sphere of society, as well as the aspiration to a political system which fully respects democratic principles and which adopts effective decision-making processes.

What are gender quotas?

Gender quotas in politics establish a fixed percentage for the nomination or representation of both sexes in elected office. Article 45(11) of the Constitution of Malta points to the *'taking of special measures aimed at accelerating de facto equality between men and women'*, recognising that such measures may be necessary in order to respect the basic tenets of equality and democracy. A status quo in which there is a persistent underrepresentation of one sex violates the basic principle of democratic representation and reinforces an unequal society. Noting the existence of such a situation in Malta, the United Nations (UN) Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women recommends that the Government of Malta avails of the Constitutional provision on special measures to accelerate the achievement of women's full and equal participation at all levels and in all areas.

Do we need quotas?

Few would disagree with the assertion that gender equality in the political sphere should be one of our goals. What seems to be more controversial is the implementation of gender quotas as a way towards achieving gender equality in practice.

To determine whether quotas are indeed necessary, one should first understand the state of play in relation to gender equality in politics. In the current legislature, 85% of our representatives are men and only 15% are women. In the previous legislature female representation stood at 13%. At local council level, a mere 22.6% of councillors are women. What should worry us here is not simply the glaringly low representation of women in political decision-making but also the lack of improvement over time. Low numbers of women in elected office constitute a pattern that is seemingly unbreakable. However, we

know from the experience of countries such as France and Slovenia that this pattern can be broken, but only if pro-active measures are implemented to address this democratic deficit.

Historical imbalance of power

Recognising that half of the population is consistently so heavily underrepresented can lead to only one conclusion: there are historical and structural barriers that impede the full participation of women in politics. The UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women describes this as '*the historical imbalance of power between women and men in society*'. Interestingly, voting behaviour is not one of the major impediments. A look at voting behaviour over time reveals that the percentage of votes for women candidates is more or less proportional to the percentage of women contesting the elections. Political scientist John C. Lane had already identified this pattern back in 1995 and, as outlined by sociologist JosAnn Cutajar (2014), this has been confirmed in most elections ever since. Women received a limited share of votes mainly because they were insufficiently represented on the ballot sheet. In fact, in the last general election, **the share of first-count votes won by women was 11.5% equivalent to the 11.1% of women candidates.**

Conditioned personal choices

This leads us to the question as to why the number of women that make it to the ballot sheet is so low. Some argue that this simply boils down to personal choices by individual women opting to stay out of the political scene. However, personal choices do not happen in a vacuum since people choose according to the possibilities available. Moreover, the totality of personal choices constitutes a clear pattern where, on the whole, women are considerably less likely to choose politics in comparison to men, leading to an unequal distribution of political power between women and men. Thus, a meaningful answer to the question of why relatively few women choose to enter politics has to explain why this pattern exists in the first place. We'll have to dig deeper in order to uncover long-standing structures of inequality that condition most women to make certain choices and not others.

Women are those who are expected to bear most responsibilities related to **primary care** such as the rearing of children and the provision of care for the elderly. This social expectation, coupled with the fact that our political institutions are not family-friendly, make it hard for many women to choose a political path. This dynamic is closely linked to the broader issue of gender roles and the **differential socialisation of women and men**. Women and girls are socialised from a young age to take on specific roles in society, mostly related to providing family-support and domestic work, and are often expected to prove their social value through being gentle, cooperative and caring. On the other hand, men and

boys are expected to demonstrate competitiveness, aggressiveness and an ambition to reach powerful positions. And in politics, it is the latter socially ascribed characteristics which are valued. Moreover, the media portrayal of women and men in stereotypical ways, and the little visibility of female role models in politics, remain an unfortunate reality.

A predominant male incumbency and male-dominated networks in politics pose another barrier to women becoming successful politicians. For example, a Member of Parliament has more chances of successfully following a career in politics, including re-election, compared to an outsider. Since insiders are predominantly men, the gender imbalance keeps reproducing itself as insiders find it easier to continue with their political careers, while aspirant politicians are also recruited from networks composed mostly of men. It has also been shown that women in politics, on the whole, start with less **financial resources** when compared to men and they tend to receive less **family support**.

Will quotas address this challenge?

Gender quotas alone won't defeat these structural barriers to women's participation in politics. However, it has been proven that **gender quotas are one of the most effective ways to spur real change**. First, quotas should prompt government, political parties and civil society in taking actions that effectively address structures of inequality. Second, gender quotas will help break the pattern of gender imbalance in politics, male incumbency and male-dominated networks. This can potentially transform the way politics are done since the inclusion of women can have a positive impact on political communication and decision-making processes due to the broader representation in politics of different social realities and experiences.

The debate on gender quotas should start with a recognition that the current situation of gender imbalance has to change if we want both gender equality as well as respect for the democratic principle of representation. There certainly are many women who would make capable politicians and effective decision-makers. Although this is already acknowledged by the electorate, as can be seen in voting patterns, our country is not making much use of women's potential due to socially-imposed obstacles hindering their participation in politics. A gender quota system is pivotal to ensuring a higher number of women representatives in our democratic institutions. However, for any quota system to be successful and bring about real change, this must be implemented alongside other measures that identify and address all those structural factors that make politics such a hard choice for women.

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