

Center for American Progress



Can Public Policy Break the Glass Ceiling?

Lessons from Abroad

By Dalia Ben-Galim and Amna Silim

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Introduction and summary

The problem is all too familiar: Despite women’s increased rates of employment, rising levels of educational development, and growing place as primary breadwinners, gender inequality remains pervasive. Women continue to be underrepresented in key decision-making positions in politics, business, and public life.

In the United States, the discussion of this conundrum tends to focus on personal improvement and the notion of “leaning in” popularized by Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg. However, a number of developed nations, particularly those in Europe, have sought to remedy gender inequality primarily through public policy.

This report aims to analyze and understand the benefits and limitations of such policies by exploring the direct and indirect roles that they play in supporting women’s progress in the workforce and, specifically, in helping boost their advancement into leadership positions. It looks at policies that tackle the leadership issue via quotas—which aim to have a direct impact on women’s representation—and also examines policies such as affordable child care, paid parental leave, and flexible work arrangements that help lay the groundwork for women’s leadership indirectly by enabling women to stay in the workforce after becoming mothers.

Examining the differences in employment rates between mothers and nonmothers is one way to clearly see how well a country does—or does not—support women’s abilities to remain active in the workforce throughout their adult lives. Through a detailed discussion of policies abroad, this report will show that countries that have affordable and high-quality child care systems—for example, the Scandinavian nations—tend to have higher maternal employment rates, paving the way for women’s advancement. Paid parental leave and flexible work policies with genuine choices for both parents can also be a retention tool that, by offering mothers and fathers the ability to work and to care, aid women’s long-term prospects and advance the goals of gender equality more generally.

Through an in-depth analysis of the results of Norway’s 2003 law imposing gender quotas on corporate boards, this report will show that quotas—numerical targets for women’s representation—are an effective way to achieve specific, identified goals. However, it will argue that, to date, the ambition of quota policies has been to support professional women who already are close to the top. If policymakers want to enable women of all income levels and educational backgrounds to enter the workplace and advance—thereby developing a pipeline for future leaders—affordable and universal child care, progressive parental leave, and opportunities to work flexibly must form the core of a wide-reaching policy agenda.

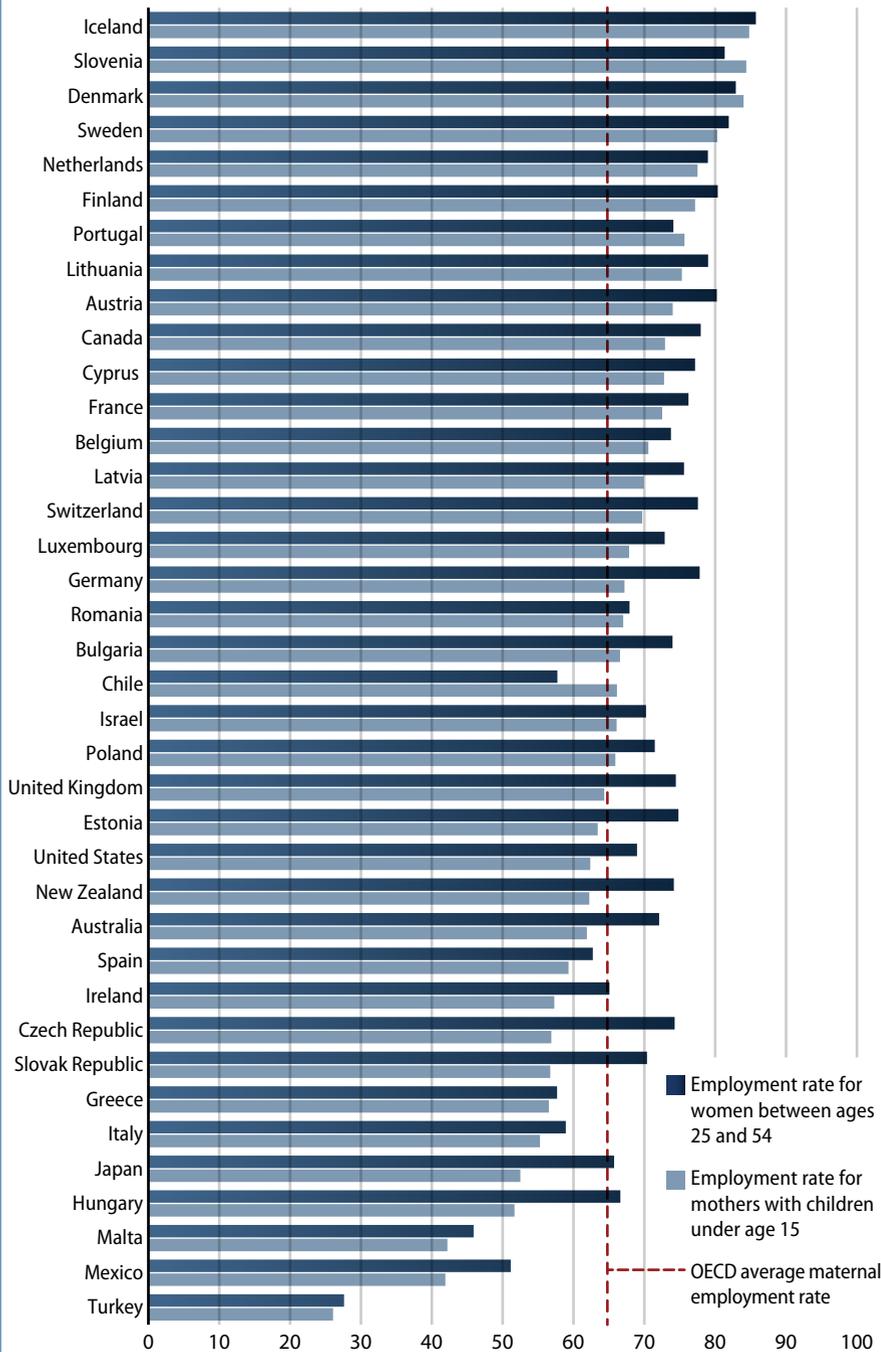
The employment gap

In most countries, including the United States, women are underrepresented on almost every measure of leadership—in politics, the media, and business.¹ These gaps matter because they translate into a lack of economic power. Having a well-paid job and keeping it is an essential building block of women’s economic independence. Policies that keep women in the workforce—creating the conditions under which they can rise, thrive, and enjoy the same opportunities for earning and advancement as their male counterparts—are critical means for enhancing women’s status in our society and, ultimately, boosting women’s leadership.

The gaps between female and maternal employment rates across Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development, or OECD, countries are shown in Figure 1. With the exceptions of Slovenia, Denmark, and Portugal, countries have higher female employment rates than maternal employment rates. The gap varies across countries. It amounts to only a few percentage points in Scandinavia, where there is a universal child care provision, rises to 7 percentage points in the United States, and reaches 10 percentage points in the United Kingdom. Although there are a range of factors that influence maternal employment decisions—such as personal preferences, the structure of the labor market, and the prevalence of flexible work—the affordability and availability of child care has been proven to be a particularly important variable.²

FIGURE 1

Female and maternal employment rates, 2011



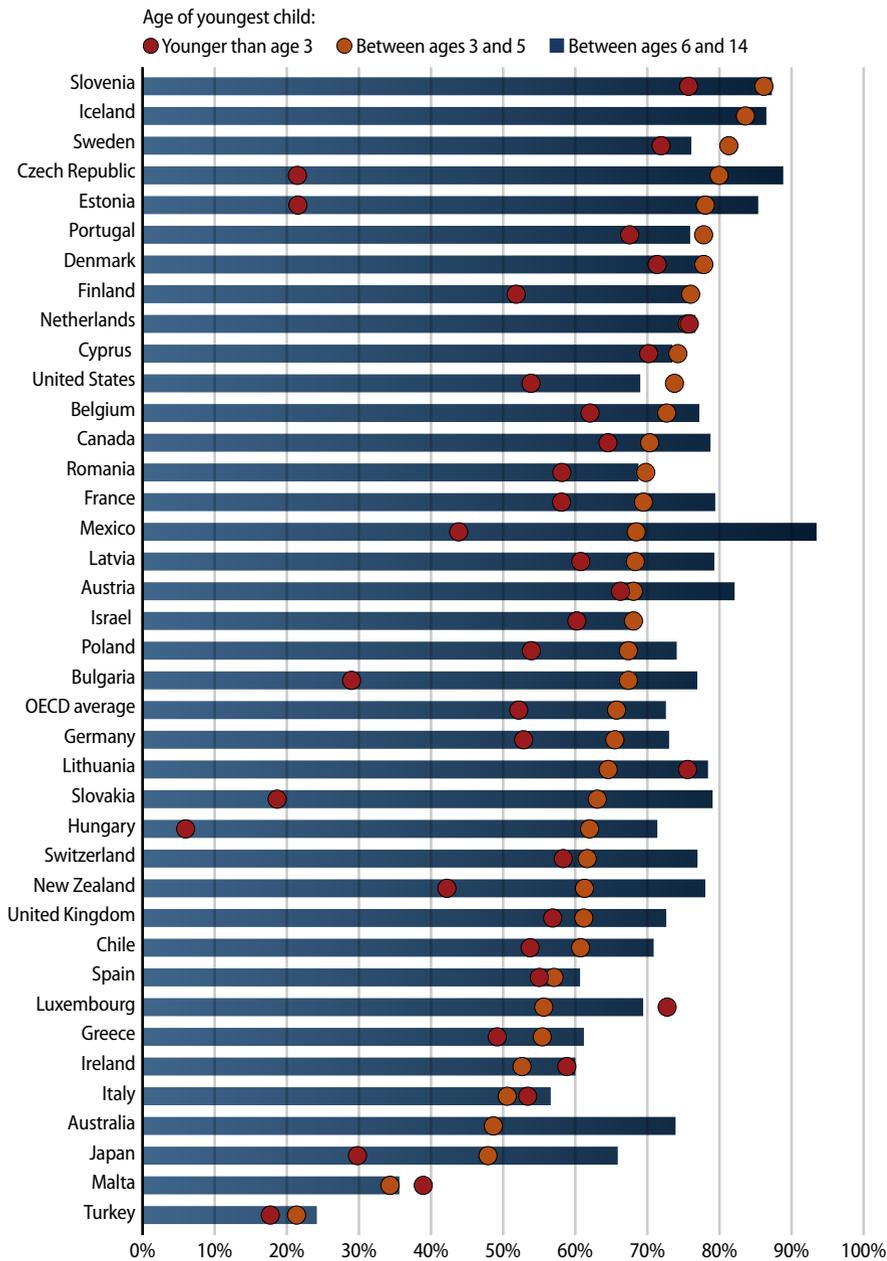
Note: Countries are ranked by decreasing maternal employment rates. The base year used for all country data was 2011, with the exceptions of data for Australia, Finland, Malta, Mexico, New Zealand, Sweden, and Turkey (2009); Chile and Denmark (2010); Switzerland (2006); Japan (2005); Iceland (2002); and Canada (2001). The employment rate was calculated for mothers with children under age 15, with the exceptions of Canada, Denmark, Iceland, Japan, Switzerland, and the United States where it was calculated for children under age 16; and Denmark, Finland, Sweden, and Turkey, where it was calculated for dependent children under age 25. The data for Cyprus relate to the southern part of the island, which is under the effective control of the government of the Republic of Cyprus. OECD data for Israel are supplied by and under the responsibility of the relevant Israeli authorities.

Source: Adapted from chart LMF 12.A 1 OECD Family database <http://www.oecd.org/social/soc/oecdfamilydatabase.htm//>

Figure 2 provides more-detailed data on the employment rate of mothers by age of their youngest child. The data show that employment rates for mothers with school-age children tend to be high but that there is significant variation in the employment rates of mothers with preschool-age children. In Iceland, Slovenia, Sweden, and Denmark, maternal employment rates are above 80 percent. This is in contrast to countries such as the United Kingdom, Italy, and Ireland, where maternal employment rates are between 50 percent and 60 percent. The maternal employment rate in the United States is just below the OECD average at 62 percent.

FIGURE 2

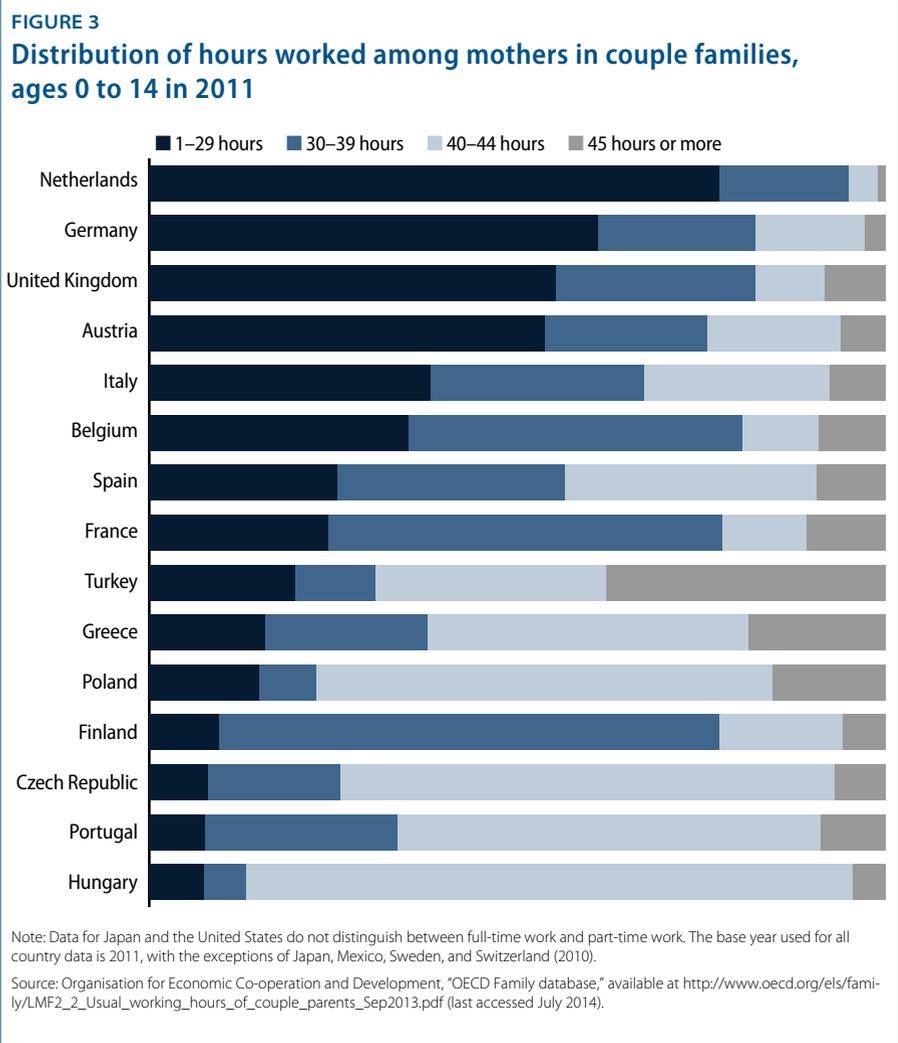
Maternal employment rates by age of youngest child, 2011



Note: Countries are ranked in descending order of maternal employment rates with the youngest child between ages 3 and 5. The base year used for all country data is 2011, with the exceptions of Chile (2010); Finland, Mexico, New Zealand, Australia, Malta, and Turkey (2009); Sweden (2007); Switzerland (2006); Japan (2005); Iceland (2002); and Denmark (1999). For the youngest-child cohort, data for Israel refer to mothers with a youngest child less than 2 years old. For the children ages 3–5 cohort, data for Australia and Iceland refer to mothers with a youngest child less than 5 years old. In that same cohort, data for Israel refer to mothers with a youngest child ages 2 to less than 5. For the children ages 6–14 cohort, data for Denmark, Iceland, Japan, Sweden, and Switzerland refer to mothers with a youngest child between ages 6 and 16. Data for Canada refer to mothers with a youngest child between ages 6 and 15. Data for the United States refer to mothers with a youngest child between ages 6 and 17. The data for Cyprus relate to the southern part of the island, which is under the effective control of the government of the Republic of Cyprus. OECD data for Israel are supplied by and under the responsibility of the relevant Israeli authorities.

Source: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, "OECD Family database," available at <http://www.oecd.org/social/soc/oecdfamilydatabase.htm> (last accessed July 2014).

The reasons for these variances are discussed in greater detail below, but they are in large measure a reflection of policy and institutional decisions focused on work-family policies, including parental leave, child care, and flexible work initiatives in the better-performing countries.



The countries with the smallest gender gap in the World Economic Forum’s 2013 Global Gender Gap Index are Iceland, Finland, Norway, and Sweden.³ These all have universal and affordable child care and early childhood education programs, as well as progressive parental leave systems with use-it-or-lose-it paternity and maternity leave. These types of policies could mitigate the “motherhood pay penalty”—the long-term wage loss uniquely associated with motherhood⁴—that women face in countries with less comprehensive provisions.⁵

The role of family-friendly policy

Affordable child care

Affordable child care supports parents, especially women, to enter or re-enter the workforce and remain employed.⁶ Comparative studies such as the work of Wilfred Uunk, Matthijs Kalmijn, and Ruud Muffels, professors at Tilburg University in the Netherlands, show that one-third of the international disparity for the number of hours mothers work is attributable to the availability of public child care spots for children ages 0 to 3.⁷ Other research has shown that the availability of child care is more important than other variables, including educational attainment. For example, Becky Pettit and Jennifer Hook, sociologists at the University of Washington and the University of Southern California, respectively, have analyzed the effect of having a child ages 0 to 2 on the probability of maternal employment in different countries,⁸ finding that in countries with greater child care provisions, the probability of maternal employment is higher. Other examples from countries that have enacted reforms to widen access to affordable child care also have found a relationship with increased levels of maternal employment.⁹

Since the introduction of subsidized child care in 1997, the maternal employment rate in Quebec, Canada, has increased significantly. The program initially offered parents care for 4-year-olds for \$5 per day.¹⁰ This has since been expanded to younger children, as well as to before- and after-school programs for elementary-school-age children, and the cost has increased to \$7.30 per day.¹¹ The research evidence points to this policy's significant positive impact on maternal employment rates. For example, a study by Pierre Lefebvre and Philip Merrigan of the Université du Québec à Montréal, compares the employment patterns of mothers of eligible children with the patterns among similar mothers in other Canadian provinces where the child care policy is not in effect. Looking across the first decade of the Quebec policy, Lefebvre and Merrigan confirm what other studies have found: The more generous child care policy had “substantial labor supply effects on the mothers of young children.”¹²

The international evidence suggests that as countries increase the availability and affordability of child care, the largest impact is on mothers on the margins of employment. For example, internationally, the employment rates of highly educated mothers are not as variable as the rate of employment of mothers who are less educated. Differences in maternal employment rates between countries largely reflect differences in the employment rates of mothers with lower levels of educational attainment and lower skill levels.¹³ In some countries, such as Sweden, less educated mothers are already working in large numbers. But in others countries, including the United Kingdom, these women are much less likely to participate in the labor market. In the United Kingdom, the employment rate of mothers rises substantially with educational attainment. For example, among women whose youngest child is between the ages of 3 and 4, more than 50 percent of mothers with a high school diploma or higher are in the labor force, compared with less than 40 percent of mothers who did not complete high school.¹⁴

A logical extension of this evidence then suggests that expanding the availability of high-quality, affordable child care is a key element in promoting leadership opportunities for women—and for lower-income women in particular—making it possible for them to remain in the workforce, obtain secure jobs, and progress.

Parental leave

The configuration of maternity, paternity, and parental leave inevitably has a significant impact on women's employment decisions. Considering the relationship between parental leave, maternal employment rates, and gender pay gaps in an international context makes the relative importance of various policy distinctions clear. Nordic countries such as Denmark—which combines generous parental leave with affordable child care programs that begin as soon as the parental leave period ends—enjoy lower gender pay gaps and relatively high maternal employment rates.¹⁵

Paid parental leave, granted to and used by both men and women in the first year of a child's life, can address a number of objectives: promoting attachment and bonding, reinforcing mothers' links to the labor market, enabling fathers to spend more time with their children, and challenging the gendered assumptions of work and child care. Paid maternity leave is also essential to mitigating the motherhood pay penalty.¹⁷

The United States is an outlier with no federal paid leave legislation whatsoever. As the employment rates of women have risen and as concerns about their advancement opportunities have remained, there has come to be a consensus among progressive governments that the policies that best protect women's long-term economic interests are those that include a period of designated maternity leave designed for optimal mother-baby health and bonding; a period of use-it-or-lose-it paternity leave; and, in addition, a period of paid parental leave for parents to divide as best suits their needs.¹⁶

Long-term experience in other nations has shown that maternity leave must strike a careful balance. It must protect the health and well-being of mothers and babies while not boxing women in as the exclusive child care provider—“marking women down as uniquely responsible for caring for children,” as the Fatherhood Institute, a U.K. think tank focused on father-inclusive policy, recently put it.¹⁸ The duration and the amount of pay provided by leave policies matter greatly for women’s long-term workplace outcomes. For example, if maternity leave is for too long a period, it tends to lock women out of work, making it more difficult for them to re-enter work and advance, while locking fathers out of caregiving roles.¹⁹

The type and construction of parental leave policies express a country’s values around gender roles and caregiving. And those values have concrete outcomes in terms of women’s status and advancement. International evidence suggests that the motherhood pay penalty appears to be highest in countries where both policies and cultural values reinforce the traditional male breadwinner and female homemaker ideals.²⁰ In the United Kingdom, where there is a period between the end of parental leave and the beginning of an early-years child care entitlement, the fact that parents have a period of being entirely unsupported tends to drive down maternal employment rates and reinforce gender inequalities. Gender pay gaps are high, and maternal employment rates are just below average, compared with the rest of Europe. In contrast, in Nordic countries such as Denmark, which offers about a year of paid parental leave and where there is no gap between the end of the parental leave period and an entitlement to child care, maternal employment rates are relatively high and gender pay gaps are lower.²¹

Fathers are most likely to take paternity leave when wage-replacement rates are relatively high and when they have an individual entitlement that is lost if they fail to take advantage it.²² In the United Kingdom, for example, a 2009 study found that 34 percent of fathers surveyed had been eligible for paternity leave—two weeks paid at 90 percent of salary, with a cap of about \$198 per week—but had not taken it. The most commonly cited reason these fathers gave for not taking paternity leave was that they had not been able to afford to do so. Sixty-four percent of those fathers said they would have liked to take the leave.²³ Compare this with countries where the so-called daddy quota—a use-it-or-lose-it period of designated paternity leave—is embedded in policy and made feasible in practice. Fathers in Norway, for example, enjoy 10 weeks of paternity leave, paid at a generous wage replacement rate of about 80 percent to 100 percent, depending on the number of weeks both parents choose to take off collectively. A family’s entire possible parental leave payments are capped at approximately \$76,400 for each child over a maximum of 59 weeks.²⁴

Since 1993, Norway’s paternity leave has been provided on a use-it-or-lose-it basis, meaning that fathers cannot transfer their unused leave to mothers. The effect of this dedicated leave has been dramatic. Before the daddy-quota policy’s introduction, only 4 percent of fathers took some parental leave;²⁵ by 2009, up to 90 percent of fathers were doing so.²⁶ Policies such as use-it-or-lose-it paternity leave can be transformational in empowering families to make choices that allow both parents to work and care for their children in whatever way best suits their personal circumstances. As Idar Kreutzer, head of the Norwegian finance industry association Finans Norge, has put it, a daddy quota means that “the father won’t need to negotiate with his employer, and he doesn’t need to negotiate with the mother either.”²⁷

Sweden was one of the first countries to introduce paternity leave in 1980, encouraging a more equitable division of caring responsibilities. In Sweden, couples are now entitled to a total of 480 days of parental leave. Sixty of those days are strictly reserved for mothers, and 60 are reserved for fathers. Of the remaining 360 days, 180 are reserved for each parent, but one parent can sign a form permitting the other parent to transfer some of the leave to his or her partner. Of the total 480 days of leave, 390 days are paid at 80 percent of salary, and since 2008, a “gender equality bonus” has served as an incentive for parents to share the leave equally. Under the terms of this bonus, both parents are paid an additional 50 Swedish kronor—approximately \$7.32 per day—for every day of equally used leave. This can add up to an additional 13,500 kronor—approximately \$1,976—for each couple.²⁸ Interestingly, the gender equality bonus does not appear to have had a great impact on gender equality, particularly compared with Sweden’s daddy quota.²⁹

In Iceland, three months of leave are reserved for the mother, three months are reserved for the father, and three months are reserved for them to share. By 2009, 96.4 percent of fathers were taking a period of leave—99 days of leave, on average, compared with 178 days for mothers.³⁰ And Iceland is preparing to go even further. The government recently passed legislation stating that, starting in 2016, families will receive five months of maternity leave, five months of paternity leave, and two months of parental leave for parents to use at their discretion.³¹ This will be paid at the relatively high rate of 80 percent of annual average wages six months before the birth of a child, up to a ceiling of about \$3,080 per month.³²

Flexible work

To varying degrees, policymakers and employers in many nations have endorsed a flexible work agenda—policies and arrangements that permit employees to vary their place of work, hours of work, and duration of work. Many European companies offer formal and informal policies to support their employees, including job-sharing; annualized hours, where the number of hours an employee is contracted to work is based on a working year rather than a working week; term-time work, where employees with school-age children work during school terms and take longer breaks during school holidays; compressed hours; and work from home. As a result, in 2013, the European Commission estimated that approximately 40 percent of European workers had at least some ability to choose their working hours.³³

In addition, in a number of countries across Europe, there is a right to flexible work and/or a right to request flexible work. This type of legislation contributes to normalizing flexible work and also provides employees with a right to have it or request it and is designed in a way that protects them from adverse treatment as a result of asking to work flexibly.

In 2003, the United Kingdom first established its right to request flexible work for parents with children under age 6 or for those with children under age 18 who have a disability.³⁴ The policy has been expanded over time to include care for adult family members as well, and it was recently further extended to all employees, allowing them to be able to ask to work flexibly for any reason, provided that they have been working for their employer for at least 26 weeks.³⁵

This right-to-request approach to workplace flexibility appears to work quite well: According to the most recent available data, between 2009 and 2011, 22 percent of U.K. employees requested changes to their working hours, and 79 percent of these employees had their requests granted.³⁶ As of 2012, nearly all U.K. employers—approximately 96 percent—were offering some form of flexible work arrangements to their employees.³⁷

Policy could play a wider role in encouraging employers to move beyond existing understandings of what flexible work can be. One striking example currently comes from Germany, where the *Familienpflegezeit*—family caring time—program, introduced in 2012, enables eligible employees to reduce their working time to a minimum of 15 hours per week for up to two years to care for a dependent. During this time, employees are paid a lower wage, though the reduction in income is less than the reduction in hours, and importantly, they continue to

accrue contributions to their pensions. When the employee returns to full-time work, he or she continues to receive reduced earnings to pay back the difference. In practice, this means that if an employee reduces his or her hours from full-time to half-time status for two years, he or she will receive 75 percent of income over a four-year period. This program is offered to employees through individual contracts or where there has been a collective agreement negotiated between the employer and a recognized trade union. The scheme provides the flexibility that employees require while protecting them against fluctuations in income and giving assurance and stability to employers.³⁸

Flexible work policies can help women, who disproportionately tend to be family caregivers, maintain employment while meeting their responsibilities at home. On their own, however, these policies are not a clear conduit toward more female leadership roles. Because women take advantage of flexible work arrangements more frequently than men, the policies have unintentionally perpetuated a less-paid and less-valued so-called mommy track for women who wish to carve out time for family.³⁹ As a consequence, these policies are often underutilized by high-earning women, who perceive that their use would diminish their long-term career prospects; some high earners even report preferring to leave work entirely rather than accept lower-status flexible work.⁴⁰ And low-income women, who have considerably less access to flexible work arrangements in the first place, are generally not in a position to be able to sacrifice hours and wages.⁴¹

For flexible work policies to make a meaningful difference for the leadership prospects of professional women, there need to be cultural changes in our workplaces so that working flexibly is no longer stigmatized. In addition, low-income women need access to high-quality and better-paying part-time jobs.

Gender quotas: The case of Norway

Quotas, most commonly used in politics to encourage female representation, are increasingly being used in Europe as a tool in business and especially in the boardroom. In 2003, Norway became the first European country to pass binding legislation imposing gender quotas on corporate boards. In 2004, publicly owned enterprises were required to set aside 40 percent of their board seats for women. In 2006, the requirement was extended to large joint stock companies in the private sector.⁴² Since then, Belgium, France, Italy, the Netherlands, and Spain have enacted similar legislation.⁴³ The French law, adopted in 2011, set a target of at least 40 percent female board representation by 2017 on the boards of all companies that are either publicly listed on the French stock exchange or that have more than 500 employees or revenue of more than 50 million euros.⁴⁴ The European Commission and the European Women’s Lobby report that since the legislation passed, the proportion of women on boards listed on the French CAC 40 Index—the top 40 equities in the French stock exchange—doubled from 12.3 percent in October 2010 to 29.7 percent in October 2013,⁴⁵ and half of the 40 largest companies have met an interim target of 20 percent female board membership.⁴⁶

Through its “Women on the Board Pledge for Europe,” a voluntary pledge that publicly commits companies to reach a target of 30 percent female board membership by 2015 and 40 percent by 2020, the European Union also is trying to increase the representation of women on boards in its member countries.⁴⁷ Countries such as Austria, Finland, Germany, and the United Kingdom have adopted their own similar voluntary measures.⁴⁸ In the case of Austria, self-regulation may be an interim step on the way to legislation if a target of 35 percent women on boards for state-owned companies is not reached by 2018.⁴⁹ In the United Kingdom, companies in the FTSE 100—Britain’s blue-chip firms—have been encouraged to increase their female board membership to at least 25 percent by 2015.⁵⁰ This goal is unlikely to be achieved given that the most recent data show that progress has stalled and that women currently account for just 17 percent of board members.⁵¹

Norway, as the first country to adopt such legislation, provides insight into the potential and limitations of quotas for women’s advancement. With a progressive family policy agenda that includes universal and affordable child care and generous parental leave policies, Norway’s maternal employment rate, at more than 80 percent, is actually higher than its female employment rate.⁵² Norway also has a decades-long, well-accepted history of using government intervention generally to advance the cause of gender equity. Norway’s chief political parties all have quotas guaranteeing at least 40 percent representation for female candidates on electoral lists, with the oldest of these measures dating back to 1975.⁵³ In 1979, the Gender Equality Act codified the “duty of public authorities to make active equality efforts”—and specified how they would do so.⁵⁴

Nonetheless, in the decades leading up to the passage of its quota law in 2006, women in Norway were not progressing to leadership roles, especially in business. In 2002, before the quota law was passed, 6 percent of corporate board members were women.⁵⁵ Over the next three years, as companies were left to augment female representation by voluntary measures alone, the number of women on boards increased to just 16 percent.⁵⁶ It was only with the threat of sanctions—in the case of companies being dissolved—that the 40 percent target was achieved in 2008.⁵⁷ “It was clear that without legislation, it would take 100 years until women were represented on boards like men,” said a Norwegian business leader interviewed in November 2013 for this report.

In the decade since implementation of Norway’s board quota law began, enough evidence has accumulated to allow us to begin to draw conclusions about the experience. The latest data available from Statistics Norway, an independent entity with overall responsibility for producing official statistics in Norway, show that, in 2014, 40.7 percent of board members were women in public limited companies.⁵⁸ Binding legislation combined with sanctions for noncompliance have been essential ingredients of the measure’s success. Women in positions of power now occupy a much more visible place in Norwegian society.⁵⁹ By requiring the presence of women, Norway’s quota law made companies consider a wider pool of candidates for recruitment to board posts, taking recruiters beyond the usual networks of mostly male CEOs and other traditional industry leaders. As a result, the notion that there were few women in Norway ready and able to serve on boards was quickly dispelled. As a senior male business leader who serves on multiple boards put it in an interview for this report, “The quota law has made us look in other places [for new board members]. ... The hypothesis that there were very few

By requiring the presence of women, Norway’s quota law made companies consider a wider pool of candidates for recruitment to board posts, taking recruiters beyond the usual networks of mostly male CEOs and other traditional industry leaders. As a result, the notion that there were few women in Norway ready and able to serve on boards was quickly dispelled.

capable women was debunked.” Indeed, Marianne Bertrand, an economist at the University of Chicago Booth School of Business who has investigated the effects of Norway’s board reform, found that after the quota law went into effect, female board members had slightly more education than their male counterparts, busting the myth that gender quotas would lead to less-qualified women on boards.⁶⁰

In a series of interviews with Norwegian business leaders, male and female board members, senior civil servants, researchers, and representatives of professional associations—all of whom have expertise in the quota policy’s development and implementation—the authors were told that Norway’s quota law had improved board governance by creating a more transparent recruitment process and enhancing recruiters’ focus on the competency and skills of potential new board members. This largely anecdotal evidence, gathered in November 2013, has been backed by more systematic research by Morten Huse, a professor of organization and management at the BI Norwegian Business School, who—together with Professor Sabina Nielsen of the Copenhagen Business School—found that objective setting and the inner workings of boards changed as a result of more diverse board composition.⁶¹

A 2009 survey by the Norwegian Institute for Social Research at the University of Oslo found that the presence of new women on boards had increased director independence: 11 percent of female directors had major ownership interests in their companies, compared with 35 percent of male directors.⁶² A number of interviewees for this report said they thought this type of independence was an asset.

Furthermore, Huse has found that decision making is enriched by the injection of different values and perspectives on boards; this has been more noticeable on boards with at least three women.⁶³ Some interviewees for this report, as well as other commentators in Norway, have questioned whether Norwegian boards now are truly more diverse or have simply widened an old boys’ network to admit a new elite. When it comes to economic performance, it is probably too early to assess the impact, though academic studies have suggested mixed results.⁶⁴

The Norwegian experience is influencing and shaping the wider debate on quotas across Europe.⁶⁵ But perhaps the most significant unanswered question is whether quotas have led to progress in gender equality overall and, in particular, whether they have had a ripple effect in helping women obtain other senior management positions. According to the global management and consulting firm McKinsey & Company, women made up only 14 percent of the members of executive committees in Norway in 2013—the same percentage as in the United States, where

no quotas are in place.⁶⁶ Disturbingly, in the years after the introduction of the quota requirement, which gave public companies the option to change their status to private companies if they did not want to comply with the law, hundreds of companies went private, with companies with fewer women board members most likely to make the switch.⁶⁷ In 2014, women's representation on the boards of privately held companies in Norway was just 17.9 percent.⁶⁸

Bertrand has investigated the effects of Norway's board reform and has found that the gender wage gap for women in top positions, including those other than board members, did not shrink after the quota law took effect, though the earnings gap shrank some for women who sat on boards and were thus directly affected by the law. In fact, according to Bertrand's research, women whose qualifications were the same as those of the new board members but who were not appointed to boards did not see any change in their professional status.⁶⁹ And at both publicly traded and privately held companies, the upper echelons of corporate management continue to be overwhelmingly male.⁷⁰

It remains to be seen whether, in the long term, the increased presence of women on boards will have a trickle-down effect on the fortunes of women in private corporations overall.

Conclusion

There is no single answer to the question of how best to support women's ascent to leadership positions in the United States and abroad. Different women have different opportunities and constraints. The direct approach of quotas, currently being used in many European countries, works to increase the visibility and representation of women on corporate boards. But focusing too heavily on the representation of women at the top can distract from the need for wider progress for the vast majority of working women. Job advancement and economic security is important to nearly all women today, and the challenges facing most working women seeking to advance in their careers are not the same as the obstacles facing women close to the very top.

Public policy has an important role in helping women enter work, remain in the workforce, and progress to decision-making roles within organizations. Europe and other nations in the international community offer a variety of lessons on the importance of affordable child care on women's employment and advancement opportunities. Countries that have affordable and high-quality child care systems tend to have higher maternal labor-force participation. Likewise, paid parental leave, with genuine choices for both parents, can be a retention tool that reduces the impact of the so-called motherhood pay penalty and also aids women's long-term prospects by offering mothers and fathers the flexibility to work and to care. Flexible work also can benefit both women and men, particularly those with caring responsibilities, if the culture of a workplace supports it.

On their own, quotas have limited effectiveness when it comes to challenging inequality. Moreover, the goal of quotas, at least thus far, has been narrow: to support corporate leadership. This will certainly offer direct gains to some women, but it will not fundamentally change the reality of most women's lives. Only when quotas are combined with family-friendly legislation and sanctions for noncompliance will they be likely to achieve the more broadly shared goal of gender equality and equal opportunity for all.

About the authors

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