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Women in Arab Parliaments:

Can Gender Quotas Contribute to Democratization?

Drude Dahlerup

Introduction

The Arab region has the lowest representation of women in parliament in the world: ten percent. Yet, seen in a ten-year perspective, the Arab region has witnessed the highest rate of increase, having started from a very low position. All over the world gender quotas are being adopted in order to rapidly increase women's political representation. The Arab world is part of this new trend, and today eleven Arab countries have adopted electoral gender quotas. Globally, women are still vastly under-represented in politics. Only 19 percent of the seats in the world's parliaments are occupied by women, 81 percent by men (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2010).

This article will analyze the use of gender quotas in the Arab countries in a global perspective. It will show that many different types of gender quotas are in use and that it is important to scrutinize the effects of various types of quotas. It is argued that this amazing new world-wide trend rests on a new understanding of why women are under-represented, different from previous explanations which have focused on women's lack of resources. In the new discourse, which was introduced by the Platform for Action adopted by the world's governments at the Fourth UN World Conference for Women in Beijing in 1995, the focus is being directed towards the political institutions and the political parties themselves and the way they tend to exclude women. In this way, the complex relation between processes of democratization and the inclusion of women in public life has reached the global agenda.

The Recent Adoption of Electoral Gender Quotas

Electoral gender quotas are defined here as an equality policy measure, the aim of which is to rapidly change an unwanted under-representation of women in the political institutions. Quotas for other categories, such as ethnic or religious groups, are well-known in the Arab world, as in Lebanon and Jordan. While quotas for ethnic or religious groups may be attached to different electoral districts, due to the geographical concentration of various groups, quotas for women are cross-cutting, since women obviously are present in all social groupings and live in all geographical areas (Phillips, 1995; Htun, 2004). Gender quotas may be constructed as a gender neutral policy, setting a minimum and a maximum representation for both sexes, or may stipulate a minimum representation for women.

Today, around 50 countries have adopted electoral gender quotas in their constitutions or electoral/party laws (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance IDEA, n.d.). In many post-conflict countries the inclusion of women is seen today as an important part of the process of reorganization and reconciliation as we have seen in Rwanda, Uganda, and South Africa, to mention just a few.

In around 40 additional countries, individual political parties have themselves adopted provisions for gender quotas regulating the gender composition of their candidate lists. Usually, leftist parties have been the first to adopt such voluntary party quotas. In several cases, such as Belgium, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Spain, voluntary party quotas were the first step, followed later by quota legislation, which is binding for all political parties in a given country. Gender quotas are adopted for the national as well as for the regional and local levels, though sometimes in different forms (Dahlerup, 2006). There has been a rapid diffusion of electoral gender quotas in the past 10-15 years, even if a few countries, such as Pakistan, Sudan, and Egypt, have made use of gender quotas prior to this development. Research by Richard Matland (2006) and Drude Dahlerup (2007) on the diffusion of quotas has shown that today gender quotas are being adopted by all types of political systems.

Women's Representation Worldwide

Partly thanks to quota provisions, Rwanda has assumed the position of number one in the world rank order in terms of women's parliamentary representation. In the first Rwandan election after the 2003 reform, women received forty-nine percent of the parliamentary seats, and in 2008 Rwanda became the first parliament in the world with a female majority, fifty-six percent. Several countries in the global south are now challenging the five Scandinavian countries: Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden, which for so long were alone at the top of the world ranking, today having an average of 42 percent women. Argentina, Costa Rica, Angola, Mozambique, and Spain are among the new countries to have passed the 30 percent threshold, all through the use of electoral gender quotas. However, it is also possible to attain a very high representation of women without quotas, as in the cases of Finland and Denmark. In general, the electoral system of proportional representation (PR) is more favourable to the inclusion of women than single member constituency systems, since under the latter system each party only nominates one candidate, usually a man.

Quotas certainly do not solve all of the problems for women in politics – such as the high costs of campaign financing, intimidation, and harassment. In her study of women parliamentarians in Morocco, Hannah Darhour (2008) concludes that gender norms and other structural constraints prove to be impossible to overcome merely through the use of a quota. The effect of quotas on the effectiveness of women parliamentarians after the elections is not dealt with in this article. However, in terms of numerical representation, research has shown that under certain conditions and with systems that are compatible with the electoral systems in place, electoral gender quotas may lead to considerable improvements, even to historical leaps in women's political representation (Dahlerup 2006, 2007; Norris, 2007).

Two Discourses on Women's Under-Representation

Why are women under-represented everywhere in the world, seen in relation to

women's share of the population? And why is women's representation especially low in the Arab world? In the public debate we find different diagnoses of this problem. Some see women as the problem – women lack the qualifications needed, it is argued – while others point to the role of the political parties as the gatekeepers to elected positions. Two contrasting modern discourses on women's under-representation have been identified by Dahlerup and Freidenvall (2005). Both discourses see women's under-representation as a problem and seek measures to remedy the situation. Consequently, the traditional positions – that gender is irrelevant in politics or that politics is a man's business – are disregarded here as out of date. The two modern discourses are presented as two ideal types based on different perceptions of historical change, different goals, different diagnoses, and different strategies.¹

A. The Incremental Track Discourse

1. General perception: Equality will come-about in due time.
2. The goal: More women in politics.
3. Diagnosis of why there are very few women in politics: Women lack resources and public commitment.
4. Strategy: Either no action at all or policies to increase women's resources.

B. The Fast Track Discourse

1. General perception: Equality does not come about of historical necessity; backlashes may occur.
2. The goal: Gender balance, parity democracy.
3. Diagnosis of why there are very few women in politics: Discrimination and various mechanisms of exclusion.
4. Strategy: Active measures, such as setting up targets and adopting quotas.

Dahlerup and Freidenvall (2005) argue that these two tracks are based on different logic. The incremental track discourse rests on the perception that equality – which in both discourses is stated to be the goal – will come about as a country develops. It is based on the time-lack thesis, according to which women's under-representation is primarily an effect of women's historical lack of resources and of old prejudices, which will disappear in due time as society develops.

In contrast, the fast track discourse rests on the understanding that male-dominated societies and organizations have an embedded tendency to reproduce male dominance. Open discrimination and structural mechanisms of exclusion are institutionalized in the norms and practices of political life and, consequently, active measures to break with these structures are needed in order to make political life more inclusive for women. Within this discourse, gender quotas do not discriminate against men, as is sometimes argued by quota opponents, but is rather a correction of and a compensation for the discrimination women are subject to.

The UN Platform for Action, Beijing 1995, came close to the fast track model. Firstly, it offers a new diagnosis of women's under-representation, focusing not on women's

1. A discourse is defined here as a coherent set of arguments, that includes the perception of possible actions though not the actions themselves.

lack of resources but on 'discriminatory attitudes and practices' and 'unequal power relations': "... [T]raditional working patterns of many political parties and government structures continue to be barriers to women's participation in public life" (Art. 182 and 185). Secondly, it states a more radical goal, namely that of 'equal participation' and 'the equitable distribution of power and decision-making at all levels' (Art. 189). Thirdly, in terms of strategy, affirmative actions are recommended, even if the controversial word 'quotas' is not used directly.

Often, many different motives are found behind the adoption of gender quotas. The growing body of research on the many new cases of gender quotas in post-conflict countries as well as in countries in the process of (re)democratisation reveals, not surprisingly, a lot of mixed motives and muddled compromises behind the adoption of gender quotas, as in the cases of Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, and Uganda (Rai et al., 2006; Tripp et al., 2006; Norris, 2007).

The Scandinavian countries and European countries in general have, until recently at least, been characterized by the incremental track model. Even women's organisations have previously adhered to this model to a large extent, pushing primarily for women's education, labour market participation, and larger commitments in the public sphere as preconditions for political representation. But if today women are as educated as men and participate almost as much as men in social movements and civic life, why is women's political representation still so much lower than that of men? Could it be that the problem is not women but the way the political institutions and political parties work?

Variations in Women's Representation in Arab Parliaments

Even if Arab parliaments on the whole show the lowest average in women's representation, significant variations can be found within the region. Table 1 shows a variation from 27.6 percent in Tunisia to zero in Comoros, Oman, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, the last country being the only one in the world where women are in reality deprived of the right to vote. In Lebanon, women's representation dropped even further at the 2009 election. How can we explain these differences?

Differences in electoral systems cannot explain the large variations between Arab states. This corresponds to Pippa Norris' conclusion that the link between electoral systems and women's representation is stronger among post-industrial societies than among industrial and agrarian societies (Norris, 2004). Furthermore, the general level of civil and political rights does not correlate with the level of representation for women, studied here through the use of IDEA's distinctions between free, partly free, and not free elections.² But party competition seems to be of importance for women's representation, since there is competition between political parties in most of the top ten countries in Table 1 (two of the countries are in civil war), whereas this is only the case for half of the countries among the lower ten.³ The adoption of gender quotas, it seems, is linked to party competition, since quotas are almost exclusively found in systems with competition between political parties in election. However, it should be noted that not all Arab countries with party competition in elections have adopted quotas, as the cases of Lebanon and Syria show.

2. It should be noted that no Arab country is listed as having totally 'free elections' according to www.idea.int

3. The definition of party competition used here (after Aboû-Zeid 2006:171) is broad and does not exclude a ban on some political parties, like the ban on the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.

Table 1. Women in Arab Parliaments
Lower or Single House

Country	Women in Parliament in % (Most Recent Election)	Women in Parliament in Numbers (Women/All)	Electoral System	Party Competition in Elections	Gender Quotas
1. Tunisia	27.6 (2009)	59 / 214	Mixed	Yes	Yes
2. Iraq	25.5 (2005)	70 / 275	PR	Yes	Yes
3. Mauritania	17.9 (2006)	17 / 95	Plurality/maj.	Yes	Yes
4. Sudan ¹	14.7 (2005)	66 / 450	N.A.	N.A.	Yes
5. Djibouti	13.8 (2008)	9 / 65	Plurality/maj.	Yes	Yes
6. Palestine O.T.	12.9 (2006)	17 / 132	Mixed	Yes	Yes
7. Syria	12.4 (2007)	31 (250)	Plurality/maj.	Yes	No
8. Morocco	10.5 (2007)	34 (325)	PR	Yes	Yes
9. Somalia	7.8 (2004)	21 (269)	N.A.	N.A.	Yes
10. Kuwait ²	7.7 (2009)	(5/65)	Plurality/maj.	No	No
11. Algeria	7.2 (2007)	28 (389)	PR	Yes	Yes
12. Jordan	6.4 (2007)	7 (110)	SNTV	Yes	Yes
13. Lebanon	3.1 (2009)	4 / 128	Plurality/maj.	Yes	No
14. Bahrain	2.5 (2006)	1 / 40	Plurality/maj.	No	No
15. Egypt	1.8 (2005)	8 (442)	Plurality/maj.	Yes	Yes (2010)
16. Yemen	0.3 (2003)	1 (301)	Plurality/maj.	Yes	No
17. Comoros	- (2009)	0 / 33	Plurality/maj.	Yes	No
17. Oman	- (2007)	0 (84)	Plurality/maj.	No	No
17. Qatar	- (2008)	0 (35)	N.A.	No	No
17. Saudi Arabia	- (2005)	0 (150)	N.A.	No	Women cannot vote

Notes: N.A. = at present no provisions for direct elections. Libya and the United Arab Emirates have no equivalent to a national parliament.

1. Sudan: All members of the National Assembly were appointed by decree in 2005. Later, non-stationary changes (80 women out of 443, 18.1 percent) are not included here since this table in general shows election day figures.

2. Kuwait: Four women candidates were elected in 2009, and one woman was appointed as cabinet minister, and in that capacity also sits in parliament.

Key to electoral systems: PR: Proportional Representation system with party lists including several candidates; Mixed: Mixed Member Proportional, a combination of PR and plurality/majority systems, often half-half. Plurality/majority: Electoral system based on single member constituencies – each party presents only one candidate and the candidate with the highest vote totals wins the seat. Variations of plurality/majority systems are the two round systems (Mauritania, Egypt and Comoros) and the block vote (Syria, Lebanon). SNTV means single non-transferable vote (Jordan).

Many Types of Gender Quotas

Quota advocates have sometimes failed to pay attention to differences in quota systems and, consequently, there are examples of quota systems that do not function well. Perhaps some quota systems were never intended to lead to major changes, and thus remain a purely symbolic gesture.

One less effective example is the quota legislation in France, which was introduced after a long philosophical debate about '*parité*' (i.e. parity). The law demands fifty percent men and fifty percent women among each party's candidates for elections to the National Assembly. The difficulties in combining a single member constituency electoral system with an effective candidate gender quotas system were illustrated here by the disappointing result of only 12 percent women being elected in the first election after the introduction of gender quotas in 2002 and only 19 percent in the following election in 2007 (Krook et al., 2006; Sineau, 2008). Research has shown that

the women candidates were overwhelmingly nominated in non-winnable seats, e.g. in constituencies where their party used to be weak (Murray, 2004). In contrast, in the local elections, the French quota law resulted in a historical leap from 26 to 49 percent of women. Behind this success lies the fact that French local councils above a certain population size use proportional representation and that sanctions for non-compliance with the quota rules are very effective, namely the rejection of candidate lists by the Electoral Commission. In order to prevent the rejection of their lists, the political parties worked seriously and successfully to recruit women candidates. In fact, this is the basic idea behind gender quotas – that those controlling the nominations make more serious efforts to recruit female candidates than before. In accordance with the fast track discourse, gender quotas focus on the actions of the political parties.

I have often heard the argument that women do not vote for women candidates and, consequently, it does not pay for political parties to nominate women. When this argument is put forward, I usually ask for evidence. Is this not just a myth? With secret ballots we cannot directly know how women and men vote. Survey data, for instance exit polls, are needed in order to answer this question, and this only makes sense in systems that allow for voting for individual candidates (open lists), not just for party lists (closed lists). In the few cases where data are available, the results have proved to be the opposite of conventional wisdom. In Finland (the proportional representation system with mandatory personal voting), more male than female voters vote for a candidate of their own gender: In 2007, 72 percent of the male voters against only 53 percent of the female voters voted for a candidate of their own gender. At this election 40 percent of all candidates were women, and the result was 42 percent women in parliament. In 1970, as many as 93 percent of the male voters voted for a candidate of their own gender against only 40 percent of the female voters (Hart & Holli, 2009, p. 17). It is, in fact, the male voters who seem to be the main problem for female candidates. It is true that women voters do not constitute a uniform group, all voting for women candidates. But even if many male voters argue that the gender of the candidate is of no importance for them, much fewer male voters than female voters in fact vote for female candidates.

Types of Gender Quotas in the Arab World

Table 2 shows the types of gender quotas in use in the Arab region at the national level. A distinction is made between: first, reserved seat quotas, which require the election of a stipulated number of women; second, legislated candidate quotas, which by law require a certain minimum of women, or of each sex, among the candidates of all party lists for the election; and, thirdly, voluntary party candidate quotas, in which individual political parties have written into their statutes the requirement of a certain minimum of women, or of each sex, on the party's electoral lists in all of the districts.

Table 2 shows that a quota system in the form of reserved seats is the most commonly used quota system among the eleven Arab countries presently using quotas. The newly adopted Egyptian quota law from 2009 is also a reserved seat system. Legislated candidate quotas are in use in Mauritania and the Palestinian Authority, whereas voluntary party quotas have been adopted by major parties in Algeria and Tunisia. Globally, a reserved seat quota system is also the most commonly used quota system in Asia and in Sub-Saharan Africa. In Latin America, the leading region in terms of

Table 2. Types of Electoral Gender Quotas in Use in Arab Countries
(year of introduction)

Quota Types		
Reserved Seats (Electees)	Legislated Candidate Quotas for All	Voluntary Party Candidate Quotas
Iraq: (25%) (2004) ¹	Mauritania: Rank order rules (20%) (2006)	Algeria (FLN, HMS) (both 2002)
Djibouti 10% (2002)	Palestine: Rank order rules (20%), only PR lists. (2005)	Tunisia (RCD) (2004)
Egypt I: 30/360 = 8% (1979-84) Egypt II: 64/404 = 16% /(2009) ²		
Jordan 6/110 = 6 % (2003)		
Morocco 30/325 = 9% (2002)		
Somalia 12 % (2004)		
Sudan 60/450 = 13 % (1978 with variations)		

Source: Abou-Zeid 2006, updated; Stockholm University, Inter-Parliamentary Union and International IDEA: www.quotaproject.org

1. According to the Iraqi constitution 25 percent of those elected shall be women. For the 2005 election (closed lists), rank order rules required that no fewer than 1 out of the first 3 candidates, and no fewer than 2 out of the first 6 candidates should be women. In addition, some non-elected women (best loser system) were moved up in order to fulfil the 25 percent quota rule. In the 2010 election an open lists system was applied, and the candidates will be elected according to their personal votes. However, according to the electoral law art. 3, par.3, at least 25 percent of the winners must be women. The result has not yet been released (March 2010).
2. The Egyptian law will be implemented during two parliamentary cycles, beginning with the general election 2010, and will only apply to the Lower House. From 28 governorates two women will be elected, one of whom will represent labourers and farmers, in accordance with the present 50 percent quota provision for these groups. In Cairo and Alexandria, due to the higher population, in total 8 more seats will be added.

the diffusion of gender quotas, legislated candidate quotas are most widespread. In Southern Africa and in Europe, voluntary candidate quotas are the most commonly used quota system, even if the number of countries with legislated candidate quotas is at present increasing in Europe, with different minimum requirements: France (50 percent), Belgium (50 percent), Armenia (15 percent), Macedonia (30 percent), Bosnia-Herzegovina (30 percent), Spain (40 percent), and Portugal (33 percent) (Dahlerup, 2006; European Parliament, 2008).

Low Echelon Quotas

The level of the quota requirements in the Arab region are, as shown in Table 2, relatively low. The Arab quota provisions can be referred to as low echelon quotas, in contrast to the high echelon quotas in the Scandinavian countries, which were introduced voluntarily by left and center political parties at a time when women had already obtained 25-30 percent of the seats in parliament (Freidenvall et al., 2006). Low echelon quotas may be seen as an important beginning, provided they do not remain that low. Could it be that it is more difficult to move from zero to 10 percent women than from 10 to 25 or from 25 to 40 percent?

While the most common candidate quota requirement globally is 30 percent, Mauritania and the Palestinian Authority use 20 percent. As for the reserved seat systems, the requirements, when calculated in percentages, are all below 20 percent in the Arab countries, with the exception of Iraq's 25 percent. Lowest is Jordan's requirement of only six women, which equals six percent. It is understandable that

such low figures have been subject to much criticism from women's organizations. In Algeria, the FLN has a party quota requiring that two of the first five names on the lists in each province must be women. The Peace Party, HMS, has decided that one-fifth of the candidates at the regional level are to be women, whereas in districts with small magnitudes, one of every three candidates should be a woman. In Tunisia, the ruling party, RCD, has earmarked 25 percent for female candidates.

The Order on the Electoral List

Without rules about how women and men candidates should be placed on the electoral lists – the so-called rank order rules – a demand of 30 or even 50 percent women may result in no women being elected at all, namely if all of the female candidates are placed at the bottom of the list. Consequently, in order to be successful, candidate quota systems, be they legally binding or voluntary, must include rank order rules. In Iraq, which has the highest number of women elected but which also represents the most controversial case – being under American rule – the rank order rules are such that at least one of the first three candidates on the list must be a female, no fewer than two of the first six candidates on the list must be female and so forth throughout the list. In the Palestinian Authority elections, the election law of 2005 requires at least one woman among the first three on the lists, at least one woman among the next four and at least one woman among every five for the rest of the list. However, the quota rules only refer to candidates nominated on party lists elected under the proportional representation system (PR), not to the district candidates. Consequently, all of the 17 women (12.9 percent) elected in 2007 ran as candidates on the PR-lists. The most elaborate rank order rules are to be found in Mauritania, where the rank order rules are adjusted to the size of the electoral districts (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance IDEA, n.d.).

A New Glass Ceiling?

There is concern within feminist circles that reserved seats may become a glass ceiling for women. With reserved seats "women have got their share", and the political parties refrain from nominating more women than the prescribed number to be elected. In Jordan, the six reserved seats are allocated to those non-elected women candidates who have achieved the highest percentage of all of the votes cast in their respective constituencies. In the 2003 election, no woman was elected and in the subsequent election, only one woman was elected to a general seat without reservation, making the total number of women in the Jordanian parliament seven in 2007. So the Jordan case seems to support the glass ceiling theory. It should be noted that this system disfavours women candidates in the large cities.

Also in Morocco, women's organizations, among them *l'Union de l'Action Feminine*, argue that the unique Moroccan system – which reserves 30 seats on a special list for women elected nationwide – leads the political parties to abstain from nominating women for the district seats, and especially for 'safe' district seats, e.g. seats with good chances of being elected. The electoral result confirms this concern, since only four additional women were elected from general district seats in 2007, making the total number 34 women. However, the case of Rwanda shows a different outcome: Here 24 women shall be elected on the basis of reserved seats – two for each district. But almost the same number, 21 women in all, were elected to general district seats, e.g.

not reserved seats, for this small parliament of 80 members in the election of 2008, making Rwanda the first country in the world with a female majority (56.3 percent). So, in this case, there was no glass ceiling that prevented women candidates from being nominated and elected for general district seats. Glass ceilings can be broken.

The political parties are the gatekeepers to elected positions in party based political systems, because it is the political parties who control the nominations. The voters choose between the candidates presented to them by the political parties. It is also the political parties that decide which candidates are nominated for so-called good or 'safe seats', e.g. in an electoral district which used to be a stronghold for that particular party. Pressure from women's organizations has proved to be essential for the increase in women's representation in all countries with high representation of women. To use a formulation by Melanie M. Hughes and Pamela Paxton (2008), stasis or growth in women's political representation is the result of the balance between forces of change and forces of resistance. In a very interesting argumentation, they identify 'critical periods' and 'continuous forces' as well as 'episodic forces', for instance the introduction of gender quotas, as being behind increases in women's representation (Hughes & Paxton, 2008).

The Inclusion of Women and the Process of Democratization

The Arab Human Development Report (UNDP, 2002) emphasized the importance of the inclusion of women for the process of development. The report acknowledged the substantial progress made by Arab countries over the past three decades, but stated that the region has not developed as quickly as comparable nations in other regions. The report identified three areas where Arab institutional structures hinder development: governance, women's empowerment, and access to knowledge: "As women number half or more of any population, neglecting their capabilities is akin to crippling half the potential of a nation" (UNDP, 2002, p. 98). This is a thought-provoking argument, since it sees women's education and the inclusion of women in public life as a crucial factor in itself for development in the region. This argument is not only new and radical in an Arab context.⁴ In Western history the sequence of development has usually been depicted in this way: First development, then democracy, and only after that can we begin to talk about equality between women and men. The UNDP is turning this traditional approach to historical development upside down. But one may ask: how is this interrelation between development and the empowerment of women to be understood?

⁴ This argument is, of course, contested, by some such as Galal Amin. His counterargument is, nevertheless, not to be taken very seriously: "...empowering women.... could lead to their losing the ability to enjoy motherhood" (2006:34). On the contrary, one may argue that empowering women in politics could lead to new policies that could improve the conditions of all mothers in the country.

Firstly, today a philosophical and normative link is made between democracy and the inclusion of women, as in the following quotation from the Beijing Platform for Action: "Achieving the goal of equal participation of women and men in decision-making will provide a balance that more accurately reflects the composition of society and is needed in order to strengthen democracy and promote its proper functioning" (Art. 183). The philosopher Iris Marion Young (2000) described this connection in her book *Inclusion and Democracy* in the following way: "The normative legitimacy of a democratic decision depends on the degree to which those affected by it have been included in the decision-making processes and have had the opportunity to influence the outcomes", and she added "... on equal terms" (pp. 5-6, 23).

In addition to this normative argument – no democracy without the inclusion of women – the link between the inclusion of women in decision-making and processes of democratization can also be made at the meso level, focusing on the organization of politics. How should we understand the above cited sentence from the Beijing Platform for Action? How can the inclusion of women be important for the proper functioning of democracy?

Demands for gender quotas force us to pay attention to the way nominations and elections take place today. One of the democratic potentials of this new global gender quota trend is that it may open up what has been called 'the secret garden of nominations'. New questions have to be asked: Who controls the nominations? Why are many more men than women nominated to 'safe seats', e.g. seats to which election is almost guaranteed? Are nominations made by an 'old boy's network'? By demanding formalization of and transparency in the process of nomination, electoral gender quotas may contribute to processes of democratization all over the world.

Drude Dahlerup is Professor of Political Science,
University of Stockholm, Sweden.
Email: drude.dahlerup@statsvet.su.se

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