



# Explicating Politicians' Arguments for Sex Quotas in Sweden: Increasing Power and Influence Rather Than Increasing Quality and Productivity

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Quotas are employed or proposed in several European countries as a means to decrease differences in outcomes across groups. Quotas belong to a family of biased selection and treatment measures based on group membership, rather than individual ability. The effects of such measures depend on the underlying model of the relevant variables and their relationships, but this model is not explicit in the political discourse. Here, thematic analysis is applied to statements that argue for legislated sex quotas in Sweden, issued by leading politicians and government officials. The most common, recurrent themes are that: (a) Women are at least as able as men; (b) less able men are currently selected over more able women; (c) the proportion of women should be increased to at least 40%, which (d) will increase organizations' quality and productivity; (e) this should be achieved by means of quotas but (f) not through improved meritocratic assessment. It is shown that these claims are inconsistent, as (1) improved meritocratic assessment was not proposed, although that would more effectively select the more able than would quotas, and (2) quotas will lead to lower rather than higher quality and productivity, as it demands that the less able be appointed if they are female. This suggests that the purpose of quotas is to increase the influence of the favored group even if it is currently less able.

**Keywords:** academia, business world, gender politics, legislation, politics, quotas, sex equality, Sweden

## INTRODUCTION

Western societies today subscribe to the ideals that all citizens have equal rights and responsibilities, are equal before the law, and hold no privileges based on heritage or group membership. In other words, the ideas of individual freedom and independence reflect a doctrine of equal treatment, which citizens of Western countries hold in high esteem, according to international surveys (e.g., Inglehart, 2018). On the other hand are many Western countries also keen to implement social interventions and redistribution through taxes in order to decrease differences in outcome between individuals and groups. When applied to demographic categories, such as sex, race, or socioeconomic status, such unequal treatment obviously conflicts with the doctrine of equal treatment. The most common rationale for nevertheless applying unequal treatment is to compensate for other forms of bias (in the context of quotas, see Dahlerup, 2008).

A quota is the selection of individuals to some sort of position based on group membership according to quantitative goals, such as selecting or reaching a certain proportion. Other similar concepts are “affirmative action,” “positive action,” “positive discrimination,” “equal opportunities promotion,” and “preferential treatment.” It is confusing with this large number of more or less established and common terms, whose precise definition varies across countries and contexts. For the purpose of the present analysis we need to define two different principles that are covertly present within these terms and their practices. The first principle is to impose an overt and systematic bias in the selection process in order to achieve a different—and typically more equal—outcome than would otherwise have been the case. “Bias” should here be understood in the technical sense as an inclination toward selecting one group over the other. Accordingly, *biased selection* may refer to anything that has this effect, from quotas, with any specified proportion, to choosing a member of the preferred group when merits are deemed to be indistinguishable. Even the latter practice obviously constitutes a systematic bias, because one group always gets the benefit of the doubt when the ranking of applicants is difficult. *Biased selection* is here defined as the overt, intentional, and systematic bias that is formally employed by selection committees and the like. The second principle is to make resources available to members of one group but not another, which may be termed “*biased treatment*.” Analogously with biased selection it technically constitutes a bias even when the applied measures are mild, such as proposing or encouraging one group but not the other to apply for courses or grants that are open to both groups. In academia, for example, Swedish authorities have made courses, training, mentoring, funding, and paid time for self-development available to women but not to men (Utbildningsdepartementet, 2004, p. 250). Thus, *biased treatment* differs from *biased selection* by attempting to increase the ability of the favored group.

The purpose of the present study is to analyse the arguments by which politicians propose biased selection and treatment, according to the above definitions, in order to infer the underlying model. This is important for assessing the role that public policies can and do play to decrease inequality. Sex is the demographic category most frequently subjected to quotas and preferential treatment across the globe (Högström, 2016). Women at large have assumed dramatically increased power in the public sphere as well as more financial and social independence in the last century. These changes have been accompanied by eliminated or even reversed sex ratios in many areas, while the sex ratio remains heavily skewed toward men in certain domains and for certain positions. The arguments surrounding measures to increase equality may add to our understanding of the dynamics of group inequality.

The issue is timely, as several Scandinavian countries are considering implementing such measures in legislation, and Norway has, for example, ruled that companies must have at least 40 percent women on their boards of directors (Strøm, 2015). In Sweden, a government bill forcing a limit on the sex ratio amongst private company board members was retracted from a parliamentary vote (Justitiedepartementet, 2016), and the government is currently policing universities to limit the

sex ratio amongst academic professors (Nilsson, 2014; Hellmark Knutsson, 2017).

Obtaining equal outcomes across women and men is desirable, according to a range of common arguments. Organizations with equal sex proportions are claimed to be more productive, to provide a better work environment, and to foster sex equality. These arguments seem to be very attractive, as they are repeated in the media and the public debate. However, there are not many studies that provide original, empirical data that bear on these relationships. They are, moreover, almost exclusively correlational, such as one of the most frequently cited studies that was based on official statistics in Finland (Kotiranta et al., 2007). The experimental studies that would be needed to determine a certain causal relation are wanting. Studies whose design enable some level of causal analysis do not find any effects of sex-equal staffing on company performance (Chapple and Humphrey, 2014; Isidro and Sobral, 2015). A correlation may just as well indicate that more successful companies can afford the resources needed to obtain equal proportions on the executive level. Such window-dressing is often motivated by improving the organization's brand and/or complying with the prevailing norms or legislation (Storvik and Gulbrandsen, 2016). Although the reality of these claims *per se* are beyond the scope of the present study, it is important to convey what seems to attract politicians and the public to quotas.

Quotas have also been criticized for not acquiring the desired effects and for creating adverse side-effects. It has been argued that quotas deflate organizations' overall ability and the status of the favored group (Seierstad, 2016; Terjesen and Sealy, 2016, p. 27), and fosters conflict and resentment due to perceived threat (see, e.g., Faniko et al., 2017) and unfairness (Holli et al., 2006; Holli, 2011). Female board members that are included to meet the quota requirement tend to have less influence, and are to a greater extent recruited from outside the company (a.k.a. independent board members) (Böhren and Staubo, 2016). Rather than fostering equality, this would seem to conserve the very sex role stereotypes whose eradication was one purpose of quotas and other forms of biased selection and treatment. On the same note, women in leadership positions are perceived as more agentic—a traditionally masculine trait—the degree to which is modulated by the magnitude of “preferential treatment” given to them (Faniko et al., 2017). For example, “women who obtain higher managerial positions demonstrate the same set of characteristics as men... the promotion system is designed for candidates that demonstrate typically male characteristics” (Kreckova et al., 2016, p. 354). Many women reject quotas, on the basis that it “would undermine our achievements” and “side-line the merit principle that ensures the best person for the job” (Kakabadse et al., 2015, p. 275). A recent review summarizes the critique from opponents of electoral quotas such that “...quotas violate principles of equality, promote unqualified individuals, do not further women's interests in policy making, are undemocratic, and are demeaning to women” (Hughes et al., 2017, p. 337).

Ability is a central concept, defined as the concurrent capacity to successfully and efficiently perform the behaviors required by a certain occupation or position. It is thus not the potential to acquire ability. In the present study, ability is mainly discussed in

terms of the group level, because that is the level at which biased selection and treatment is applied, and for which outcomes are assessed in terms of group means. These means are obviously tacit about the underlying structure of ability within each group. It should therefore be noted that they are not informative about the typical ability of each individual or the number of individuals above a certain level of ability, for example. Another constraint is that when we consider selection to specific occupations and positions, as do the legislative proposals considered here, the ability of the group in question refers only to eligible individuals. The sex differences discussed in the following are constrained to select groups with certain domain-specific skills, rather than to men and women generally. Another central concept is sex, defined as being biologically male or female. This is used rather than gender, consistent with the fact that formalized discrimination, such as quotas, biased selection, and biased treatment, is exclusively applied to sex, not to people's perceived gender identity<sup>1</sup> (Halpern, 2012). In conclusion, statements representative of the legislative power will be subject to thematic analysis and examination of their internal consistency, in order to infer the underlying model of the relevant variables and their relationships.

## METHODS

### Design Considerations

The subject matter of the present study is the phenomenon of treating members of groups unequally in order to achieve equal outcomes, and more specifically the structure of the arguments given in support of these measures. Arguments advanced by politicians and government officials are conceivably particularly relevant and representative, because they are closest to the power to actually implement the measures in question. Sweden will be used as a case for study, and sex as the defining group demographic category. The motivations for these choices are that (a) Sweden ranks amongst the countries highest in sex equality and has (b) recently proposed legislation and exercised governmental power to change the sex distribution amongst boards of directors and university professors, (c) several countries have targeted these specific positions for sex quotas, (d) they have been targeted for many years, which means they have been subject to considerable deliberation and discussion. Accordingly, Sweden provides authoritative, well-prepared statements from the highest governmental levels, and is likely to reflect the future situation of many countries. Sweden ranks as the fourth most sex egalitarian amongst 145 countries (World Economic Forum, 2015, p. 8) and its Cabinet labels itself as feminist (Socialdemokraterna, 2016, p. 6). As of December 2018, 47 percent of its MPs are female, 3 out of 8 parties in the parliament have female leaders, and the Cabinet has 12 female and 11 male ministers.

<sup>1</sup>The term "gender" is often reserved for societal manifestations of being male or female—the roles people play... I use "sex" as the more inclusive term... "gender" is most commonly used to refer to the psychological aspects of rearing... the way your parents and other socializing agents treated you based on your sex when you were growing up... (Halpern, 2012, pp. 160–161).

## Data

The Internet and the Swedish government website (<https://www.regeringen.se>) was searched with the main terms "kvotering," "jämställdhet," "regering\*," and "lag" (quota, sex equality, cabinet, law). Yielding about 40,000 hits, iterative searches were performed on Boolean combinations of these terms together with several constraining terms until no additional relevant hits were obtained. Maintaining only statements issued by politicians or other government officials resulted in 12 official statements since 1994, which are listed in **Appendix 1**. Analysis of their content begun with the most recent statements, and was discontinued when saturation was achieved, meaning that the next three older statements did not yield any new themes. More recent statements happened to also be more authoritative, defined as being issued by policymakers higher up in the political or governmental hierarchy, and as being more prescriptive, rather than descriptive. The retained statements were one from the Minister of Higher Education regarding university professors and two government bills regarding company boards. These statements are included within the main body of this article, in order to transparently convey the method of aggregating and summarizing main, distinct themes, and ensuring trustworthiness and replicability. However, the reader can go directly to the thematic analyses following each statement, and yet follow the main arguments. All statements were translated from Swedish by the author. The translations are sometimes semantically or grammatically awkward, which is partly inherent in the original texts, and partly a result of a verbatim rather than idiomatic translation.

## Analysis

Some portions of the text is omitted if considered irrelevant for the present questions. These instances are indicated by standard notation, with the addition of the number of words omitted. When a whole sentence or more is omitted, that text is described with a condensed summary within brackets. Each sentence or phrase identified as carrying distinct information is italicized and numbered consecutively in superscript, like this<sup>1</sup>. This numbering is then used as shorthand for referring to them in the thematic analysis. The resulting themes are also numbered, and referred to like this (1).

## RESULTS

I begin with the statement about university professors, signed by the Minister of Higher Education and Research Helene Hellmark Knutsson. It is phrased as an official statement from the Cabinet, and was simultaneously published on the Swedish government website and in a major newspaper. Of the original 575 words are the relevant parts translated below, excluding headings.

"Although Sweden is world-leading when it comes to the proportion of women in the labor market, and *although 60 percent of the students have long been women, three out of four professors are still men. We must have higher ambitions than that. In Swedish universities, women and men should be able to act on equal terms and have the same career opportunities*<sup>1</sup>. All too often have *notions about the male genius trumped competence*<sup>2</sup>,

and too often have *internal recruitment and networks played a greater role than hard work*<sup>3</sup>. This is in the long run *damaging for the quality of Swedish research*<sup>4</sup>. The government invests more than 60 billion crowns [~6 billion Euro] annually. Such an extensive and important area *must be subject to a strong and active equal opportunities promotion—and provide equal opportunities for research and education regardless of sex*<sup>5</sup>.

The Cabinet is now substantially increasing the level of ambition for the period 2017–2019. New recruitment goals for equal sex distribution amongst newly recruited professors are written into the universities' letters of regulation. They correspond to nine *percentage points on average*<sup>6</sup> per institution for the upcoming period. In addition, the Cabinet has for the first time set a national goal: *Equal numbers of women and men shall be recruited as professors*<sup>7</sup> 2030 at the latest. In the next government bill on research, the Cabinet also introduces several important measures to *strengthen the promotion of equal opportunities and the quality of research*<sup>8</sup>. We know that it matters for equal opportunities how money is distributed to research. The Cabinet therefore charges the universities with the task of following up the distribution of research funding from an equal opportunities perspective. It is important that *each institution oversees the distribution of research funding across women and men as well as if it varies across disciplines*<sup>9</sup>. With 1.3 billion crowns [~130 mn Euro] in increased basic funding for research, presented by the Cabinet, universities are given greater possibilities to control the distribution of funding to the employees and to *counter slanted distribution with respect to sex*<sup>10</sup>.

[A 154-word paragraph about qualification positions, with three references to sex: (a) *That women are more likely than men to abandon an academic career unless there are attractive and clear career paths*<sup>11</sup>, (b) *academia has too long been too good at recruiting its sons*, and (c) *to advertise qualification positions in open competition nationally and preferably also internationally . . . is important to facilitate sex equality*<sup>12</sup>].

The Cabinet will also commission administrative authorities that commit more than 100 million crowns [~10 mn Euro] annually to research and development to *equality-integrate their operations and to promote equality between women and men when distributing research funding*<sup>13</sup>. The funding bodies who distribute large sums will be given bolstered instructions about how to work in order to promote equality. If Sweden is *to be an eminent science- and research nation, a more equal university is required*<sup>14</sup>. *Your network should not determine if you become professor or receive funding*<sup>15</sup>, but your competence and the quality of your research" (Hellmark Knutsson, 2017).

Note that most instances of the word "equality" in this translation correspond to the term "jämställdhet," which in Sweden is defined as equal opportunities, rights, and obligations specifically for the two sexes (e.g., *Delegationen för Jämställdhet i Förskolan*, 2004, p. 29). This statement can be summarized as follows. Women and men act on unequal terms and have different career opportunities<sup>1</sup>, because males are favored by internal recruitment<sup>3</sup>, networks<sup>3,15</sup>, and a notion about male genius<sup>2</sup>. Equal opportunities require equal opportunities promotion<sup>5,8</sup>, e.g., increasing the proportion of women amongst newly recruited professors with 9 percentage points over the next 3 years<sup>6</sup>. Institutions shall measure the sex distribution of research funding within each discipline<sup>9</sup>,

and see to that it becomes equal<sup>10,13</sup>. Women have higher demands with regard to career paths, as follows from the proposition that women shy away from unattractive or unclear paths in greater proportions than do men<sup>11</sup>. Finally, the present lack of open competition favors men<sup>12</sup>, and more equal numbers of professors of each sex will improve science and research<sup>4,14</sup>.

There are thus five main, distinct themes: (1) women on the highest academic level are in general at least equally able as men, because it is stated that the proportions would be equal<sup>7</sup> in the absence of bias favoring men<sup>2,3,15</sup>. That a higher proportion of women would increase the overall ability of academia further implies that women are more able than men<sup>4,8,14</sup>. Furthermore, (2) less able men are currently being recruited as professors over at least equally able women<sup>2,3,15</sup>. This follows logically from the fact that only about 35% of newly recruited professors are women, although they are stated to be at least equally able. Because of (1) and (2), several measures shall be applied to (3) increase the proportion of female professors and receivers of research grants to 50%. These measures constitute quotas by definition, because the goal as well as the level of increase are specified in magnitude<sup>6,7</sup> and in time<sup>6</sup>, although the term quota is not used in the statement. This is less explicit for research funding, although the overall impression points in the same direction: Funding should be subject to equal opportunities promotion<sup>8</sup>, based on monitoring of the sex distribution<sup>9</sup>, and should be countered if skewed<sup>10</sup>. Fourthly, women have (4) higher demands with regard to career paths<sup>11</sup>. There is also an intimation (5) that a larger proportion of women would increase the quality<sup>4</sup> and eminence<sup>14</sup> of research in Sweden, although it is not clear if the reason for this is the higher contributions of women *per se*, or that curbing male chauvinism and favoritism<sup>2,3</sup> will halt the selection of less able men.

The most recent attempt to legislate quotas for company boards of directors was turned down by the counsel's office for public administration on January 18th 2017. The statement in question was a 68-page *promemoria* with concrete changes and additions to the law, issued by the Department of Justice. Under the heading "general pre-requisites," it offers 583 words of motivation for the proposed law:

"The Cabinet wields a policy whose purpose is to *combat stunting gender norms and structures*<sup>16</sup>. *Women and men shall have equal possibilities to form their lives and reach positions of power and influence*<sup>17</sup>. That is *not how it is today*<sup>18</sup>. The boards of directors of leading Swedish companies have historically had a very low proportion of women. The *explanation cannot be that women lack the qualifications to partake in such contexts*<sup>19</sup>. *Women have because of their sex been cut out from the economic decision-making, and from one power-base in society*<sup>20</sup>. Important decisions regarding, for example, commercial and industrial life, employment, consumers, and the environment have therefore been made by men. An important goal for the Cabinet's sex-equality politics is to break off the male predominance on the leading positions in Swedish industrial life. It is furthermore in the *interest of the companies to take advantage of the competence that women have*<sup>21</sup>. Sex-equal decision-making gives companies a *diversity that can increase their competitiveness*<sup>22</sup>

[51 words about the current proportion women in company boards of directors, which is 32%]. This is however still far from the Cabinet's goal. Furthermore, one cannot only consider the composition of the boards. *Equality amongst other leading positions must also be aimed for*<sup>23</sup>. There is still much to be done. Of the listed companies' CEOs are less than 6 percent women. Amongst chairpersons of company boards was in 2014 the proportion women 5% and the proportion men 95%. The question regarding the sex distribution amongst the company board members has been in focus for a long time. Several cabinets have left it to the companies themselves to manage the skewed sex distribution. *It is however just that the Government intervenes with regulations, if the companies fail to exhibit sufficient results*<sup>24</sup>. The Cabinet's actions have indeed led to improvements. The Cabinet has, to push the development, set the minimum proportion of the underrepresented sex to at least 40% amongst the listed companies' board members in the spring of 2016<sup>25</sup>. The Cabinet has stated that a legislative proposal to achieve an even sex distribution will be laid out if the goal is not reached on time. [192 words about the history of this proposal, its scope, and implementation]" (Justitiedepartementet, 2016, September 9, pp. 13–14).

The main themes in this quote are similar to those in the case of quotas for professorships and research funding. Using the same numbering as before, (1) women in the business world are more able than is reflected by their numbers. This follows from the statement that the current low proportion fails to take advantage of their ability<sup>21</sup>. As in the previous statement, (2) less able men are currently being recruited over more able women as board members, as implied by the propositions that women have less possibilities to reach positions of power and influence<sup>17,18</sup>, in spite of being able to meet the required qualifications<sup>19</sup>. Finally, (3) at least 40% of each sex shall be reached<sup>25</sup>. Again, such a demand constitutes a quota by definition, but is considered to be justified if the companies have failed to reach this goal themselves<sup>24</sup>. A few differences from the professor case can be noted. Women are not explicitly said to be more or equally able, only underrepresented. Rather, it seems to be implied that women can develop sufficient ability<sup>19</sup>. There was no mention of (4) higher demands from women, but women confer unique, sex-specific ability<sup>21</sup> that might boost competitiveness<sup>22</sup> supposedly through increased diversity, which is consistent with (5).

The third statement is the most recent parliamentary bill from 2013, a successor to the seminal bill about company board of director quotas from 2006. The whole statement is 2,313 words and contains a lot of detail about political turns that is omitted.

*Sex equality is about freedom. People's opportunities to live their lives shall not be limited by sex or gender identity*<sup>6</sup>. A modern and radical gender equality policy focuses on both men's and women's equal opportunities<sup>27</sup> in the labor market and when it comes to responsibility for home and family<sup>28</sup>.

*Equal salaries and economic independence is a prerequisite for achieving increased sex equality*<sup>29</sup>. Representation is also of importance<sup>30</sup>, not least as companies loses competence because of the biased composition<sup>31</sup> in boards and directorates.

For more than 15 years we have debated how to reach a more even balance between the sexes in the boards of directors, in the public sector as well as in private companies. [95 words about a proposal from 2006 about a quota for a minimum 40% of each sex to be effective from 2010, but which was not passed on to the parliament for voting]. The Cabinet has instead chosen to *educate women* [name of the education]<sup>32</sup>. But it is rather the nominating committees that need education to learn to wear their gender glasses when recruiting<sup>33</sup>. [37 words with details about ministers' actions] *Quotas favoring men are, of course, still covertly exercised for company boards of directors*<sup>34</sup> [287 words with further details about ministers' actions, and a quote from the counsel's office for public administration].

The non-socialist parties consider it an issue for the owners and that is true, but change does not happen by itself<sup>35</sup>. Politics must therefore take responsibility. *It will take 70 years to reach 40 percent women* in the boards of private companies, at the current rate<sup>36</sup>. Moreover are the owners also often taxpayers *who want companies and boards to work efficiently*<sup>37</sup>.

Non-socialist debaters have long resisted a law about quotas, arguing that *those selected by quotas risk being challenged*<sup>38</sup>. That argument does not hold water<sup>39</sup>, and more people realize that *quotas is an effective method*<sup>40</sup>. For us, quotas is no political goal in itself, but could be a means to reach a goal<sup>41</sup>. We wish it were not needed but when the years pass by and nothing happens we cannot just "wait and see," which seems to be the political stance taken by the current government on this issue, as for so many other issues.

*There is a dearth of women in listed companies, although more women than men attain an academic degree*<sup>42</sup>. [469 words about the sex and age distribution across different types of companies, institutions, and countries] These figures convey a clear message: *the business world equals competence with being a man*<sup>43</sup> [55 words about how many CEOs and chairpersons in listed companies were women in 1999 and 2008].

We in the Green party are convinced that *more women in top positions in companies will improve the conditions for recruiting more women and for equal salaries and conditions in working life*<sup>44</sup>. The political parties have adopted the Green party's alternate lists [of men and women], but that is not enough. That only every fifth board member in public service companies is female shows clearly that more needs to be done [that figure was 47% in 2013 and 48% in central governmental boards and advisory councils (2012), 31% in limited companies (2011), and 24% in listed companies (2013) (Statistics Sweden, 2014, pp. 96–100)]. The Green party is a feminist party. Sex equality issues were central when we formed. We introduced the equal spokesperson-system, sex-alternated lists, and quotas for internal assignments. It was ground-breaking in its day to recognize women's equal right to influence<sup>45</sup>. Political tools are required to counter *the gender-power order. That is the root to how women as a group are subordinate to men as a group in influence and resources*<sup>46</sup>, but also to that both men and women become stuck in traditional sex roles that limit the freedom of the individual<sup>47</sup>.

With their old methods, with *men recruiting men*<sup>48</sup>, the company managements misses *valuable competence*<sup>49</sup>. With even sex distribution in company management, that is, both boards of directors, directorates, and chief executives, the opportunity increases to *widen the companies' base of experience and thereby potential to increase the market*<sup>50</sup>.

But the companies seem unable to break the male dominance on their own, although most nomination committees should

realize the advantages<sup>51</sup>. Several investigations show that uniformity in management and boards is bad business. The Finnish Eva-report showed in the fall of 2009 that *companies with a female CEO are approximately 10% more profitable*<sup>52</sup>. This is in line with earlier reports from American research institutes which concluded that, from an investigation of 353 companies, *those with the highest proportion women in management had 35% higher revenue on common equity*<sup>53</sup>, compared to companies with less equality.

[142 words about the differences between Finland, Denmark, Norway, and Sweden in their sex proportions in private and public boards and the related legislation].

Political will is needed to attain a more even sex balance in companies, committees, and boards of directors<sup>54</sup>. The covert male quota that currently takes place needs to be drawn into the light<sup>55</sup>. [149 words with repetition and technical detail regarding why the government bill is split into three separate proposals, and 411 words about a quota proposal from the European commission, and that the then Cabinet was opposed to it].

Sex equality is the great democracy issue of our time. That women in general have worse [sic] economic power and are worse [sic] represented amongst chief executives, in company boards of directors, and directorates is not only an issue for a handful of people who own companies, nor for certain people in political management. Sweden should learn from all the countries that have already implemented regulations. The parliament should therefore demand the Cabinet to submit a proposal for legislation about quotas for boards of directors (Ericson et al., 2013)."

The same three main themes are repeated: (1) women are more able than is reflected by their numbers, as implied by the proposition that companies are unable<sup>51</sup> to reap the benefits of having women as CEOs<sup>52</sup> and in their managements<sup>31,37,53</sup>, (2) less able men are currently being recruited over at least equally able women through the application of covert quotas<sup>33,55</sup>, in the guise of male chauvinism<sup>43,46,48</sup>, and (3) quotas is the cure. As in the *promemoria*, (5) women are different from men in a positive and profitable sense<sup>37,52,53</sup>, even to the extent of increasing the market on which companies operate<sup>50</sup>. It should be noted that no other means than quotas are considered to reach the goals<sup>41</sup>, so one must conclude that quotas is the only conceivable instrument of political will<sup>54</sup> to increase the proportion of women.

Several new ideas appear in addition to those hitherto compiled. The increase of women in domains with initially small proportions seems to be conceived as a (6) linear process<sup>36</sup> set on a track to reach 50%, whose rate is either decreased by resistance to change<sup>30,35</sup> or chauvinism<sup>30,43,46,48,49,54</sup> and "patriarchal structures"<sup>47</sup>, or increased by political<sup>53</sup> or progressive forces<sup>37</sup>. Another new idea is that (7) a higher level of education and a lower level of participation in business for one group reflects discrimination<sup>42</sup>. Also raised is (8) the concern that individuals selected based on quotas may be challenged<sup>38</sup>, which is, however, dismissed without any argument<sup>39</sup>. The authors conceivably suggest that (9) a larger proportion of one sex tends to amplify further still, because they state that artificially boosting the numbers<sup>41</sup> will set them on a course to increase naturally<sup>44</sup>. Yet, they express dissatisfaction with the extent to which women harness their nowadays formally equal rights and possibilities, as they (10) focus on women's

equal right to influence<sup>45</sup>, rather than the classical definition of equality, which is equal opportunities to assume positions of influence. The proposition that the nominating committees should "need education to learn to wear their gender glasses when recruiting"<sup>33</sup> seems to imply that the authors reject the idea of educating women for a future role in a company board of directors<sup>32</sup>. However, it illustrates an inherent problem with biased selection and treatment. Glasses distort the trajectory of light to compensate for a distortion within the eye, but this has to be done to exactly the same amount as the aberration to restore focus, as everyone in need of glasses knows. Likewise, the magnitude of the suggested sex discrimination has to be known exactly in order to deploy a compensatory level of biased selection or treatment, unless there is some rational yardstick, such as the ability to perform the work one is selected to do.

Analysis of the subsequent three statements in the list (**Appendix 1**) revealed no additional themes, and none of statements 4–12 are therefore included in the results section.

## DISCUSSION

The emergent themes have been categorized and numbered from 1 to 10: Women are (1) at least as able as men, but (2) less able men are currently being recruited over more able women, and (3) quotas shall be applied to adjust the proportion to the target value within 40–60 percent. Furthermore, (4) women have higher demands in terms of career paths, and are also (5) different from men in ways that leads to higher performance in organizations, in terms of quality, eminence, and profitability. The outcome in terms of sex proportions is (6) described as an attractor set at 50 percent, any deviation from which is attributed to oppression. Across groups, there (7) should be an association between merits at different levels, specifically that the level of education amongst women should be reflected in their level of participation in business leadership. There is (8) no risk that an individual's ability might be challenged if that individual has been selected by quotas, (9) increasing the proportion of women by means of quotas will in itself lead to further increase, and the ultimate goal is (10) that women have equal influence, rather than just equal opportunities to have influence. Before analysing these arguments further, some limitations and constraints should be considered.

First, verbal data do not necessarily reflect what the people talking or writing actually think or believe. As any other form of behavior, it might constitute posturing, deceit, and a range of more or less conscious intentions to achieve a certain effect, such as changing the receiver's opinions or appearing to be a virtuous person. This is all the more likely with political discourse and with public debate, in contrast to personal conversations between individuals. Given that the present data are end-products that have been vetted by many individuals, they are nevertheless representative of the way that these individuals and the institutions they represent choose to present themselves and argue for their position. These complications may be considered in the analysis, as for example attempting to identify arguments that feed into some cultural norm or conflict.

Second, this kind of thematic analysis goes beyond what is explicitly covered in the statements. Although a common and established approach (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005; Mayring, 2014), the results of discourse analysis approaches are not necessarily consistent with what respondents would report if asked directly (Bailey, 1998). There may be several different reasons for this discrepancy but when it cannot be addressed through follow-up interviews, for example, we do not know. It could be that respondents are unaware about their models of reality, that they consciously withhold their model for tactical reasons, or that they refuse to admit to certain beliefs due to social desirability. The results are nevertheless legitimate, for the reasons argued above.

Third, the entire population of statements has not been sampled, with or without applying certain inclusion and exclusion criteria, but to do so is not relevant for the present study. Its purpose is to analyse the structure of typical arguments, not to describe the frequency or distribution of various arguments. As such, it is a substantial strength that these issues are on the political agenda, as their authority is readily quantified by their place in a hierarchical structure defined by executive power. The current data selection procedure therefore asserts a high level of representativeness with respect to the target population, that is, the political elite.

The rest of the discussion is organized according to the emergent themes, followed by a review of historical policy statements that may explain some of the inconsistencies in the structure of the arguments.

The arguments that women are (1) at least equally able as men and that (2) less able men are selected are inconsistent. If women are at least equally able, and ability is relevant for selection and success in fulfilling the demands of the position, then they would be selected in at least equal numbers if selection is meritocratic<sup>ii</sup>. Meritocratic selection is in the interest of the organizations, in order to have the most able staff. Nevertheless, it is suggested that women are discriminated against in both academia and business. However, inasmuch as companies with a larger proportion of women do better, as argued by both Justitiedepartementet (2016) and Ericson et al. (2013), they will thrive and thus employ even more women, whereas companies with a smaller proportion of women will do worse, and eventually shrink or go out of business. In this light, executives, boards, and shareholders would, long before disaster is inevitable, see to it that more women are hired, as profitability is the central factor leading to success or failure for companies. Thus, (2) cannot be true if (1) is correct, given the powers of meritocracy and commercial self-interest. When those who suggest that meritocratic assessment is not working properly propose quotas rather than improving meritocratic assessment to increase the proportion of women, they act as if they believe that women are currently in fact less able.

<sup>ii</sup>“meritocratic” was originally coined as a term of derision rather than a neutrally descriptive term. According to Chambers Concise Twentieth Century Dictionary, meritocratic is “possessing merit or desert: deserving of reward, honour, or praise” and meritocracy is “(government by) the class of persons who are in prominent positions because of their ability”.

The argument that (2) less able men are currently being recruited over more able women require two conditions to be fulfilled: meritocratic assessment is poor and men are preferred. If men were generally preferred, meritocratic assessment would still select the more or equally able women. If meritocratic assessment were poor and there were no sex preference, the most able individuals would not be selected, but there would be no systematic sex bias. Improving meritocratic assessment would therefore both reduce any possible sex bias and improve ability-based selection generally, leading to more productive and effective organizations. As mentioned, the statements do not propose any measures for improving the selection process, but propose measures that favor the selection of women (3). Specifically, they argue for biased selection<sup>54</sup>, biased promotion<sup>13</sup>, biased treatment and work conditions tailored for women<sup>9,10,11</sup>, and quotas<sup>25,40,41</sup>, in the guise of compelling quantitative goals<sup>5,6,7,8,13,10,14,23</sup>. While these measures would increase the proportion of women, they would not increase the overall ability, unless women are in fact already more able overall. No direct claim to this effect has been made. Rather, the propositions in support of the argument that less able men are currently being recruited over more able women are all indirect, through the implication that an unequal sex ratio *per se* indicates foul play. These propositions are condensed with the original numbering below. For example, that “three out of four professors are still men” shows that women and men do not “act on equal terms and have the same career opportunities<sup>1</sup>, according to Hellmark Knutsson (2017). Similarly, she asserts that “notions about the male genius [has] trumped competence<sup>2</sup>, ... [that] internal recruitment and networks played a greater role than hard work<sup>3</sup>, ... academia has too long been too good at recruiting its sons<sup>12</sup>. It is further argued that women and men “shall have equal possibilities to form their lives and reach positions of power and influence<sup>17</sup>... is not how it is today<sup>18</sup>, ... the “business world equals competence with being a man<sup>43</sup>, [and] the gender-power order... is the source of how women as a group are subordinate to men as a group in influence and resources<sup>46</sup>. Finally, men are “recruiting men<sup>48</sup>... [and the] covert male quota that currently takes place needs to be drawn into the light<sup>55</sup>.” By the same standard, males are oppressed or discriminated against according to the fact that 90% of veterinarians, 65% of school principals and chief executives in the public sector, 63% of university graduates, and 57% of newly graduated physicians are female (all figures from Statistics Sweden, 2014).

I exclude the argument (4) that women have higher demands, because it was only mentioned once, and does not tie into the discussion of ability.

The argument (5) that an increased proportion of women amongst professors and company managements would increase the overall ability of academia<sup>4,8,14</sup> and the business world<sup>21,31,37,51,52,53</sup> requires that women have higher ability. This follows from the fact that to increase the overall ability, those (men) who are replaced must have lower ability. However, most propositions argue that women are (1) at least as able as men, but not more able. Equal ability is also implied by propositions to the effect that the sex ratio would be equal<sup>7</sup> in the absence of bias favoring men<sup>2,3,5,15</sup>. Therefore, these main

propositions are internally inconsistent with regards to the argument that a larger proportion of women would increase quality and performance. A few propositions<sup>4,14,21,22,37,50,52,53</sup> do however state or imply that women are more able or confer advantages. Thus, both sex differences<sup>11,14,21,22,42,49,51,52,53</sup> and the lack of sex differences<sup>7,9,10,19,8</sup> are wielded as arguments for quotas. This is inconsistent in two ways. First, it would seem that the sexes cannot be, at the same time, both different and similar. Second, it would seem that if one argues that being equal justifies quotas, then being different cannot also be brought to justify quotas. The exception would be if different types of arguments were raised, for example that certain traits or properties were argued to justify quotas because they differ between the sexes, and other traits were argued to justify quotas because they do not differ between the sexes, but no such distinction is made in these statements. Moreover, stating only advantages of selecting women<sup>21,22,37,49,50,51,52,53</sup> but not of selecting men appears to constitute a sex bias: If the sexes do differ, it seems unlikely that any dimension on which this is the case would unanimously confer advantages to one sex but not the other. Surely, any behavioral tendency that is useful in one situation may be a liability in another situation, and therefore it cannot be correct that any given difference is unanimously advantageous.

Another problem is that essential underlying assumptions are not made explicit, which is particularly pertinent for the theme that (6) a sex ratio of 1.0 (50%) constitutes an attractor across various environmental conditions. First, in the absence of any other factors, the current proportion in a certain position depends on the base rate in the sector or in the lower level from which selection to this position is made. If the proportion of eligible women is 35%, for example, equal ability of the sexes on the group level should result in 35% in the selected position. However, that would still be outside the stated goal of 40–60% (3). Second, the relevant individual properties may not scale equally for men and women across levels of ability. Thus, the theme (7) that the higher level of education amongst women should be reflected in their proportion in the higher echelons of business and academia rests on the assumption that education and its underlying psychological traits are the only relevant factors for occupational success. The Norwegian law from 2006 that forced listed companies to have at least 40 percent women on their boards of directors constitutes a natural experiment that tests this proposition. It is almost identical to the one proposed in the Government bill above. According to Kristina Jullum Hagen at Naeringslivets Hovedorganisation, the Norwegian confederation of employers, evaluations of the reform are overwhelmingly critical: “The expectation was that the effects would spill over to the rest of the companies and thereby increase the proportion women at large, which did not happen. Quotas do not lead to increased equality in the business world ... I share the opinion that equality in business life is desirable, but I do not see that quotas is the way to go. The law has produced 900 female board members, but has not been able to change the underlying structures. This shows that quotas do not constitute a quick-fix for equality” (Svenskt Näringsliv, 2016). Thus, the idea (6) that sex-equal outcomes constitutes an attractor or natural law has failed to play out across 10 years, when given the opportunity.

Nearing the end of the list of themes, female professionals feel that being selected by quotas bereaves them of their legitimacy and the recognition of their own achievements (Kakabadse et al., 2015), in contrast to (8) dismissing the possibility that it might jeopardize their perceived ability. Rather, group favoritism in the guise of quotas or other forms of biased selection and treatment has been reported to create tension and foster resentment (see, e.g., Faniko et al., 2017) and be perceived as unfair (Holli et al., 2006; Holli, 2011).

Another argument leveled for quotas is that (9) changing the sex ratio has significant dynamic effects, such that, for example, increasing the proportion by force (i.e., quotas) will in itself lead to further increase. The assumption underlying this theme seems to be that social factors are the ultimate determinants of behavior, in the guise of norms, identity, role models, and the like. Individuals are thought to mimic other individuals belonging to the group they identify with, and to avoid behaviors associated with other groups, which might be called a role model effect. According to official government statements, the mere presence of women in high positions within an organization is believed to convince other women that it is possible and appropriate to assume such a position oneself (Delegationen för Jämställdhet i Högskolan, 2009; e.g., Delegationen för Jämställdhet i Högskolan, 2009, p. 13). According to this model, both men and women should shy away from jobs with few of their own sex, but be attracted to jobs with many of their own sex, because they are assumed to want to adhere to the “norm” (Delegationen för Jämställdhet i Förskolan, 2006). We can thus see how such a social model of sex and group differences may favor quotas, even though it might constitute selecting less able individuals and hence attenuating quality. These models predict that (9) actually changing the composition of people from different groups is a powerful way to make such a change happen, because individual behavior is seen to be determined by the behavior of large shares of the population in a society. This would also explain the affinity to the idea (10) that women shall have equal influence, rather than just equal opportunities to have influence, because the role model effect implies that actual influence leads to ability, but ability does not lead to influence (if there is discrimination). Consequently, the quality of the organization will eventually recover as the formerly less able group develops its ability as a response to the new norm.

Given the internal inconsistencies demonstrated above, one may ask if any other motive than increasing quality and productivity might better fit the structure of the arguments. To this end, policy statements from the Swedish government and its institutions, such as the department of education, may be informative. It turns out that the dominating view of sex equality expressed in these statements is formulated in terms of outcomes rather than opportunities: “One aspect of sex equality can be described in purely numerical terms, and concerns the sex distribution amongst PhD students, teachers, and researchers”<sup>iii</sup> (Utbildningsdepartementet, 1994, p. 26). Likewise, “[q]uantitative equality constitutes an even

<sup>iii</sup>En aspekt på jämställdhetsfrågan låter sig beskrivas i rent numerära termer och gäller könsfördelningen bland forskarstuderande, lärare och forskare.



distribution between men and women within all areas in society, for example within various educations, professions, leisure activities, and positions of power.”<sup>iv</sup> (Statistics Sweden, 2016, p. 2, my translation), consistent with the current goal that the sex ratio specifically amongst professors in academia be no greater than 40/60% (Delegationen för Jämställdhet i Högskolan, 2009, p. 5; Delegationen för Jämställdhet i Högskolan, 2011, p. 166).

Turning to the means to this end, a large number of actions had been taken to increase the number of women at higher levels of academia already in 2004: “...accounting responsibility for research officers, course elements about sex equality, sex equality centers, a special vice chancellor council, positive action, directed resources for leadership development and ability development, interventions for thesis advisors, conscious recruitment, career development programs, directed educational programs, focus on management consciousness, extra resources for women to do research after their PhD, mentor programs, promoted parental leave, widening of fields of study when recruiting, and new merit evaluation instruments”<sup>v</sup> (Utbildningsdepartementet, 2004, p. 250). A total of about 950 state funded projects for increasing sex equality within academia are reported to have taken place between 1985 and 1994 (Utbildningsdepartementet, 1994, p. 26), but I have not been able to find any figure total of how many have taken place in the 23 years since then.

Yet, these 950 projects and the ensuing pressure put on academic staff, administrators, and leadership have not been sufficient, as “...the rate of increase is slow, and in 2003 were still 85 percent of professors men and only 15% women. The leveling that has now been started must accelerate... [which] will demand further efforts and a more active work on the part of the universities. This could take the form of special efforts like identifying female candidates for various positions and consider if they can be advertised within areas where there are able female applicants. It is also a matter of appearing as an attractive work environment for students and doctoral students, with equal opportunities for career development for women and men. Transparency and clarity in processes for acceptance and employment is important ... [which] must be designed with an awareness that women at every career stage tend to have had poorer opportunities to advance than men. An increased awareness about women's preconditions and opportunities for conducting research on the same conditions as men is fundamental for formulating

effective equality strategies”<sup>vi</sup>. (Utbildningsdepartementet, 1994, p. 123). No empirical support is given for these claims, such as “women at every career stage tend to have had poorer opportunities to advance.” As a countermeasure to this, the authorities “...shall demonstrate that they can perform sex neutral evaluations, and in the case of otherwise equivalent applications prioritize the underrepresented sex. The Cabinet further expects that the authorities investigate and strike at the causes if the sex distribution amongst the applications is skewed in relation to the general distribution within a discipline”<sup>vii</sup> (Utbildningsdepartementet, 2004, p. 46). In the context of a special effort to establish additional positions as professors, the Cabinet furthermore prioritized women by choosing disciplines and fields of study while “...considering that there are qualified prospective applicants who belong to the underrepresented sex” and mandating that if required and possible, a position may be filled with a “competent applicant of the underrepresented sex, even if she is less qualified than a co-applicant of the other sex”<sup>viii</sup> (Utbildningsdepartementet, 1994, p. 36).

Thus, these official steering documents prescribe both *biased treatment* and *biased selection*, as well as their application even if the favored group is in fact less able. But why would those politically responsible for academic or commercial and industrial life sacrifice ability for sex equality in outcomes? One explanation is implied by the view that influential positions constitute an opportunity for exercising power on behalf of the group that an individual is attributed to: “The cabinet's actions to increase the number of female professors shall be seen against the background of the professor's role as a model for students and younger researchers, as well as a teacher and researcher. Through their position they have great impact on education, choice of research areas, problem formulation, choice of methods, etc. Professors also have great influence outside their own institution, for example as members of funding

<sup>iv</sup>Kvantitativ jämställdhet innebär en jämn fördelning mellan kvinnor och män inom alla områden i samhället, t.ex. inom olika utbildningar, yrken, fritidsaktiviteter och maktpositioner.

<sup>v</sup>Bland åtgärder som nämns är redovisningsansvar för forskningsansvarig, kursmoment med jämställdhetskunskap, jämställdhetscentrum, särskilt rektorsråd, positiv särbehandling, riktade medel till ledarskapsutveckling och kompetensutveckling, insatser för handledare, medveten rekrytering, karriärutvecklingsprogram, särskilt inriktade utbildningsprogram, fokus på medvetenhet hos ledningen, extra resurser för möjligheter för kvinnor att forska vidare efter disputation, mentorsprogram, uppmuntrad föräldradedlighet, breddning av ämnesområden vid rekrytering och nya meritvärderingsinstrument.

<sup>vi</sup>Ökningstakten är dock låg, och ännu 2003 var 85 procent av professorerna män och endast 15 procent kvinnor. Den utjämning som nu påbörjats måste ske i snabbare takt när fler unga forskare anställs. Detta kommer att kräva ytterligare insatser och ett mer aktivt arbete från lärosätenas sida. Det kan handla om särskilda insatser såsom att aktivt identifiera kvinnliga kandidater till olika anställningar och vid utlysning av anställningar pröva om dessa kan utlysas inom de områden där kompetenta kvinnliga sökande finns. Det handlar också om att högskolan för studenter och doktorander måste framstå som en attraktiv arbetsmiljö med lika möjligheter till karriärutveckling för kvinnor och män. Öppenhet och tydlighet i processer för antagning, anställning m.m. är viktiga faktorer i detta sammanhang. Dessa processer måste utformas med en medvetenhet om att kvinnor vid varje karriärsteg har tenderat att ha sämre möjligheter att avancera än män. En ökad medvetenhet om kvinnors förutsättningar och möjligheter att bedriva forskning på samma villkor som män är grundläggande för att kunna formulera verkningfulla jämställdhetsstrategier.

<sup>vii</sup>Myndigheterna skall också ha en bevisad förmåga att prestera könsneutrala bedömningar och vid i övrigt likvärdiga ansökningar prioritera underrepresenterat kön. Regeringen förväntar sig vidare att myndigheterna aktivt undersöker och angriper orsakerna om könsfördelningen bland de sökande är skev i förhållande till könsfördelningen generellt inom ett vetenskapligt område.

<sup>viii</sup>Vid valet av ämnen för de nya professurerna skall även beaktas att det finns kvalificerade presumtiva sökande som tillhör det underrepresenterade könet. .... Vid engångssatsningen bör s.k. positiv särbehandling vid behov tillämpas, när detta kan ske. Med positiv särbehandling avses att en tjänst tillsatts med en kompetent sökande av underrepresenterat kön, även om vederbörande är mindre kvalificerad än motsökande av det andra könet.

bodies. They are also employed as experts and commentators in various contexts.”<sup>ix</sup> (Utbildningsdepartementet, 1994, p. 26). If academia and the business world are perceived as arenas for representative democracy, rather than for expert development of products and knowledge, there is a certain logic to “[t]he sex distribution within different areas and within different levels regarding students as well as staff shall be even”<sup>x</sup> (Utbildningsdepartementet, 2006, p. 5). However, the people who work in these domains are all but representative for the population as a whole, in terms of intelligence, education, income, social capital, and so forth. No argument is provided for why their sex would be of any particular significance as a representativeness criterion, compared to all other possible demographic categories, and given that the cited statements repeatedly emphasize that sex differences are minimal.

Nevertheless, these policy statements clearly convey an ambition to increase the proportion of women, to the effect that women have equal influence rather than merely equal opportunities to have influence. They are thus, in fact, strikingly consistent with the essence of

the propositions that advocate quotas, biased treatment, and biased selection, which is to (10) increase the proportion and influence of women, regardless of negative consequences.

In conclusion, the structure of these arguments reflects a model according to which the proportion and influence of the favored group should be increased although even if it is less able. This is consistent with government policy and steering documents that over a period of more than 30 years express an ambition to achieve equal outcomes rather than equal opportunities. For as much as the present analyses have uncovered logical inconsistencies, omission of critical underlying premises, and ignoring possible negative effects, they demonstrate a substantial bias in the anti-bias business.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

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## APPENDIX 1

The list of all statements in the order they were considered.

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