

Why quotas aren't enough to tackle gender equality

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A holistic approach is needed to achieve gender equality and get more women to the top, according to new research from Nyenrode Business University.

A new gender quota has come into effect in the Netherlands as of this year. Listed companies are required to have at least one-third of their supervisory boards comprised of women.

However according to the research from Assistant Professor Rosalien van 't Foort-Diepeveen, although a quota is necessary, it mainly changes the number of women in business, and does not automatically change attitudes or processes.

Her research shows that there are seven barriers that impede the advancement of women to the corporate top. The most persistent barrier is gender stereotyping. This is when specific traits are often assigned to men, such as dominance and assertiveness, while women are assigned traits such as being kind and helpful. The research shows that this stereotyping negatively affects the assessment of women as good leaders, and consequently, women are less likely to be selected.

Other barriers that women face include devaluation of women, a masculine organizational culture, work-family balance, bias in recruitment and promotion, lack of mentors, role models and networks for women, and the phenomenon of the 'leaky pipeline'. The research shows that the barriers are interrelated and mutually reinforcing. This makes it complicated to overcome them. Therefore, several interventions are needed to make a change.

She investigated both governmental and organizational interventions to remove existing barriers. The study on the organizational interventions that was conducted by four large Dutch companies include a training to eliminate unconscious biases, mentoring programs, (female) development programs, and setting specific diversity targets for the percentage of female leaders.

However, according to Assistant Professor Van 't Foort-Diepeveen "Having only organizational interventions is not enough. When companies themselves develop specific interventions, commitment from the top is a crucial prerequisite for success. The board has to believe in it, act upon it and also has to promote it by measuring, evaluating and communicating it."

"A quota alone is also not enough, the quota in the Netherlands will only apply to women serving on the supervisory boards of listed companies. It affects only a small group. Therefore, the quota should also apply to the management board and to a broader range of companies in order to bring about real change. I hope this creates a flywheel effect."

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