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Sustainable representation of women through gender quotas: A decade's experience in Morocco

Articles by Aili Tripp, Gretchen Bauer, and Jennifer Rosen in this gender and politics series have explored, globally and regionally, the role that gender quotas can play in balancing the number of male and females in legislatives.

My recent article with Drude Dahlerup in the journal *Women's Studies International Forum* focuses specifically on Morocco. Substantial reforms have been made shifting women's position in Morocco in the last decade. In 2002, an informal 'honorary agreement' reserved 30 seats in parliament for women; in 2008, a quota reform for local governments was instigated; in 2003 the Mudawanna Reform led to the enactment of the family law. In 2011, quota provision was passed into law, and the number of reserved seats for women increased from 30 to 60 seats.

In general, through the new constitution, reform, not revolution, has characterized the Moroccan society during and after the 'Arab Spring'. The changes in women's position are part of these reforms, and at the same time strong women's organizations in Morocco have themselves been key actors in the reform process.

The focus of our article was on the adoption and implementation of gender quota provisions in three Moroccan parliamentary elections, 2002, 2007 and 2011. These quotas have been effective in bringing a substantial number of women in to parliament, from 1% in 1997 to today's 17%. Morocco has thus passed the threshold which in old democracies was the most difficult to overcome, that of moving from zero to 10% women ([Dahlerup and Leyenaar, in press](#)).

However, we must still ask: can gender quotas, once introduced, lead to more sustainable

political representation for women?

By introducing the concept of *sustainable representation*, defined as a durable, substantial political representation of women, our article highlights the importance of studying how gender quotas may or may not alter some of the barriers that prevent women's equal participation and representation.

Our study of the nomination and election of women through three subsequent elections in Morocco since the adoption of gender quotas, traces the evolution of the reserved seat system from a controversial and fragile system set by an 'honorary agreement' to an expanded and finally legalized system. Our analysis suggests that the political uprising in the neighboring countries during 2010–11 created a political transitional atmosphere for the reform of the Moroccan constitution, and provided an opportunity for institutionalizing the principle of gender equality in the 2011 constitution.

We also explore the link between the reserved seat system and the election of women in Morocco's general district seats, scrutinizing the widespread supposition in the quota literature that reserved seats tend to block the nomination of women to constituency seats, thus constituting a kind of glass ceiling. Plausibly, we could find that the election of women through quotas might lead to the increase of women in other seats if women are seen to be generally accruing more resource in political life and new perceptions emerge of women as potential political leaders. What do we actually find in Morocco?

Our research shows that the link between reserved seats and women elected to regular seats is rather complex and context dependent to allow for generalizations at this stage of the research on gender quotas. In Rwanda, reserved seats did not prevent women from being elected in large numbers to the district seats, thus resulting in 56% women in parliament ([Powley, 2005](#)). In Morocco, such large increases were not discernable.

The low increase of the number of female candidates elected in district lists from 5 to 7 after three rounds of reservation may indeed not be that surprising. We cannot expect the long history of women's exclusion from political institutions to be transcended in two legislative periods. It will take time for parties to trust the abilities of women leaders, and update their beliefs ([Bouras, 2007](#)). Gains must be institutionalized and widely promoted and accepted in society for their consolidation and longevity to be assured ([Maghraoui, 2001](#)).

The reservation may still have a lasting impact on women's capacities to contribute to politics, as it gives women MPs the possibility to pursue a feminist platform and participate in the public debate on women's issues, which had not been part of the public political discussion before.

In the shorter term, the longevity of women's political representation can be guaranteed by enforcing stronger requirements for women's participation in internal party structures, specific legislative provisions for the number and rank order of women candidates on all electoral lists (as opposed to just the national list), and a minimum percentage of women-headed lists.

In terms of sustainability, we concluded that the quota regulation in Morocco in the form of reserved seats is not in any danger of being removed, on the contrary, it has been legalized and expanded. The quota provision has led to some changes in women's resources and in women's

agency in Morocco. However, the very few women elected to the regular district seats so far indicates that if the reserved seats were to be removed, women's representation would probably decrease, surely not as dramatically as in Egypt after the removal of the previous quota system, but enough to show the limited sustainability of women's political representation even in Morocco.

