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Trócaire is dedicated to empowering women to play an active role in decision-making that affects them. We believe that the absence of women in decision-making structures at all levels of society is a global injustice, and a barrier to the achievement of gender equality.

Trócaire is supportive of gender quotas for political representation. This is one strategy among many required to bring about gender-equal decision-making in politics and society. In some contexts, other strategies may be more effective or more appropriate; it is always important to pursue multiple strategies to bring about change.

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Quotas for women guarantee that women must constitute a certain number or percentage of the members of a body, whether it is a candidate list, a parliamentary assembly, a committee, a government or any other decision-making space.

The quota system places the burden of recruitment not on the individual woman, but on those who control the recruitment or selection process. The core idea behind this system is to recruit women into political positions and to ensure that women are not only a token few in political life.

An increasing number of countries are currently introducing various types of electoral quotas for public elections. In fact, half of the countries of the world today use some type of quota for their parliament (Quota Project, 2013).



### Arguments for Gender Quotas

Quotas for women do not discriminate, but compensate for actual barriers that prevent women from their fair share of the political seats

Quotas imply that there are several women together in a committee or assembly, thus minimizing the stress often experienced by the token women

Quotas can contribute to a process of democratisation by making the nomination process more transparent and formalised

It is in fact the political parties that control the nominations, not primarily the voters who decide who gets elected; therefore quotas are not violations of voters' rights

### Arguments against Gender Quotas

Quotas are against the principle of equal opportunity for all, since women are given preference over men

Introducing quotas creates significant conflicts within the party organisation

Quotas imply that politicians are elected because of their gender, not because of their qualifications and that more qualified candidates are pushed aside



Two women running for office, Katoto DRC.



### Party candidate quotas

Candidate quotas for party lists ensure that women put forward by a party reach a minimum percentage of all candidates (usually between 30% and 50%). The quota is applied at the nomination stage, before elections take place. It does not guarantee the outcome of equal representation in the elected body.

### Reserved Seats

The aim of reserved seats is to guarantee that a certain number or proportion of decision-making spaces are set aside exclusively for women. Reserved seats may be a proportion of existing seats, or they may be additional to existing seats. They can be in place at any level of government.

### Voluntary Vs Compulsory Quotas

In some contexts, political parties themselves choose to implement quotas as a way of ensuring that they strengthen women's representation in their structures. Increasingly though, countries are mandating quotas either through their constitutions or legislation.

In some countries quotas are applied as a temporary measure, that is to say, until the barriers for women's entry into politics are removed, but most countries with quotas have not put a time limit on their use of quotas.

### Sanctions and enforcement

To ensure that parties and electoral authorities meet compulsory quota targets, sanctions can be introduced for non-compliance. These measures and penalties include: fines; rejection of the party list by the public authorities; ineligibility for a party to receive full subsidy entitlement; and disqualification of parties.

### Quotas and International Human Rights Law

The international commitment to ensuring that women can participate in public affairs on an equal basis to men is enshrined in the **UN Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW, 1979)**, in Article 7. The **Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action** gives guidelines on how the provisions of CEDAW can be implemented, under Strategic Objective G on women in power and decision-making. The BPfA commits signatories: "to take measures to ensure women's equal access to and full participation in power structures and decision-making."

The international policy framework for **Women, Peace and Security** provides specific opportunities to use post-conflict transition periods to increase women's political representation. UNSCR 1325 provides for the increased participation and representation of women at all levels of decision-making. This includes through conflict-resolution and peace processes, as well as national, regional and international mechanisms for the prevention, management and resolution of conflict. General Recommendation no. 30 to CEDAW provides for the integration of Women, Peace and Security in the CEDAW process.

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## 1. Quotas alone don't bring about change

"There may be a quota for representation, but there isn't one for participation and influence" (*VSO volunteer, 2013*).

Quotas in and of themselves can only deliver numeric representation. It is necessary to understand how gender inequality functions in each political context, and how elites maintain control of political power, in order to develop strategies to truly increase women's political participation. Quotas can certainly make a positive contribution to such strategies; but on their own they can't be expected to transform gender relations. In fact, excessive expectations of the impact of quotas on their own could backfire.

**India: Panchayats have lots of women, but limited power.** In India, the intervention of the reservation system can actually consolidate existing hierarchies as well as create new problems including, amongst others, the doubling and tripling of women's workloads and new forms of gendered violence (Batliwala, 2007). Furthermore, the Panchayats (representing the lowest levels of decentralised governance) lack any real form of power, as they have very limited autonomy in both funds and functions. Party politics as well as state level and national level politics continue to have enormous influence over the local level, sometimes creating disempowering constraints for elected women representatives (Wrenn, 2011).

Nonetheless – change has happened through the Panchayat system. An evaluation study of 265 Panchayats in West Bengal and Rajasthan found that where leadership roles were reserved for women, the type of public goods provided were more likely to respond to women's priorities. For example, the number of drinking water projects in areas with female-led councils was 62% higher than in those with male-led councils, reflecting the relatively high priority given by women to their need for access to clean water (VSO, 2013).

## 2. Violence can be a barrier to women's political participation and also an outcome

Experiences of violence are often a significant barrier to women's personal empowerment. Gender-based violence reinforces feelings of low self-esteem and fearfulness, making affected women less likely to view themselves as leaders and to seek representative positions.

When women seek election, this can result in new forms of violence. Women in power can be exposed to verbal, physical and even sexual harassment and abuse on the basis of their gender. All of these elements can impact negatively on a person's self-confidence, their effectiveness in office and subsequent willingness to stand for an election.

However, tackling violence can serve as an entry point to empowering women, both individually and collectively, to address issues that concern them.

## 3. Women representatives may face different expectations to men

Quotas draw attention to the exceptional nature of women as political representatives: if women were present in equal numbers to men, there would be no need for quotas. This can result in different and often higher expectations of women. In some cases, women are held to a higher standard of accountability for transparency and non-corruption by their constituents, on the basis that they are meant to represent a new or different way of doing politics. While transparency and non-corruption are essential values, women should be held to the same standards as men.

#### 4. Women already face significant work burdens

While women have a right to be represented, and to be political representatives, many are overloaded with burdens of reproductive, productive and community work before engaging in political decision-making. The doubling and tripling of women's work burden may result in very small numbers of women representatives carrying the expectations of all women. Ultimately, it won't be possible to increase women's political participation without redistributing unpaid care and domestic work.

#### 5. The women's movement is an important factor

Women's movements outside of formal politics have had a significant impact on legislation for women's rights. In a review of 36 countries, women's groups lobbied for an emphasis on domestic violence and equality legislation. This resulted in domestic violence to be perceived as a public problem. Domestic violence and equality legislation were determined more by the size and strength of women's movements than they were by the number of women in parliaments (Weldon, 2002).

Lobbying for gender quotas in the absence of a strong women's movement may result in greater representation of women, but no organised voice for gender

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"I think we need to have a reflection around whether it is appropriate to encourage women to enter a political system which is corrupted/not working/etc..."

"Personally I am not enthusiastic about quotas. In Nicaragua we have a parity law, but the feminist movement and others have criticised the quotas because they don't address the real issues of gender inequality."

"Quotas and reservation systems are absolutely necessary to begin to redress the imbalance that exists in all societies."



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Trócaire implements programmes in the DRC and Sierra Leone which include specific advocacy strategies for legislation and implementation of gender quotas. Both of these programmes work to support women's political empowerment in a range of other ways, including support to women leaders, accompaniment to female electoral candidates, and addressing gender inequality at community level.

- **Don't assume that a quota alone can resolve the exclusion of poor and marginalised women from decision-making.** However, in many cases it can be a very good start. It can open the conversation about the absence of women around the table, while increasing the numeric representation of women provides role models for others to aspire to. It is necessary to work for behaviour change and attitudinal change and to change structures at the same time.

In DRC, all partners use methods and techniques such as workshops, petitions, radio, TV, posters and public events in carrying out their advocacy strategy for parity in decision-making. The Sierra Leone programme also engages with the media, to try to change discriminatory portrayals of women.

- **Use the process of advocating for gender quotas to support women leaders.** This is a perfect opportunity to develop the leadership, advocacy and networking skills of women in civil society. The training, information and guidance that Trócaire provides to an advocacy strategy on gender quotas should have a lasting impact on women's political leadership.

In Sierra Leone, Trócaire partners carry out training, coaching and mentoring for aspiring female political representatives alongside advocacy for a Gender Equality Bill. In DRC, where decentralisation has stalled for many years,

partners lobby local government authorities to ensure that open positions are filled by women leaders, who gain administrative and leadership experience. These are long-term strategies intended to form the candidates who will go on to deliver gender equality in decision-making if quotas legislation is enacted.

- **Build broad constituencies: work with champions...** In both Sierra Leone and DRC, advocacy strategies rely on gender champions who are also elected representatives. Allies among MPs are necessary to get decisions through parliament. In both countries, partners have found such allies in women parliamentarians who are passionate about the cause of gender quotas.
- **... and develop new champions** In DRC, the national Catholic Commission on Justice and Peace is a part of the gender quota advocacy coalition. The Church is not a typical advocate for this cause, but it is a powerful one, and it brings the message to groups of people who would never otherwise hear it.
- **Use international declarations and human rights law to strengthen your arguments.** Women's political participation is named in numerous declarations as a political priority. Use existing commitments to "name and shame" your government into action. Relevant opportunities include CEDAW reviews; Universal Periodic Review (UPR) hearings; the upcoming review of the Beijing Declaration; discussions of Women Peace and Security including development of and reporting on National Action Plans where they exist. For example, Trócaire supported a submission to the UPR of the DRC focusing exclusively on women's rights with three angles; GBV, the parity law and women's peace-building.