

# The West Australian

## Quotas correct imbalances

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**G**ender equality in business should be a matter of whoever is best for the job, but far too many women are being overlooked for leadership positions due to the inherent biases stacked against women.

We have only to look at the recently released gender pay gap data to see that even with equal qualifications and productive output, women are being undervalued time and time again.

The truth is women have learnt to keep their heads down for fear of getting painted as “bossy” or “domineering”. Meanwhile, their male counterparts are celebrated as being “decisive” and “assertive”. For behaving in exactly the same way.

A combination of domestic inequality, sexism, and bias against women in leadership positions is creating a toxic environment where women don't feel worthy of putting themselves forward and thus don't even bother trying.

One study comparing identically qualified men and women found that women were “assigned significantly more negative attributes”; well-liked female leaders were most often described as “compassionate” while unpopular female leaders were most often labelled as “inept”.

More than 10 years on from Julia Gillard's blistering speech on misogyny, we are yet to make significant progress in how we describe female leaders.

At the time, Australia's first female prime minister's political ambition was perceived as “unseemly and unduly brutal for a woman”, and though she confronted the barrage of sexist attacks from her critics head on, her time in the top job was short-lived.

Likewise for Gillard's counterparts in the corporate world who have similarly short-lived tenures as leaders.

According to a 2022 analysis of 3000 companies, female CEOs tend to stick around for 6.6 years on average compared with 9.9 years for male CEOs.

Today only one in five CEOs in Australia is a woman.

Despite efforts to boost female representation, the numbers have been slow to change.

At the current rate of progress, independent think tank OMFIF estimates it will take 140 years to achieve gender parity.

Studies show that women are prone to being more modest than men in assessments of their own abilities.

They tend to apply for jobs where they are extremely overqualified and routinely underestimate their own abilities.

Companies looking for qualified leaders end up missing out on suitable candidates due to women's reluctance at being seen as “arrogant” or otherwise too big for their boots — and for good reason.

In one study researchers found that women who self-promote during job interviews are evaluated more negatively and liked less than those who don't. Whether they choose to highlight their

achievements or not, it's clear women can't win in this game.

On the domestic front, women in full-time jobs do more unpaid work than men. Women take the lion's share of domestic labour from child care to house cleaning averaging 21 hours of more unpaid work than men per week. And while mothers suffer from career stagnation when they re-enter the workforce, fathers suffer no such penalty. What the

conversation about gender quotas fails to address is that women are the ones picking up the slack at home for their male partners, doing as much as 72 per cent of unpaid work in Australia and sacrificing their own career progression along the way.

In 2005 Norway became the first country in the world to introduce a mandatory 40 per cent gender quota on boards of listed companies. Though there was significant opposition to the proposal at first, the quota, which was put forward by a conservative government, has been instrumental in securing equal representation for women with no adverse consequences for companies.

Not long after Iceland followed suit with mandatory gender quotas. This has not adversely affected company performance but has improved gender diversity in companies. Since then more than 130 countries have modified their rules to include a gender quota for women. The result? Women's political participation jumped from 11 per cent to 21 per cent between 1995 and 2012.

In the corporate world, gender quotas have spurred companies to achieve greater heights of success. Not only is

there overwhelming evidence that women in leadership improves return on investment, return on sales and stock price growth, McKinsey & Co found that companies with gender diverse executive teams were 21 per cent more likely to experience higher than average returns. One would have to question why it is that McKinsey itself, while advocating for its clients to up the ante, themselves have a median gap of 38 per cent.

One of the greatest trends of the modern consumer market is that consumers want to see themselves represented in businesses.

Consumers expect and value diversity, they reward businesses which pursue it, and punish or ignore those that don't.

In Australia research from Mastercard shows that 55 per cent of consumers are more likely to spend money with businesses that promote diversity over those that don't.

As women strive to smash the glass ceiling, companies must do their part to dismantle the barriers holding capable and worthy women back from achieving their full potential.

They must keep in mind that gender quotas are a powerful way to fight back against bias and give women the confidence they need to put their hand up for leadership roles, allowing for greater flexibility within the workplace, such as parental leave, benefiting both mums and dads along the way.

Gender quotas aren't just about filling positions with women, they're about correcting a legacy of imbalance and ensuring that our future is shaped by a more diverse range of decision-makers.

By embracing quotas, we make gender equality a lived reality for the endless numbers of talented women who would

otherwise be deprived of the same opportunities as men. And that's a future worth fighting for.

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