

Does Gender Matter for Academic Promotion: Evidence from a Randomized Natural Experiment

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Women have historically been under-represented in top academic positions. Moreover, whereas the number of women undertaking PhD studies has increased steadily, the pipeline seems to be leaky at the top. For instance, in Spain, the presence of women among PhD graduates has grown from 36% to 49% over the last twenty years. During the same period, the incidence of women among faculty has increased from 30% to 39% among associate professors, but only from 11% to 18% among full professors. The picture is qualitatively similar in the US and the rest of Europe.

Do women may face discrimination in promotions to top positions by the (mostly male) committees? There is a lack of studies analyzing promotion to top positions, and this study intends to close this gap in the literature. Between 2002 and 2006 in Spain all academic promotions were decided through nation-wide competitions. The existence of a system of random assignment of evaluators to committees makes it possible to consistently estimate the effect of the gender composition of committees.

Results suggest that the gender composition of committees strongly affects the chances of success of candidates applying to full professor positions. For a committee with seven members, each additional female evaluator increases the chances of success of female applicants by 14%. When evaluators decide on promotions to associate professor positions, no significant interaction between the gender of evaluators and the gender of candidates could be observed.

Conditional on the research production of candidates, female applicants to full professor positions have lower probability of success relative to male candidates when assigned to an all-male committee. In committees including at least one woman, we do not observe significant gender differences in success rates. The evidence might reflect the existence of ambivalent sexism, arising when men's attitudes toward female candidates depend on the position at stake.

Valentina Fava, Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies

Valentina Fava worked on PRAGES Practicing Gender Equality in Academia (an FP7 project) with Prof. Giulia Calvi of the European University Institute. The project aims at collecting, classifying and evaluating what is good practice with respect to non-discrimination.

They sampled a thousand institutes with a semi-structured questionnaire and created a database with a description and short assessment of 109 programmes. The imposition of quotas are but one anti-discriminatory measure. Other types of intervention include:

- creating a friendly environment for women promoting early career development;
- gender awareness to overcome stereotypes;
- promotion of women's leadership.

She thinks that quotas on committees are not always the best solution, also because given the relatively limited number of women sitting on these committees in certain disciplines, they might develop a one-sided approach. There might be different practices that are more effective than quotas.

And PRAGES is particularly keen to point out that early careers are the most problematic stage for women; the stereotypes that women are better or worse in certain disciplines are very persistent.

Matthias Moschel, Researcher at the European University Institute

Matthias Moschel thinks that the idea of a pipeline, which is leaking at the top, is very apt and that it was used before as the image of a track. Since academics run very different races to arrive at the top, the importance is to fix the track and eliminate the obstacles on parts of this 'track'.

The problem with committee quotas is that they are only procedural and not relate to the final outcome. Furthermore, quotas are problematic, because there is a certain assumption that if women sit on committees they will also vote in a predetermined way. Another solution would be to have direct quotas of Professors in academia.

How different are universities from firm boards or political parties?

In France there is a law since January, which establishes that representation must be at least 40 per cent for each gender in public or joint-stock companies (private), otherwise they incur penalties. In Germany instead they actually do not think they need such law, despite the fact that in their company boards only 2 per cent of women sit (17 per cent in UK and 14 per cent in Sweden).

In politics there are different practices. Various Green parties had voluntary compliance in the 1970s, but these did not actually produce encouraging results, hence, legal enforcement is necessary. CSU/CDU discussed introducing quotas but this did not work as planned. In Italy and France, lists had to contain female candidates, but the Constitutional Courts struck these down as they violated quality of treatment.

In academia any quotas that affect the outcome are absent. Hence there may be the need for more state interventionism. Quotas are clearly not a definitive solution, but they may help jumpstarting the system.

Manuel Bagues, Assistant Professor and a Ramón y Cajal Fellow at Universidad Carlos III.

Interestingly, the procedural quotas may be a way for male Professors to catch two birds with one stone. Women, which are underrepresented spend time instead of men on committees, which is both a façade recognition of active discrimination; very convenient for men who do not have to do this otherwise tiresome job.

There is in any case widespread recognition that the big leak is actually before entering the profession, at doctoral and post-doctoral level, when there is a clear trade-off between female production (in academic terms) and reproduction (in the sense of childbearing capacity).