

## Quota Trouble

TALKING ABOUT GENDER QUOTAS IN FINNISH LOCAL POLITICS

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### Abstract

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This article analyses the discourse concerning gender quotas and their implementation in Finnish local politics. Among our local actor interviewees, we found four different groups: feminist-oriented, non-feminist, accepting and disapproving. Despite the successful implementation of the quotas, our analysis reveals hidden conflicts and resistance. Respondents often resorted to memory lapses, strategies of distancing or assumptions about the interim character of quotas in an 'almost gender equal Finland' when discussing the implementation process. The predominance of these strategies is explained by contextual factors, including the strong cultural support for gender equality and legalism in Finland. We suggest that they can be interpreted as psychologized forms of resistance to a hegemonic discourse which does not really allow for anyone to be 'against gender equality' or wilfully negligent of the law.

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### Keywords

discourse, Finland, gender, local politics, quotas

## INTRODUCTION

The introduction of gender quotas of various types has to an increasing degree become the answer offered both by policy makers and feminists to the gender imbalances in democracy. The study of quotas spans from theoretically oriented discussions on the arguments for women's representation to empirical research on quota policies in countries around the world.<sup>1</sup> Judith Squires (2004: 54–5) divides the empirical research field into three areas: studies on the adoption, the implementation and, finally, the consequences of gender quotas. Until recently, the *implementation* of quotas was a neglected area in research; however, studies can be found on the quantitative impact of

quota regulations and the relationship between quota policies and the electoral and political systems.<sup>2</sup> It has been argued that to be able to analyse the multiple consequences of quotas, there is a need for qualitative research on the interaction between discourses, institutional settings and gendered power relations between actors in the implementation of quotas (see Squires 2004: 55).

In this article, we will present an analysis of the discourse by local-level politicians, both women and men, on the reception of the Finnish quota law, introduced in 1995. The quota law mandates that a minimum of 40 per cent of each sex should be represented in all indirectly elected public bodies at national and local level. Our article will present a more ambivalent picture of the impact of quotas than has previously been the case. In our analysis, we investigate the ways in which the interviewees coped personally with the quotas and we also investigate narratives of the implementation processes, recounting some of the discursive strategies utilized by our interviewees to explain and legitimate the problems encountered in the implementation of quotas. We conclude by discussing the 'quota trouble' – that is, the conflicts and contradictions linked with the reorganization of local politics – and reflecting on the meanings of the forms that resistance towards active equality policies has taken in the Finnish context.

We observed that when people talked about the implementation of quotas in practice, they simultaneously told stories about the gendered organization of local politics and constructed themselves as gendered subjects in this arena. In discourse, their resentment towards quotas tended to take psychologized forms, very reminiscent of mental 'states of denial' (Cohen 2001) utilized to protect oneself from knowledge of suffering and gross injustice. Our suggestion is that the predominance of these psychologized strategies of resistance can be understood in the context of the discursive terrains allowed to the interviewees: they had to navigate between the strong cultural support for gender equality, the Finnish legalist tradition and their own role in implementation given the division of tasks between the municipality and the state. The interpretation emphasizes the culturally and context-specific character of the phenomenon. However, it also raises questions about the further generalizability of the results.

Our study was conducted as a part of a European comparative research project on gender and the local management of change in seven European countries (Holli *et al.* 2003a; Heinen *et al.* 2004). In Finland, we selected as objects of our case study seven cities of different size, socio-economic profile, party profile and profile in terms of women's representation: Helsinki, Kotka, Oulu, Raahe, Kuopio, Savonlinna and Joensuu.<sup>3</sup> In each city, we interviewed during 2001–2 ten people actively involved in local politics, both women and men, asking their views about the changes in the local scene since the beginning of the 1990s. The semi-structured interviews were conducted with five experienced city councillors; three local top administrators

(including the municipal manager, i.e. the Finnish-type mayor); and two representatives of the non-governmental organizations that were active in the local scene. In this article, our data consist mostly of the interviews of the politicians, as they were the ones who had the most to say about the gender quotas.

In order to provide sufficient background for our analysis, we will commence by giving an account of the adoption and content of the Finnish quota law, as well as of its quantitative and qualitative impacts, before proceeding to analyse the quota discourse.

## THE FINNISH QUOTA LAW OF 1995

### Overview of the Quota Law and Its Quantitative Effects

The Finnish Equality Act of 1986 was reformed in 1995. By joining forces across party lines in Parliament, women MPs and other feminist activists succeeded in including numerical gender quotas in the new law. This occurred despite strong opposition by the Government, the right-wing parties and many male party colleagues. Initially, it was the left-wing women who began to favour numerical quotas as a solution to women's under-representation in indirectly elected and preparatory bodies<sup>4</sup> at the beginning of the 1990s. At the same time, a Supreme Court decision<sup>5</sup> disillusioned many right-wing women, too, about the capacity of the political system to reduce the problem voluntarily. A large proportion of them gradually adopted the quota solution. The women MPs' Network in Parliament, founded in 1991, played an important part in co-ordinating women's joint efforts to push the quota reform through.<sup>6</sup>

The new fourth paragraph of the Equality Act decrees that all *indirectly elected* public bodies (government inquiry commissions, other similar bodies, municipal executive boards and other municipal boards and committees) must be composed of at least 40 per cent of women and men, unless there are special reasons to the contrary. The quota paragraph also includes inter-municipal and regional decision-making structures in which the representatives are indirectly elected from the councils of the member municipalities. Moreover, an additional clause in the Act more loosely decrees that there should be 'a gender balance' in the decision-making bodies (in so far as they are composed by political representatives) of state-owned enterprises, companies in which the state is the majority share-owner and similar bodies. The clause also includes similar enterprises owned by the municipalities (Law 206 1995).

From an international perspective, gender quotas are most commonly applied either to party structures or electoral candidate lists. The Finnish quota law, although not unique, is exceptional on several counts. First, it expressly excludes all democratically (by popular poll) elected structures. By

contrast, quotas must be considered in almost all<sup>7</sup> cases where political or administrative authorities nominate or indirectly elect bodies wielding formal public power. Second, the quota law targets municipal executive bodies, which extends the principle of equal representation to a field of political power outside the democratic assembly (compare Phillips 1995: 182–4; see also Holli 2004). It must be stressed that, unlike in many other European countries, in Finland the municipal executive boards and municipal boards in question are major sites of power at the local level. In fact, they have become even more influential since the mid-1990s in relation to the municipal council in particular (e.g. Valanta *et al.* 2000). Finally, in Finland the quota law is more rigidly applied in regard to the local executive boards than, for example, in Norway, which has a very similar law. There have been few, if any, possibilities at all of gaining a dispensation from implementing the quotas.

The implementation of gender quotas in Finnish municipalities can be considered a highly successful endeavour, evaluated in terms of both its quantitative and qualitative effects. Before implementation, it was typical that the proportion of women on the executive boards in particular was lower than their share of local councillors. For example, in 1993, there was an average of 30 per cent female municipal councillors in the country and 25 per cent female executive board members. However, the degree of women's under-representation in executive power positions varied hugely by municipality. The quota law, implemented for the first time in 1997, after the 1996 municipal elections, changed this situation. The proportion of women members in municipal executive boards increased from 25 per cent to 45 per cent; in municipal boards from 35 per cent to 47 per cent. Similar figures still stood after the municipal elections of 2000.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the quota law homogenized the situation geographically: during 2000–4, only 1 of the 432 mainland municipalities failed to fulfil the 40–60 per cent ruling (Finnish Association of Municipalities 2003).

Another important consequence was that the quota law changed the strong horizontal gender segregation of local government. There, women had traditionally been elected to 'soft-sector' boards (dealing with e.g. social affairs, health or education) and men to 'hard-sector' boards (e.g. economic development and technical service). Since 1997, there has been a gender balance in boards of all sectors. However, the nomination of chairpersons to the executive boards and municipal boards is not quota-regulated and in 2003, women made up only 16 per cent and 24 per cent of chairs in those bodies (Pikkala 1999, 2000; Holli *et al.* 2003b).

### The Qualitative Effects of Gender Quotas in Finnish Local Politics

The qualitative effects of gender quotas point to their significance at a deeper level, as a starting-point of a process of change in local democracy.

The most direct impact we observed was the snowball effect brought by obligatory gender quotas: the issue of gender balance was often on the agenda also in the case of organs where the law does not, strictly speaking, have to be applied. Any municipal organ with members of one sex only was more easily noticed, considered abnormal and sometimes its composition was corrected. The quotas had also notably affected the recruitment criteria and negotiating practices of local party organizations (Holli *et al.* 2003a, 2003b).

The interviews moreover testified to both procedural and substantial changes in local politics. The impact of the quota law was especially emphasized in the technical-sector boards and other organs, where the quotas had led to a significant increase in the number of women (from 19 per cent in 1993 to 44 per cent in 1997 and 2001).<sup>9</sup> There were also younger and politically less experienced members in these boards than previously. A consequence frequently mentioned was that the nature of the deliberations had changed: the number of discussions had increased and they had become more thorough. According to the interviewees, women asked what were labelled 'dumb questions' expressing viewpoints that had not been common, for instance, in the technical sector. One Conservative male councillor said 'they question matters maybe more than the guys would do just among themselves'. As a result, the deliberations had become more open and transparent and sometimes the agenda had become more diversified.

Also stricter unofficial standards of policy preparation for the administration had emerged. In our interviews, women entering into new arenas in politics were depicted as 'the good students'. Women were seen to take their post very seriously, study the materials carefully, ask for more information if it was not adequate and have an open mind: '[W]omen ... like to talk, to put ideas forward, to discuss, and to twist and turn and look for new things' (see also Holli *et al.* 2003a).

In sum, the gender quotas have contributed to a change of political style in municipal decision making and an improvement in the quality of local democracy. By contrast, our interviewees generally did not perceive that quotas had contributed to substantial changes in the contents and priorities of local politics.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to positive impacts, our study also revealed a series of negative side-effects and new problems connected with the local-level implementation of gender quotas. There were visible transfers of power to new, male-dominated arenas, which were outside both democratic control and the range of application of quotas (Holli *et al.* 2003a). On the basis of our interviews we could tentatively conclude that the initial, open and strong resistance towards quotas (Pohjola 1997) had abated somewhat, shifting gradually towards a reluctant acceptance (Holli *et al.* 2003a). However, there were also signs pointing towards an opposite interpretation: that the resistance towards gender quotas had not disappeared, or even lessened, after all.

Instead, the resistance has perhaps only been changing into more indirect and intangible forms. This is the focus of the next part of this article.

## THE PROBLEM AND THE RESEARCH FRAME

The notion that change meets with resistance is no news to any political scientist. The observation that the adoption and/or implementation of gender quotas is often met with exceptionally strong and persistent resistance in various forms is equally unsurprising to any scholar or activist who has had anything to do with the topic.<sup>11</sup> For example, recent studies of the French parity law point out how its effectiveness has been partially diluted.<sup>12</sup> Evaluations of the Norwegian quota law reveal how various actors and institutions have ingenuously deployed loopholes for circumventing it. Strategies range from a widespread use of dispensation opportunities, to parties changing their nominating practices to avoid putting up women as candidates, and to a lack of supervision (Guldvik 2004). These problems of implementation point to the presence of resistance at both individual and institutional levels.

Empirical work and theorizing about forms of resistance are still largely missing in quota studies proper. We can however easily find them in a closely related field, which also encompasses the issue of gender quotas, conceptualized as methods of gender equality work. Research on the implementation – or rather, non-implementation – of gender equality policies offers the most productive area of research on the existence and forms of resistance for our purposes (see Cockburn 1991; Halsaa 1995; van der Ros 1997 as well as those sources discussed later).

In her analysis of Swedish municipal equality projects, Ingrid Pincus (1997; see also Pincus and van der Ros 1999; Pincus 2002) studied the gap between the goals and the reality of equality policies in a cultural context where everybody was expressly ‘for gender equality’. Her focus was on male resistance and the ways in which it changed forms in time, during the process of implementing gender equality reforms. There was resistance among women, too, Pincus noted, but the focus of the study on men was justified because they were still occupying the leading posts within municipal administration and thus acting as crucial gate-keepers against gender equality reforms.

Pincus (1997; Pincus and van der Ros 1999) showed that the implementation of gender equality policies met with both *passive* and *active* resistance. Resistance was likely to change from passive forms towards more active ones as gender equality issues gained a firmer foothold on the municipal political agenda and as the equality projects started to be implemented. Drawing on Lukes and Bachrach and Baratz, Pincus (1997: 12) stressed that passivity should be conceptualized as a mode of power and control. More active forms of power and resistance become necessary only as pressure from the

inside or the outside increases, when it becomes more difficult to keep gender issues at bay.

According to Pincus (1997: 14), passive resistance aimed at hindering the gender issue from reaching the political agenda, or from being effective in cases where the process was already underway. Forms of passive resistance included ‘silence’ – for example, quietly ‘forgetting’ the gender aspect – and ‘sham-actions’ such as promoting equality issues in name only, aiming to avoid fines or a bad reputation (Pincus 1997; Pincus and van der Ros 1999: 224–6).

Active resistance became prominent in situations where gender issues had definitely reached the political agenda and the implementation of municipal gender equality policies had begun. Pincus identified three active counter-strategies: counter-argumentation, subversive action and person-oriented resistance. ‘Counter-arguments’ pointed out, for example, that gender equality did not fit with other institutional tasks or its implementation did not rightly belong to the municipality. Instead, it would be reached by a change of attitudes, via educational measures initiated in kindergartens and schools. ‘Subversive action’ included strategies by which the effectiveness and potential for change of gender equality work was diluted, by stripping its resources or down-grading its institutional status. Whereas ‘subversive action’ targeted the methods and practices of gender equality work, ‘person-oriented resistance’ targeted the femocrats responsible for the projects. It worked to undermine their authority by focusing on their presumed shortcomings in efficiency or personal traits (Pincus 1997: 23–48; Pincus and van der Ros 1999: 227–8).

Bearing in mind Pincus’ two forms of resistance and their connectedness to the implementation phase, we decided to examine those sections of our interviews that explicitly discuss quotas. We were interested in questions such as: Are the forms of resistance observed in our interview data similar to Pincus’ categories? Are the transformations in resistance to be interpreted as gradual steps in the process of implementing quotas, from passive resistance towards a predominance of active forms (Pincus 1997; Pincus and van der Ros 1999)? What has happened to resistance in the Finnish context of a continuous, fixed success of implementing gender quotas? Is there something else going on in Finnish municipalities that is not sufficiently covered by Pincus’ classification – and if so, how should we understand it?

The focus of our analysis of the interviews was on the cultural constructions of gender and politics that were articulated in the discourse on quotas. In our analysis, we paid attention to what was said and what not, how it was said, what kinds of recurrent metaphors were deployed and how the interviewees positioned themselves and others both in what could be termed normal politics and during the disruptive process of implementing quotas (see, for example, Bacchi 1999; Wetherell *et al.* 2001b). Analysing the interview data not only for its information value about the implementation of quotas but also for its form, as discourse, offered deeper insights into the gender conflicts that

surrounded the process. In this instance, discourse is regarded as language in use (Wetherell *et al.* 2001a: 3) constructing attitudes, the changes that quotas have brought into municipal politics and the interviewees' evaluations of the post-quota local scene.

The following part of the article presents the results of our empirical analysis. We show how attitudes towards quotas divided the respondents into different groups, often in conflict with each other. This is followed by an analysis of the concrete situations where the implementation of gender quotas had proved problematic. In this context, we pay special attention to the metaphors and discursive strategies utilized by the respondents.

## ANALYSING THE QUOTA DISCOURSE

### Four Categories of Respondents

In our interviews, there emerged contradictory viewpoints about the desirability of quotas. The attitudes divided the interviewees into four main categories: *feminist*, *non-feminist*, *accepting* and *disapproving*. Political affiliation seemed to matter less than the respondent's gender in regard to attitude towards the quotas,<sup>13</sup> although the data were not suitable for more extensive elaborations in this respect. It should also be noted that different, even contradictory discourses often came out in one single interview. When in the following sections we label groups of respondents in terms of the above categories, we simplify a more complex reality.<sup>14</sup>

The respondents with 'feminist' attitudes – all women – saw the quotas as a result of the long political struggle by the women's movement. They unanimously regarded the quotas as a necessary measure in local politics, questioning neither their legitimacy nor usefulness. However, they also tended to see problems in their implementation, and often labelled their own role in the municipality as that of 'watch-dog', a role they described as crucial for the implementation of the quota law in their municipality. Confiding easily with the interviewers, feminist themselves, the women told of the difficulties they had encountered as what they called 'the official feminist' of the town.

'Non-feminists', mostly right-wing women councillors, showed caution while talking about the quotas. They were rarely overtly critical but rather eagerly pointed out that they themselves were not, and would never want to be, 'quota women'.<sup>15</sup> They emphasized that competence should be the first criterion of recruitment to any position, and seemed to think that the quota law undermined this ideal. Also, as if it were a reflection of the experiences of the feminists, they pointed out the risk of stigmatization if one advocated gender equality issues as a prominent part of one's political agenda.

The 'accepting' attitudes were found predominantly in a group consisting mostly of male interviewees (but also some women) whose standpoints varied from 'active' approval and even participation in some forms of equality

work, to a 'forced' acceptance of the quotas. Both subgroups tended to point out the difficulties produced by the quota law, but the former subcategory also underlined its positive effects, whereas the latter was satisfied with describing the quotas as an 'unavoidable evil'. The difference between the discourses of the 'accepting' respondents and the 'non-feminists' was that the former group did not express either very strong emotions or personal involvement in regard to the quotas, whereas non-feminists, being women themselves, seemed to feel very much involved, albeit against their will.

Finally, the 'disapproving' attitudes linked with a group of male respondents who can be defined as the bitterest critics of the quota law. Some of them described the quotas angrily and with frustration as 'absurd' and 'senseless'. The rationale of the negative statements varied, but there seemed to be a certain set of underlying attitudes towards women's role in general, as can be detected in the words of a senior male councillor:

The equality law, it is the worst law in the world . . . I mean, there have never been some men or a law or something that would have compelled one to select men only to certain posts . . . But there have not been women volunteering for those posts either . . . It must be because of the traditions . . . I remember when I was elected for the first time, there were very few women in local politics then also . . . they had not learnt to come along. They took care of the domestic tasks. And what kind of a woman would be crazy enough to want to enter politics today? To sit all days in meetings and to tag along and the family left to its fate.

However, most of the men in this group sought to envelop their views in a modicum of 'political correctness' expressing regrets and 'condolences' about what they saw as the fact that 'there just aren't enough women' available and volunteering for political positions. It is difficult to estimate whether and to what extent this tendency was dependent on the fact that the interviewers were women.

In sum, there have emerged two totally polarized groups in Finnish local politics in regard to quotas: 'feminist' women supporters and 'disapproving' male opponents. Given that the quota law is applied precisely to local political structures, the polarization of the actors concerned is not surprising. The female councillors have in fact gained in relative power whereas the male councillors have lost some power (Holli 2004; cf. Bergqvist 1994).

These groups at odds with each other did not, however, construct themselves as political subjects in terms of gain or loss of personal power, but rather resorted to more altruistic arguments. The feminist respondents argued in terms of defending gender equality and respect for the law, or working for women's issues at large. Hence, they also implicitly positioned themselves as representatives not only of their party but also of their gender. The disapproving male councillors, in contrast, did not see themselves as gendered subjects but instead declared themselves motivated by the decreasing quality of local decision making, and losses for democracy. Implicitly, the changes brought

by the implementation of the quota law were thus constructed as threats to the normal functioning of local politics and democracy, defended by its stalwart (male) guardians.

We can nevertheless query whether the argumentative strategies emphasizing larger political and ideological concerns functioned also to conceal and justify political self-interest. The notion is supported by the finding that neither of the 'middle groups' ('non-feminists' or 'approving' respondents) displayed a similarly strong altruistic agenda. The 'approving' respondents tended to discuss their standpoints in relation to external facts: there was an obligatory quota law that had to be followed in the municipalities, regardless of personal opinions. The non-feminists' strategy, in turn, seemed quite individualistic, targeted at being regarded as what could be called 'proper politicians' despite their female gender. This was done by distinguishing themselves from other sorts of women and stressing the significance of merit and accomplishments in politics, the subtext being that they themselves possessed those qualities (cf. Holli and Kantola 2005).

In her study on gender equality in Norwegian regional policies, Ann-Therese Loetherington (1992; see also Loetherington and Flemmen 1991) classified actors along the dimensions of principal and practical support for organizational gender equality. Similarly to us, she discovered two polarized groups, strongly divided by gender (see also Skjeie and Teigen 2003: 175–6). She pointed out that the more moderate groups of actors in her analysis were potential allies for the feminist promoters of gender equality. On the basis of our observations in Finnish municipalities, we concur with this evaluation. In addition, we wish to emphasize that our 'middle groups' can equally well be allied with the 'disapproving' male opponents of quotas depending on the prevailing culture of the municipality.

### The Quota Scene: Metaphors and Illustrations

In the Finnish municipal context, the electoral law guarantees the proportional representation of all the political groups with any elected councillors in the executive board and other municipal boards. These bodies are elected by the municipal council at the beginning of its term. The system is thus consociational rather than resting on the rules of majority parliamentarism. The electoral rules make the selection process predictable, and the choices are in practice negotiated between the local party organizations after the municipal elections. This setting is crucial for understanding the implementation of the quota regulations.

The most frequently utilized metaphor by the interviewees when describing the implementation process was that of 'a jigsaw puzzle'. It referred to the difficulties that the quotas had brought to the selection process for municipal bodies making the pieces hard to find or to fit together. The greatest struggles concerning the quotas took place during the negotiations inside and between

the parties and they were very similar in different municipalities. Each political group had its particular problems. Minority parties with few elected councillors struggled to find what they considered to be suitable people – usually meaning women – to fill the quotas. Larger parties, in contrast, had to depart from their own preferences and ‘put a woman forward’, as they were often better resourced in this regard.

Inside parties, the quota law meant significant readjustments with obvious bitterness emerging over what were seen as ‘forced solutions’. Some interviewees who disapproved of the quotas stated that these, to quote, ‘unnatural’ arrangements had complicated the work of the council group of the party throughout the electoral period. They also claimed that democracy was in peril because some women who had received fewer personal votes than some men had been chosen for prestigious posts.<sup>16</sup>

Descriptions of the political negotiations and selection procedures of various municipal bodies where the quotas were implemented were frequently colourful. In some cases, these meetings were described as resembling public auctions, where, as soon as it was noticed that some organ had more women than the required 40 per cent, what was labelled a ‘shouting contest’ began, with each political group trying to get its own man chosen for the open position. Some feminists told these stories with upset and ironic humour, some disapproving men as proof of the absurdity of the quota law.

Stories of implementation failures were also illustrative. Interviewees from all the categories except that of the feminists lamented how what they called ‘suitable’ and ‘competent’ persons could not be placed in this or that body because of the quotas, and how this had led to problems in the work of the municipal boards, as there were ‘uninterested’ people who had been ‘forced’ to participate, though they wanted to work in other boards. Most of the examples given were of women who had been nominated to previously male-dominated bodies such as municipal waste management boards or municipal corporations. The ‘disapproving’ men in particular expressed deep concern about the future of the whole municipality in the face of the threat posed by the quota law, which had supposedly replaced expert men with uninterested women (see also Pohjola 1997: 38). A leftist male councillor put it with pious regret: ‘It is no secret that unfortunately the party had difficulties to find, I’ll be frank now, to find sufficiently skilled women.’ These narratives were often in the same interview accompanied by more playful examples, for instance, of men apparently forced to participate in household management boards. To note, their political competence in those arenas was never questioned.

In contrast, the feminist-oriented interviewees did not identify the problem as concerning women’s lack of competence, but instead emphasized the existence of resistance towards the quota law:

...there were open executive posts in Suomen turistiauto [the public transportation corporation]. And for ever and ever there had been only men there.

The law had come into effect and we had to choose new members. It was totally unimaginable, that debate, it was really like a landmark. They said that women can't understand cars, can't understand anything about bus traffic ... And that no, no women there, this must stay intact, go everywhere else ... I felt that it was like the last bastion. And then we abolished that bastion. And women have done just fine there, of course women have coped.

The above quotation shows that there were also happy endings to the stories told about the application of quotas, as in part testified by our analysis above of the quantitative effects of the quota law. However, since our interviews abounded with narratives about mishaps occurring in the implementation process, in the following we will take a closer look at the ways in which the interviewees explained the problems and failures.

### Memory Lapses and Strategies of Distanciation

A very commonplace explanation for initial failures to implement quotas was that the law was, in the words of the interviewees, 'forgotten'. A quotation from an 'accepting' male councillor illustrates this strategy:

It [the quota law] has been mainly a good thing. But then, for example, still this year the political groups tended to forget that the adjustments should have been made according to the quota law. They were then effectuated as the last thing, and there we were then thrown into violent solutions.

Such 'forgetting' had happened in all imaginable municipal organs during the first round of application (1996–7) in the cities studied. What were described as 'slips of memory' were not uncommon in the second round of application (2000–1) either, for example, with regard to selecting members to regional councils and to boards and executives of inter-municipal bodies and corporations.

There also seemed to be a constant searching for organs that might not require gender quotas. The feminist-oriented councillors then played key roles in correcting the situation in several municipalities, actively submitting complaints on the basis of the Municipal Law and reporting the irregularities to the national Equality Ombudsman.

The concept of forgetting deserves some special attention. None of our interviewees questioned the sincerity of these memory lapses, at least not explicitly. They used expressions like 'it slipped from our/their minds', regardless of whether they were the ones with a bad memory themselves or those feminist-oriented councillors who had finally corrected the errors. Forgetting, of course, is something very human; something so neutral and forgivable that it was passed with a mere shrug. Regarded from this perspective, there were no subjects responsible for the violations of the quota law, or for attempts to

dilute its effectiveness. Nobody was guilty, nobody was blamed. The incidents were almost always told in a passive tense: mishaps and human errors just happened without anybody actually intending them.

Another prominent feature of the Finnish quota discourse were the strategies of distanciation used in connection to problems of implementation. In spite of the many vivid stories about problem-ridden implementation, all the interviewees tended to see the real problems somewhere other than in their own immediate proximity (see also Czarniawska and Calás 1997; Korvajärvi 1998; Holli 2003).

First, it was typical for the interviewees to claim that their own party had managed to cope with the quotas – the first round of application as well as the second one – in a good co-operative spirit, whereas the *other* parties had had big problems. Also, the quotas apparently had an immediate positive effect on the culture of their own party, whereas in the *other* parties, the effect had been vague or even non-existent, as the following citation by a female councillor describing the situation in a rival party illustrates: '[A]t least during ... the first period, they [the women] didn't act independently in any way, they really were tied to the men's apron strings, so that at least there it didn't have an immediate effect.' Although it is most certainly true that there are differences between the parties, it is still noteworthy that similar statements were made by the representatives of all parties.

Second, the discourse in all the studied cities utilized a strategy of distancing the problems to *other* municipalities. Descriptions of problems caused by quotas were almost always followed by lamentations about the situation of 'smaller towns'. This strategy made the problems at home seem less serious, but often it also served as a hidden critique of the quota law more generally. In Savonlinna and Raahe, for instance, the problems in implementing the quota law were obvious. However, even there the respondents rather turned the attention elsewhere, such as the male councillor who said that 'in the small rural municipalities around here, I mean, there just aren't any women there'. In contrast, the interviewees in the capital, Helsinki, used the same strategy to talk up their city, as in the following example: 'we in Helsinki are already so enlightened [that the quotas pose no problems] but out there in the Ostrobothnian farmland-owner municipalities [North-Western Finland], it may be a little different'.

Some of the expressions utilized were quite telling: the respondents described how in the small municipalities they had to fetch 'the old biddies from the backrooms' or 'the farmers' wives from the cottages' to fill the needed posts. These expressions clearly implied that the women 'found' in this way were not very competent. Relocating problems in the quota implementation elsewhere was also a strategy which helped keeping the imminent gender conflict at a secure distance (cf. Magnusson 2001a, 2001b). This feature becomes even clearer when we turn to the next discursive strategy: the emphasis on the temporary nature of the quotas.

## Before Achieving Equality: Quotas as an Interim Measure

The most common evaluation of the quotas, expressed by both female and male interviewees, both those who criticized them and those who accepted them, was that the quotas were an interim measure to be removed after perfect gender equality was attained; a stage which didn't seem to be so far away to some of the interviewees.

Many of the male interviewees who deplored the quota law described it as 'violent' and 'bureaucratic'. However, most of the interviewees stated that they accepted the law since 'we people just don't seem to be able to behave ourselves without them'. The quotas were needed because humans were imperfect. If 'everyone had good will', it was argued, there would be no need for the quota regulations. There was something shameful and unnatural about the quotas, and many interviewees said that they were not 'the right way' to promote gender equality. However, most of them did not mention a better means either.

Some of the interviewees – mostly men – felt that the quotas could already be removed. In these comments, the idea of progress already achieved was strong: progress in gender equality, or simply progress in women's own behaviour, as a male councillor stated:

Women are all the time more aware. They are more educated than ten years ago. They are more active ... [T]he quotas that were made back then, they don't necessarily support that positive thing. So we could very well soon start thinking about whether they really make sense.

Another point that emerged in this line of discourse was that Finland, with its good reputation in gender equality, had already passed the supposed 'phase' when quotas were needed – in contrast to *other* countries.

The idea of the temporary nature of the quotas was also present in the discourse of many feminist-oriented interviewees. This can be interpreted as a strategy of toning down their attitudes to make them more acceptable to their more moderate, conservative, sometimes even misogynous surroundings. Or it can be seen as an example of the belittlement, even nullification, of gender-based discrimination that is typical of the Finnish context, also to feminist-oriented actors. It is not easy to question commonly held views about the flawless progress of equality in, and the already existing high-grade gender sensitivity of, Finnish society.

## MAKING SENSE OF THE QUOTA TROUBLE

Pincus' studies on Swedish municipal equality policies had led us to expect that active forms of resistance towards quotas would be more prominent than passive ones in the Finnish municipalities analysed. Indeed, our

interviews yielded evidence of an upsurge of more active resistance forms after the quotas were first introduced in the municipalities (Holli *et al.* 2003a; see also Pohjola 1997). However, in a context where the local authorities had been obliged to implement the quota law for a considerable period already, five to six years at the time of the interviews, we mostly found resistance that could only be described as 'passive' in character. However, it assumed somewhat more fluid and flexible forms than what Pincus had indicated, dissolving the boundaries between active and passive resistance.

To follow Pincus' classification first, the most manifest uses of passive forms of resistance in our Finnish case study consisted of 'silence', that is, 'memory lapses' regarding fulfilment of the requirements of the quota law, and the frequently told story of 'the lack of women'. The latter can be interpreted as a sham-action, which was deployed to show that, in spite of apparent good will, the law was impossible to implement because of the insufficient supply of competent women.

We also detected active forms of resistance. In counter-argumentative strategies, it was claimed that quotas were not the correct way of promoting equality, or that they were no longer needed because gender equality had already been achieved. In the same manner as the men using active resistance in Pincus and van der Ros' study (1999: 228) argued that gender equality should be a "natural part" of the personnel activities of the municipality, their Finnish counterparts claimed that equality should come about in municipal decision-making organs of its own accord, not by the force of law. 'Subversive action' appeared very much in the form of attempts at non-implementation and finding ways of circumventing the law. Quotas were not implemented until the decision makers were reminded of them; and respondents actively searched for representative bodies where the quota law might not be applicable. Lastly, person-oriented resistance occupied a prominent role in our interview data. The task of promoting gender equality at the local level had largely been left to a few enthusiastic individuals. In the process of implementing the quotas this had involved a personal burden for many feminist women politicians, who not only had to act repeatedly to ensure the correct implementation of the law, but also got harassed for their efforts.

After the introduction of the quota law, the new gendered dimension of power struggles at the local level has disproportionately focused both the attention and the discourse on the qualities and behaviour of women as political actors. The entrance of women in much larger numbers to local power positions has set their competence and specific ways of acting under the microscope. By some disapproving men in particular, the situation was interpreted as a negative change from the gender-neutral state of affairs which was supposed to exist in local politics earlier. The 'quota trouble', to coin a phrase, always had to do with women. Terms such as 'uninterested' implied not only to 'less competent' but also to 'unsuitable' women. The emphasis on the problematic women was linked to rather traditional conceptions of a gender system where certain issues and positions were taken for granted as male prerogatives

and others as women's arena of activity. Also the stress on the ostensible absence of women naturalized their invisibility in the public sphere and their role in the privacy of the home.

Notwithstanding the active role of Finnish women in the labour market and public life for more than a century, the predominance of these assumptions shows that women are still represented as gendered subjects who negatively deviate from the supposedly neutral male norm. The other side of the coin is the invisibility of men as gendered political actors. Their competence as newcomers in the female-dominated sectors of social and health policies was not called into question, nor was their role discussed in the gender-based discrimination of local politics.

Despite the usefulness of Pincus' categorization for understanding different forms of resistance, in our opinion it does not catch the nuances of forms of resentment towards quotas emerging in our interviews. Our argument is that in the Finnish municipalities the resistance has largely translated into *psychologized forms*, for example, those of denial, projection and distancing. These very much resemble individual psychological strategies for dealing with difficult or abhorrent issues. In our interviews, however, they appeared as a collective discourse, deployed to justify problems and failures in the implementation of quotas and to dilute the seriousness of gender-based discrimination. For example, 'memory lapses' served to explain problems in implementation by motivating them with common human frailty, without putting blame on anybody for active misogyny or wilful misdeeds. Denying any gender problems at home and focusing on other locations where the problems appeared 'much more serious' served to delete the difficulties encountered in the local scene and to project the problems onto others (see also Czarniawska and Calás 1997).

The predominance of these discursive 'strategies of denial' in our study is linked to the strong cultural support for gender equality in Finland. Lena Martinsson (1997) has described a hegemonic discourse as a rhetoric that is almost forced upon the subjects. The speakers have to follow certain patterns of speech and adopt certain subject positions that put them on the side of the 'good people' and 'acceptable' values.

Several studies have claimed that supporting gender equality has, especially since the 1980s, acquired characteristics of a hegemonic discourse in Finland (e.g. Holli 2003; Raevaara 2003, 2005). Already in the 1980s surveys testified to an almost total support of the goal of gender equality nationally (e.g. Haavio-Mannila 1986). Among our seventy interviewees, there was only one man who openly claimed to oppose gender equality, although at the same time immediately relativized his standpoint and turned it into a more acceptable form: 'I am a *little bit* anti-gender equality *in the form it exists now ...* it is no more gender equality. It oppresses men now' (emphasis added).

As the Finnish hegemonic discourse for gender equality does not really allow for anybody to be 'against gender equality' (Holli 2003), resistance towards quotas in our interview contexts had instead to take other forms

where the speaker was rhetorically and discursively placed among the ‘good’ and distanced from the problems and conflicts. We were dealing with a situation where the cultural norms and codes of behaviour strongly delimited the strategies and possibilities at the actors’ disposal.

In our case study concerning gender quotas, the forceful hegemonic discourse of gender equality moreover combined with two other important factors: the strong legalism of the country and the executive role of the municipalities vis-à-vis state legislation. By legalism, we refer to the high compliance with legal norms and, for example, EU directives, which has been characteristic of Finnish political culture. In addition, the municipalities are both units of local democracy and the main implementation machinery for national legislation, and they are obliged by constitutional and legal restraints to fulfil this role satisfactorily. Together, these three imperatives created a situation where the interviewees had to orient themselves in a discursive terrain where they supposedly had to be ‘for gender equality’, and look both law-abiding and as if they were fulfilling their responsibilities on behalf of the municipality.

The four groups of respondents identified in our analysis had differing strategies for dealing with these demands. The ‘feminist’ respondents had least problems with the requirements as they simultaneously endorsed gender equality both as a societal norm and a proper implementation of gender quotas locally, the latter seen as an inherent part of ‘real equality’ (cf. Holli 1996). The ‘accepting’ respondents for their part often opted for the legalist solution, presenting themselves as ‘loyal bureaucrats’ (Lotherington 1992: 101–2) who respected the law and implemented it despite some difficulties or their personal opinions. The ‘disapproving’ respondents, on the other hand, discursively tended to shift towards hegemonic values other than those of gender equality or legalism in their deliberations on the quota law, most notably ‘good politics’ or ‘good democracy’. These were presented as *separate* from gender equality and legalist concerns. The ‘disapproving’ respondents were thus able to construe themselves as representatives of larger and more important societal values, which also justified their criticism towards the quotas (cf. Skjeie and Teigen 2003). Finally, the ‘non-feminist’ respondents seemed to adopt ingredients from all three approaches above. They tended to be positive towards gender equality, although perhaps not in the numerical form embodied by the quota law; and they endorsed legalism and the fulfilment of municipal obligations as well as ‘good politics’, which did not include gender as an explicit, legitimate criteria in its descriptive form.

However, in the interview situation the respondents had very much to navigate between what was forbidden and the interpretative repertoires at their disposal. The psychologized forms of resistance get their explanation in this context. They allowed the interviewees to express doubts, hesitancy, sometimes even active resistance towards quotas and the new, more feminized situation of local politics without *openly* crossing the boundary to forbidden areas. For instance, describing the situation as ‘already gender equal’ served to

diminish the problem of women's under-representation. Consequently, quotas as a measure of remedy were constructed as superfluous and of little significance, and it was easy to 'forget' them in the selection procedures.

This kind of psychologized resistance may well be a more general phenomenon, found also in other cultures and national contexts, as indeed illustrated by Czarniawska and Calás (1997) in their comparative study. In this article, we however wish to emphasize a contextualized understanding, both in relation to our interviews but also to the Finnish cultural context. Several studies on Finland have observed the presence of counter-strategies of a similar type than described here in societal discourse over the decades (e.g. Holli 1991, 2003; Korvajärvi 1998). For example, Holli's analysis (1996) showed how there emerged new argumentative techniques for denying the existence of gender inequality in the Finnish administration in the 1980s as state equality policies were strengthened. Psychologized resistance as a discourse may thus form a cultural and institutional reservoir of response that is brought into active usage in the face of change, induced by more active gender equality policies, for instance.

In our case study concerning gender quotas, the psychologized forms of resistance articulated by Finnish local-level actors definitely aimed at preserving the status quo in the face of change and at toning down the power aspects inherent to the promotion of gender equality (cf. Eduards 2002). They served to contain and delimit the possibility of qualitative changes implied by the factual increase of number and power of women in local politics. Moreover, they also functioned to silence, delegitimize and modify the voices of feminist local activists and to make their influence redundant.

## CONCLUSION

In this article, we have analysed the quota discourse of local-level actors in Finnish municipalities. Our findings show that quotas and their implementation, as well as gender as a political category, continue to be highly contested, even after quotas were adopted and successfully implemented in Finnish municipalities.

There have emerged completely polarized groups of women versus men in regard to attitude to quotas in the municipalities studied. This polarization fractures the prevailing gender contract, based on the idea of a consensual and harmonious co-operation of the sexes (Raevaara and Saarikoski 2002; Raevaara 2003, 2005). Traditionally, there has been a clear-cut separation between a specified 'feminine citizenship' and a 'neutral' (male) citizenship in Finland. The model offered to women has embraced the concept of 'societal motherhood' (Sulkunen 1987, 1989, 1990). Disintegrating set boundaries between supposedly feminine and masculine sectors of politics, the quotas have made visible, and exacerbated, dormant gender conflicts (compare Hirdman 1991; Julkunen 1994; Rantalaiho 1994). As women and men are

now competing for the same positions, the gendered, masculine ‘rules of the game’ in local politics have become more manifest, along with struggles concerning their preservation and/or challenge (see Eduards 1992).

Moreover, multiple strategies of self-justification and techniques aimed at ‘saving face’ were discovered to be an inseparable part of the Finnish quota discourse. Analysing their place in the larger discourse, their connection to depictions of the ‘real’ and their significance in terms of implementation and consequences of the quotas provided tools for studying changes in gendered power dynamics and the altering forms of resistance in local politics. Our interpretation emphasizes the transformation of resistance into psychologized forms, appearing as strategies of denial, projection and distancing in the interviews. We stress that the phenomenon can be understood as a context-specific and recurrent counter-strategy, which is actualized especially when patriarchal gender relations are challenged. By raising these questions, the study opens new avenues for analysing the interaction between legislative measures, cultural norms and social discourse.

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## Notes

- 1 For theoretically oriented discussions about women’s political representation see, for example, Hernes (1987); Phillips (1995); Sawer (2000); Skjeie (2001). For empirical research on the introduction of quotas into national legislation, and arguments surrounding this, see, for example, Giraud and Jenson (2001); Meier

(2002); Raevaara and Saarikoski (2002); Teigen (2003); Bereni and Lépinard (2004); Raevaara (2005). For comparative studies demonstrating the efficiency of quotas in correcting gender imbalances see, for example, Norris (2000); Caul Kittilson (2001); Htun (2001); Htun and Jones (2002).

2 See, for example, Pikkala (1999); Dauphin (2002); Green (2003); Meier (2003).

3 From the point of view of women's political representation at the local level, the sample can be regarded as Finland in miniature: women's proportion in the municipal councils was on average 34 per cent, corresponding to the national average (34.4 per cent). However, there were huge differences in women's numerical representation as councillors between the cities, from 16 per cent in Raahe to nearly a gender-balanced situation (48 per cent) in Helsinki. Regardless, all of them had had to implement the quota law, and had done so in a satisfactory way, with one minor exception: in one of the cities studied, we found one illegal board.

4 Please note that women's share in democratically elected assemblies has not been considered a similar problem, probably because it has been very high by international standards (see Holli 2004; Holli and Kantola 2005).

5 The first Equality Act (Law 609 1986) had a clause stating that 'there shall be both women and men' in state inquiry commissions and other similar public bodies. However, municipal authorities in particular insisted on interpreting the law in a minimal way. In 1990, the Supreme Administrative Court decided that it did not consider the presence of only one woman or man in a public body to be in breach of the Equality Act, despite its express plural tense. As a result, there was a public outcry by women activists at what they saw as a watering-down of the Equality Act.

6 See Holli (2004); Lejonqvist-Jurvanen (2004); Holli and Kantola (2005); Raevaara (2005).

7 However, the Finnish quota law excludes the Parliament, the Cabinet and the President of the Republic, since including these in the quota law would have required a constitutional law process. Interestingly, for example, parliamentary standing committees, the Cabinet and its internal ministerial working committees are about the only political sites where both gender segregation or women's/men's exclusion has remained legal in the country.

8 Municipal elections were held in Finland on 24 October 2004. The proportion of women councillors increased from 34.4 per cent to 36.3 per cent. The other municipal bodies were elected indirectly by the councils in the beginning of 2005 but the figures have not been available.

9 By contrast, the positive effects of the quotas on the social and educational sectors, which had previously been female-dominated, were rarely mentioned in the interviews.

10 The reasons for this might be context-specific. First, in many Finnish urban municipalities, the quota law did not in practice change the situation very much numerically. Second, although municipalities implement, for example, social policy and day care laws, their role in influencing the basic, already 'women-friendly' principles of these are limited. Third, and most importantly, since the beginning of the 1990s Finnish municipalities have faced extremely severe

economic problems that have forced them to reprioritize interests – with obligatory tasks (including the organization of education and social and health services) topping the list (Holli *et al.* 2003a).

- 11 See, for example, Skjeie and Teigen (2003); Teigen (2003); Lépinard (2004); Holli and Kantola (2005); Raevaara (2005).
- 12 See, for example, Green (2003); Zimmermann (2003); Freedman (2004); Lépinard (2004).
- 13 Wängnerud (2000) and Skjeie and Teigen (2003: 165–91), however, emphasize the significance of party affiliation for quota attitudes on the basis of their survey data.
- 14 The respondents were divided into these four groups rather evenly, although the moderate opinions were slightly more common than the most polarized standpoints.
- 15 This expression, which has become customary in Finland over the past few years, implies a situation where a woman is chosen for a post or a committee (or for instance, as a guest in a television talk show), only because it is ‘politically correct’ or because the quota law insists on the presence of women. ‘Quota woman’ is a pejorative term meaning that the person in question does not have the qualities needed, but is only chosen as a representative of her gender.
- 16 The same notion was referred to in newspaper writings concerning the first round implementation of the quota law (Pohjola 1997).

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