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Article

"I find the term "quota woman" unobjective": Eight questions to Norma Schmitt

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Dr. Norma Schmitt, Research Associate for the Executive Board at DIW Berlin

EIGHT QUESTIONS TO NORMA SCHMITT

»I find the term “quota woman” unobjective«

1. Dr. Schmitt, as of 2016, there will be a gender quota in Germany. What will this consist of? The legislation envisages a fixed gender quota for listed companies that also have employee representation on their supervisory boards, in other words, are subject to full codetermination. These companies must meet a 30 percent gender quota on their supervisory boards. However, there are also some companies that only meet one of these two criteria – they are either listed or subject to codetermination. These companies have to set themselves flexible but autonomous target quotas for both their supervisory and executive boards.
2. How many companies will be affected by the fixed gender quota from 2016? According to the information I have, it will affect 105 companies.
3. Isn't that just a drop in the ocean? It seems initially that only a small number of companies are affected and also only a correspondingly small number of women will benefit from the quota. It is a first step in the right direction, however. The effects beyond that are interesting but we'll have to wait and see how it all pans out. The second pillar of the legislation does not impose any sanctions. If this has no positive effects, policy-makers will have to come up with steps to improve it.
4. We often hear the criticism that a quota means performance is no longer decisive but gender instead. What's your opinion of this criticism? I don't think it's justified because the point is to select the best candidates. For years now, research has shown that our decisions might subconsciously be affected by gender stereotypes. Here is a very good example that illustrates this: there used to be remarkably few female musicians in orchestras. It was only the introduction of anonymized auditions with candidates playing behind a curtain that made it possible to considerably increase the share of women in orchestras. This shows that without the curtain the gender of the musicians mattered more than their performance. The quota now gives us an opportunity to dismantle this relationship.
5. Should women in managerial positions be concerned that they will be labeled as quota women in future? I find the term "quota woman" unobjective. It suggests that, once the quota is introduced, a less qualified woman will take the place of a highly qualified man. In other words, this is all about the supposed incompetence of women in general and no distinction is made as to whether an individual woman is actually less qualified than a comparable man. Here again, we are dealing with a stereotype about gender differences and so that puts an end to the discussion.
6. Will men be disadvantaged by this quota? That is also a very persistent misgiving because it is often assumed that men, the previously overrepresented group, will now be suppressed. This in turn is based on the premise that this distribution of positions was efficient in the pre-quota era.
7. To what extent can a gender quota also bring a competitive edge in its wake? A higher share of women on the supervisory board can lead to increased visibility for women, thus improving their promotion prospects in the entire workforce, which in turn creates a signaling effect on higher qualified women entering the labor market. Ultimately, companies will then have the opportunity to identify where qualified women fall by the wayside when climbing the corporate ladder in their own organization. To become more attractive in the competition for high-caliber candidates, companies also need to offer women real career opportunities.
8. What further measures would be necessary in order to put an end to the underrepresentation of women in managerial positions? Companies should shine a torch on their organizational structures to uncover any "blind spots" preventing the advancement of women and make adjustments in the areas of weakness identified. There is still further potential for policy-makers, too, to increase the share of women in managerial positions. If we think about the family and the reconciliation of work and personal life, it's all about creating a level playing field for both women and men.

Interview by Erich Wittenberg



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