

Center for American Progress



# Can Public Policy Break the Glass Ceiling?

Lessons from Abroad

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December 2014

# Introduction and summary

The problem is all too familiar: Despite women’s increased rates of employment, rising levels of educational development, and growing place as primary breadwinners, gender inequality remains pervasive. Women continue to be underrepresented in key decision-making positions in politics, business, and public life.

In the United States, the discussion of this conundrum tends to focus on personal improvement and the notion of “leaning in” popularized by Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg. However, a number of developed nations, particularly those in Europe, have sought to remedy gender inequality primarily through public policy.

This report aims to analyze and understand the benefits and limitations of such policies by exploring the direct and indirect roles that they play in supporting women’s progress in the workforce and, specifically, in helping boost their advancement into leadership positions. It looks at policies that tackle the leadership issue via quotas—which aim to have a direct impact on women’s representation—and also examines policies such as affordable child care, paid parental leave, and flexible work arrangements that help lay the groundwork for women’s leadership indirectly by enabling women to stay in the workforce after becoming mothers.

Examining the differences in employment rates between mothers and nonmothers is one way to clearly see how well a country does—or does not—support women’s abilities to remain active in the workforce throughout their adult lives. Through a detailed discussion of policies abroad, this report will show that countries that have affordable and high-quality child care systems—for example, the Scandinavian nations—tend to have higher maternal employment rates, paving the way for women’s advancement. Paid parental leave and flexible work policies with genuine choices for both parents can also be a retention tool that, by offering mothers and fathers the ability to work and to care, aid women’s long-term prospects and advance the goals of gender equality more generally.

Through an in-depth analysis of the results of Norway’s 2003 law imposing gender quotas on corporate boards, this report will show that quotas—numerical targets for women’s representation—are an effective way to achieve specific, identified goals. However, it will argue that, to date, the ambition of quota policies has been to support professional women who already are close to the top. If policymakers want to enable women of all income levels and educational backgrounds to enter the workplace and advance—thereby developing a pipeline for future leaders—affordable and universal child care, progressive parental leave, and opportunities to work flexibly must form the core of a wide-reaching policy agenda.

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