

ECPR — Studies in European Political Science



# deeds and words

gendering politics after Joni Lovenduski

Edited by  
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## Chapter Seven

# The Critical Mass Theory in Public and Scholarly Debates

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Women have gained the right to vote, and possess de jure equality, in nearly all Member States of the United Nations. However, despite forming at least half the electorate in most countries, they continue to be underrepresented as candidates for public office. In 1995, approximately 10 per cent of members of national assemblies across the world were women (*Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action*, Article 182) and even fewer women held positions in the government. These figures fall short of reaching the target of having 30 per cent of women in positions at decision-making levels by 1995 endorsed by the Economic and Social Council. The figure of 30 per cent forms the so-called 'critical mass', believed to be necessary for women to make a visible impact on the style and content of political decision-making process.

(UN Division for the Advancement of Women, DAW, 2005<sup>1</sup>)

### Introduction

All over the world one can hear the argument, that 'it takes a certain number or percentage of women in politics, a *critical mass*, to make a difference'. An increase to 30 per cent women is often pointed out as the minimum requirement, as in the UN statement above. Frequently, it is argued that a correlation between the numbers or rather the share of women in political assemblies and women 'making a difference' has been proved 'by research'. But is this true?

This article will scrutinise the critical mass argument in the scholarly debates, and at the same time analyse how the critical mass argument, in spite of scholarly reservations has spread among those advocating an increase in women's political representation ever since the 1980s. During the last decades it has moreover been instrumental to the rapid spread of electoral gender quotas all over the world (Dahlerup 2006a; Krook 2009). It is no coincidence that 30 per cent is the most

1. Concept paper for the expert meeting on 'Equal participation of men and women in decision-

commonly used candidate quota percentage, be it quotas by law or party quotas adopted by individual political parties ([www.quotaproject.org](http://www.quotaproject.org)).

The political use of the critical mass 'theory' is an outstanding example of the close, yet complex links between gender research and gender equality policies. No doubt, feminist scholarship (publications, speeches at political conferences, counselling) has been important, may be more important that we have previously realised, for the actual increase in women's representation in many countries.<sup>2</sup>

The analysis of the public debate reveals that the argument of a critical mass is most commonly being used under two circumstances. Firstly, and most importantly, as an argument for increasing the number of women in political assemblies to a substantial level. Secondly, women politicians have frequently made use of the critical mass argument when defending themselves against the critique, predominantly from feminist organisations, that they have not made enough of a difference after they have been elected. Women politicians have defended themselves by arguing that one cannot expect them to make major changes, as long as they are only a small minority in the elected assemblies – adding that this has been proved 'by research'.

Critique of women politicians for not making a difference, has, however, also been expressed publicly by commentators, who are in fact sceptical about a gender perspective in politics, and who do not see women's under-representation as a problem worth discussing. Why campaign to elect women, if they do not make any difference? Gender is not important, it is argued.

Consequently, it is highly relevant to look closer at the alleged link between women's share of the political assemblies and the difference they make once elected. It will be argued in this article, that even if the critical mass argument appears to be primarily a prediction about what will happen once women's representation exceeds a certain crucial threshold, it has mostly been applied to the opposite situation, when women's representation amounts to *less than 30 per cent*. In its historical context, the critical mass argument should be interpreted as an attempt to shift the focus from women's alleged lack of qualifications in politics to a critique of the conditions women meet when entering the political arena in small numbers. It points to the inequality embedded in the political norms and culture, which in most countries developed before women had access to the political arena.

One crucial question is *what differences* are expected from a growing number of women in politics. It will, however, be argued that the critical mass argument seems to be strategically most effective in building broad advocacy coalitions, when it is *not* specified what 'difference' more women in politics will make. This problem is so to speak left to the future after the critical mass of women has been obtained.

Within the expanding research field of gender and politics, the critical mass theory has been the object of numerous interesting discussions, but little empirical testing. In 2002, Studlar and McAllister state that the idea of a critical mass

constitutes more of a theoretical expectation than a demonstrated effect (2000: 234). Manon Tremblay calls it a 'dogma' (2006: 502) and Joni Lovenduski talks about an 'underdeveloped concept' (2001). Karen Beckwith and Kimberly Cowell-Meyers state that the critical mass theory is both problematic and under-theorised in political science (2007). The actual increase in women's representation in a number of countries over the last decades, with thirty-eight countries having passed the 30 per cent threshold by summer 2014 ([www.ipu.org](http://www.ipu.org)) has actually improved the possibilities of operationalising and testing what ought to be labelled the critical mass *hypothesis*, rather than the critical mass *theory*.

This chapter first looks at the origin of the critical mass hypothesis before discussing the Scandinavian legacy, being the first area with more than 30 per cent women in parliament and local councils. The normative claim for why women should make a difference is then discussed and three areas are selected for special scrutinising of the debate and possible testing of the critical mass hypothesis: changes in workplace culture; policy changes; and finally, changes in women's numerical representation, a less discussed field in the critical mass discussion. The chapter then addresses the surprising revival of the critical mass argument, namely in the more neo-liberal coloured discussion, which has followed after the extraordinary Norwegian law demanding a 40–60 per cent quota for both sexes in the boards of the biggest public and private companies.

### The origin of the critical mass hypothesis

The concept of a critical mass is borrowed from nuclear physics, where it refers to the smallest amount of fissile material needed for a sustained nuclear chain reaction, in general terms an irreversible take-off into a new situation or process.

By analogy, the term critical mass has been used since the 1980s in gender and minority research within the social sciences about an expected qualitative change, a turning-point, which may be an irreversible take-off into a new situation, following an increase in number or percentage of those under-represented or outnumbered. It makes a difference whether women, and in a similar way, blacks or immigrants, constitute a small or a large minority in an organisation or assembly (Dahlerup 1988a).

But is it possible to make such an analogy from physics to social life? In physics, the concept of a critical mass is applied to processes, which takes place in isolated entities or rooms. In social science there is hardly any entity which does not have at least some interaction with its surroundings. Consequently, the analogy has its limitations.

Today, the term critical mass is being used in many other contexts as well, as about diffusion of innovations or even as a name for regular bicycle protest events, which have spread all over the world, since Ted White's film *Return of the Scorchers* from 1992 showed, how in the crowded Chinese traffic, bicyclists would queue up at unregulated intersections until the backlog reached a 'critical mass', at which point that mass would move through the intersection!

2. Joni Lovenduski's work in the United Kingdom is an excellent example of this.

### Moss Kanter's theory

The first scholarly use of the concept of critical mass in political science research on gender and politics was inspired by organisational theory, not least by the American sociologists, Rosabeth Moss Kanter's (1977) research on 'women' and 'blacks' as minorities in organisations. Without using the concept of a critical mass, Kanter makes the point, that '[t]he life of women in the corporation was influenced by the proportion in which they found themselves' (1977: 207). Moss Kanter identified four types of group on the basis of different proportional representation of socially different people, be it women and men or blacks and whites: the *uniform group* or organisation, the *skewed group* (with a minority of no more than 15 per cent, which often functions as 'tokens', and have 'only woman' status, and become 'symbols of how-women-can do') and the *tilted group* in which the efficiency of the minority increases and it is becoming strong enough to begin to influence the culture of the whole group, and alliances between minority group members become a possibility. The previous 'tokens' have turned into a 'minority'. The ratios for the tilted group is not clear in the book, in the text defined as 65:35, in the tables, however, from 15 to 40. Finally in the *balanced* group, defined as 40:60 and down to 50:50 the gender or race becomes less important than other structural and personal factors (Kanter 1977: ch.8, for various interpretations see Dahlerup 1988a, 2006b; Mateo-Díaz 2005; Childs and Krook 2006, 2008).

The foundation of Moss Kanter's reasoning is that within their human similarities, there are differences in culture and behaviour between the minority and the majority group, not by birth (biological arguments being otherwise the most common at that time) since differences, Kanter argues, can better be explained by 'roles and situations' (1977: xiii). The majority in an organisation places its mark on the organisational culture, which gives the minority many kinds of difficulties. The problems for women in the corporations derive from women's minority position, not from being women. Other minorities, such as blacks, will encounter the same problems, she argues.

With her work, Kanter pointed to important dynamics for minorities within organisations, even if one may argue that the cultural and social position of specific groups in society in general cannot be disregarded: the successful careers of the small group of male nurses illustrate this point. And the working conditions and salaries of women workers in the textile industry were always very poor, in spite of women being the majority of the workers, or may be even because of this gender distribution. However, Kanter's contribution was important because she directed the attention to what happens within the organisations and institutions at what she labels 'the intermediate level' (1977: x).

The critical mass argument has been transferred into political life on the basis that politics is also a workplace with its own internal rules, norms and practices. Women were newcomers, even intruders, when during the first many decades after enfranchisement the elected women were few, under 10 per cent in most old Western democracies (Dahlerup and Leyenaar 2013). The theory of a critical mass and minority theory is focusing on identical problems (Lovenduski 2001).

Mercedes Mateo-Díaz has criticised the extrapolation of the findings from the corporations to the political arena, not least because the symbolism (perceptions, identifications) is much stronger when it comes to the act of representation. Mateo-Díaz also criticises the assumption that changing working conditions for women will lead to substantial differences in policies (2005: 119 f). Following the same line, a distinction is here made between women politicians' *ability* to perform their task as politician the way they want, feminist or not feminist (the working conditions) and their *commitment* to work for gender equality (the policy dimension) even if the two perspectives are not unconnected (Dahlerup 2006b).

### The Scandinavian legacy

Marie Wilson, head of the White House Project, a nonpartisan organisation in New York that works to elect women to all levels of office, sets that 'critical mass' bar higher, at 33 per cent. That's closer to women's percentages in legislatures in Scandinavian nations, which have typically led the world in working toward gender equality (interview [www.womensnews.org](http://www.womensnews.org), Dec.27, 2012).

The small Nordic countries inhabit a special position in the critical mass debate, since they were the first to pass the 30 per cent threshold. In general, the Nordic countries are well-known globally for their early and high representation of women in politics, which combined with the general positive picture of the Scandinavian welfare state as being particularly 'women friendly' no doubt has contributed to the general idea, that many women in politics will make a substantial difference (Haavio-Mannila *et al.* [1983] 1985; Lovenduski 1986; Bergqvist *et al.* 1999; Freidenvall *et al.* 2006).<sup>3</sup> However, in the first decades after women's enfranchisement around World War 1, women's political representation in the Nordic parliament and local councils, with the exception of Finland, remained very low to the great disappointment of those women's organisations that had worked hard for women's right to vote and to stand for election. It was not until after World War 2 that the number of women in the elected assemblies slowly began to rise in all Nordic countries.

Figure 7.1 illustrates how the substantial increase in women's representation in the Nordic countries came with the 1970-80s, a period of extensive feminist mobilisation in Scandinavia as in most parts of the Western world. At the end of the 20th century, only five countries in the world had actually passed the 30 per cent threshold, among them four Nordic countries: Finland in 1983, Norway in 1985, Sweden in 1986, Denmark in 1990, and the Netherlands in 1992. In the 1980s and 90s such a high women's representation was outstanding.

The scientific study of gender and politics, originally labelled the study of 'women and politics' soon developed into a substantial research field within Nordic academia, and several comparative Nordic projects have been issued, financed by

3. Scandinavia usually refers to Denmark, Norway and Sweden, while the Nordic countries cover these three countries plus Finland and Iceland. Here the terms are used interchangeably.

the Nordic Council of Ministers (Haaivio-Manilla *et al.* [1983]1985; Bergqvist *et al.* 1999; Niskanen and Nyberg 2009; Niskanen 2011). In the Nordic countries the interaction between feminist researchers on the one hand and feminist politicians and feminist movements and organisations on the other hand has been and still is intense, may be with a highpoint in the 1980s. The feminist discourse at the time was one of strong critiques, not of gains obtained: critique of male dominance which forced women to be politicians 'on the premises of men'; and strong critique of the fact, that the higher up in the hierarchy, the fewer women (the law of increasing disproportions) (Haaivio-Manilla *et al.* 1985). One may argue that this strong critique also by feminist research has been conducive to changing male dominance in Nordic politics.

Many reforms were carried through during this period in a process of policy diffusion between the Nordic countries: free abortion on demand; split taxation and the removal of all other legal provisions, which made the man the head of household; part-time workers (mostly women) became entitled to unemployment benefit; the establishment of public gender equality agencies; public gender equality plans; extended public day care and equal treatment and equal pay provisions, first in the collective agreements, and later in legislation because of EU directives.

Consequently, there were many good reasons to start researching the thesis of the importance of the size of the minority in Scandinavian politics. In one of the first articles in political science, which made use of the critical mass theory, entitled 'From a small to a large minority: women in Scandinavian politics' (Dahlerup 1988a) I discussed the theory of a critical mass against Scandinavian experience with 20–30 per cent women in parliament and local councils. Was there any scientific evidence supporting the theory of a substantial change, now women had passed the 30 per cent threshold? This 1988-article argued that in order to answer this question, it is necessary to specify different dimension of political life that could be expected to change into a qualitatively new situation with more women in politics:

Dimension of possible change with a critical mass of women in parliament:

1. Changes in the reaction to women politicians
2. Changes in the performance and efficiency of the women politicians
3. Changes in the social climate of political life (the political culture)
4. Changes in the political discourse
5. Changes of policy (the political decisions)
6. Increase in the power of women (the empowerment of women) (Dahlerup 1988a: 283–84).

While the first dimension relates to the attitudes towards women performing political roles, the second and third dimension deals with the working conditions

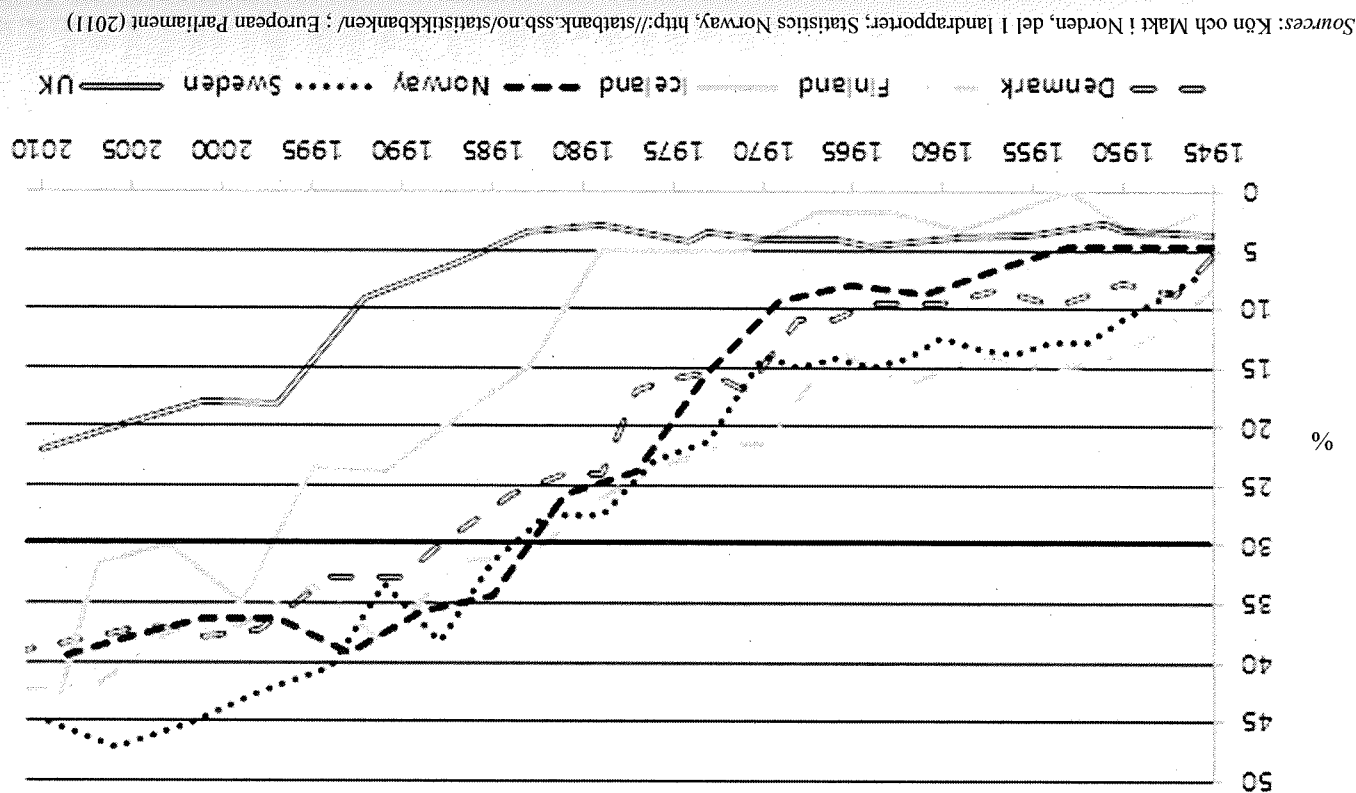


Figure 7.1: Women's representation in five Nordic Parliaments and House of Commons, UK: 1945–2011

for women politicians. Dimension four, changes in the political discourse, points to the tone of the debates in the political assemblies, but touches also upon the discourses on women and gender equality in society in general. Dimension five concerns what most feminist advocates would see as most important, namely changes in public policy. Dimension six covers changes in the overall power or lack of power of women in society and in politics.

The general argument of the 1988-critical mass article was that in relation to most other dimensions than those dealing with the political workplace, critical acts seems more important than critical mass when it comes to human beings. Most importantly is 'the willingness and ability of the minority to mobilise the resources of the organisation or institution to improve the situation for themselves and the whole minority group' (1988a: 296). However, as Mercedes Mateo-Díaz critically states, the critical act perspective is not really embedded in Kanter's workplace perspective (Mateo-Díaz 2005: 122).

In the 1980s it was, however, difficult to find research on women in Nordic politics, which could support the critical mass hypothesis. Firstly, this was because of the general difficulties in isolating the effects of the sheer numbers of women from other influential factors and secondly, because the critical mass hypothesis requires studies over time, before and after the 30 per cent, which were not available at that time, as women in politics was a relatively new research area.

In a rare survey, the European Commission showed a general decrease from 1975 to 1983 and again to 1987 in the number of voters who 'had more confidence in a man than a woman as their member of parliament' (dimension one). The difference between female and male voters was minor compared to the huge variations between the countries, with more German and Italian voters being against a female representative, and much fewer in Denmark, which also held the highest number of women in parliament (Dahlerup 1988a: 286).<sup>4</sup> Speaking to dimension two, surveys among local politicians from both Sweden and Norway in the 1980s revealed that more female than male local politicians were dissatisfied with their own performance as politicians and felt they lacked personal influence in politics. Yet, there was only a slight or no gender difference in drop-out rates from local politics. These results were not correlated with different levels of women's representation in the municipalities (Wallin and Bäck 1981; Hellevik and Skard 1985). Interviews with Nordic women politicians in the 1980s showed awareness among women politicians of all political colours, especially among those in national politics, that the main problem was not women's alleged shortcomings, but barriers in the male dominated political culture. This no doubt contributed to the Nordic success in increasing women's representation to a world-wide high during the 1970-90s. But the evaluations about the advantages of a large number of women could differ:

Of course one has to behave as naturally as possible and not make a fuss about oneself, but find one's place as one of them. But I feel more comfortable when

4. This survey was conducted by the European Commission among its member states in the 80s. Consequently, Denmark was the only Nordic country included.

there are some women. I do not know why. I had the feeling that the men in a way built a wall around themselves and their clever economic thoughts (Interview with Elsi Hetemäki-Olander, vice chair and MP for the Conservative Party in Finland, in Dahlerup 1985, in English in Dahlerup 1988a: 287).

I felt – embarrassing to admit – that it was pretty comfortable (being the only women in the local council). It gave me some advantages. Because the men had not so much to contribute with, had in fact no knowledge or experiences concerning the political issues I took up. So I felt I had some success with these issues (children's and women's issues). I was in fact the only one who knew anything about these issues [...] they would never have reached the political agenda without me (Gerd Forsell, Swedish Cons).

Later, she was elected to the County Council with more women:

It is a positive difference, when you are many women and if you share perspectives. And if you really push for certain issues together. Then it is a tremendous advantage to be more women. But it is a damned disadvantage, if in a mixed assembly of both women and men, the women do not believe that their female values have any significance (Interview with Swedish Gerd Forsell (Cons.) in Dahlerup 1985: 72).

In a survey among women's organisations and equality committees within all political parties in the five Nordic countries (WOC Survey 1984) all these women's organisations, except for one, answered in the affirmative to the following question: 'Do you believe that more women in politics will lead to change in what issues are brought forward?' However, many of them added: 'if there are a sufficient number of women, since the few women cannot make much of a difference'. Some argued that such changes have already occurred (Dahlerup 1988b: 292). This shows that the idea of the importance of the size of the minority was already part of the Nordic debate on women's political representation in the 1980s.

Were women in Scandinavian politics showing an increased commitment to gender equality and women's issues once their number grew (dimension 5)? It is hardly possible to draw this conclusion, because even if there were many feminist actions in the Nordic parliaments in the 1980, also across party lines, a large portion of the very few female parliamentarians in the 1920s and 30s actually worked for women's issues and gender equality. The Nordic countries have a long tradition, although with variations in strength, for informal cross-party collaboration among women politicians working for gender equality issues. Not in formalised women's caucuses, but sometimes even in a coordinated action, women politicians would raise new issues in their respective party factions in an attempt to persuade their male colleagues. To get women's issues and gender equality policies integrated into party platforms and government programmes as general political issues has been the strategy of Nordic feminists (Sainsbury 1993). However, this rather successful strategy makes it even more difficult to scrutinise the effect of the growing number of women politicians in Scandinavia than in less strong party systems.

### The travel of the story of the critical mass

A Google search in 2013 on critical mass theory shows not only an extensive scholarly debate about the theory, but also an extensive use of it in public debate. In a Spanish translation, the 1988-article has circulated in Latin America (Dahlerup 1993). This is an example of how a new idea can travel around the world, when useful in various political contexts. For in spite of the scholarly reservation about the critical mass theory expressed in the 1988-article and other articles that followed, and in spite of the argument of Child and Krook that the two classic works of Kanter and Dahlerup 'have largely been misread – and thus misconstrued [...] with crucial implications for subsequent research' (2008: 726) *the story of the women's descriptive and substantive representation*' (2008: 726) *the story of the critical mass theory*, e.g. the travelling of the argument around the world constitutes an interesting research subject in its own right (Dahlerup 2006b).

### Should women make a difference?

What are the normative claims behind the wish that women shall make a difference? And what if women politicians do not turn out to make a difference, yes may be even explicitly do not want to make a difference as *women politicians*?

These questions should be placed within normative political theory on women's political representation. When women began to press for access to public life, they were faced with what Carole Pateman has labelled *Wollstonecraft's dilemma* named after one of the first feminist writers, Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797). It was taken for granted 'that for women to be active, full citizens they must become [like] men. But if, on the other hand, women were to retain their experiences and qualities, so that they were an integral part of their citizenship, women would remain marginalised' (Pateman 1989: 14).

The arguments, which were used by the suffrage campaigns and later by advocates of more women in politics, reflect this dilemma. Firstly, according to the *justice argument*, women should be granted suffrage and later representation as a natural right, today expressed in terms of human rights. Under this perspective, women do not have to prove whether they are similar to or different from men, or if they will make a difference. But secondly, the demand for suffrage and, later, for increased or equal representation have also been based and still are, on *the experience argument*; as long as men and women live so different social lives, the experiences of (various groups of) women should not be excluded from political decision making. According to a third type of argument, *the interest argument*, less commonly used though, there is a conflict of interest between men and women regarding many political issues, and consequently men cannot represent women. For instance, why do we still have a gender gap in salary in favour of men in spite of decades of equal pay provisions and EU-directives? May be men do not really take an interest in equal pay?

While the two latter arguments consider representation as a means to make a difference, the justice argument, frequently used also by other under-represented

or excluded groups, looks upon representation as a goal in itself, what we today would label symbolic representation (Kraditor 1965; Dahlerup 1978; Hernes 1982; Philips 1995).

In recent debates on women's representation, a fourth and a fifth argument are heard: *the utility argument*, according to which the society should make use of all talents in society, has gained in importance in newer discussions. It is a waste to exclude talented people for leadership positions because of their gender, skin or ethnicity. We will return to the utility-argument in connection with the new use of the critical mass argument in the most recent discussions about quotas for women in the steering boards of public and private companies. The last of the newer argument to be mentioned here is *the democracy argument*: if parts of the population are de facto excluded from influence, the political system will lack democratic legitimacy. In Iris Marion Young's words: 'The normative legitimacy of a democratic decision depends on the degree to which those affected by it have been included in the decisions-making processes and have had the opportunity to influence the outcomes [Iris Marion Young argues further, adding] on equal terms' (2000: 5–6, 23).

The European Women's Lobby has made use of a similar argument about democratic legitimacy in their 2008 campaign for *gender parity* in politics. Their argument gained extra strength because they placed it within the general discourse about the 'democracy deficit' of the European Union institutions:

No Modern European Democracy without Gender Equality [...] The current under-representation of women in most elected assemblies in Europe, including in the European Parliament, is a serious democratic deficit threatening the legitimacy of European institutions and political parties ([www.womenslobby.org](http://www.womenslobby.org)).

The conclusion is that there is no one argument that unites all advocates for gender equal representation, apart from the argument that women are being de facto excluded (Dahlerup 2011). The critical mass hypothesis, however, seems predominantly to rest on the experience argument and the difference of interest argument, but as we shall see, even the neo-liberal utility discourse can make use of the critical mass argument.

The demand for gender parity in politics does not necessarily presuppose that all women have the same interests and demands, if one, as Young, takes a more dynamic approach to representation based on a model of deliberative democracy. Then the inclusion of women is primarily a question of democratic legitimacy. Young strongly argues against seeing the inclusion of women as a kind of interest representation. She argues that representation is a dynamic relationship, not a substitution or identification (2000)<sup>5</sup>.

5. This could also be seen as an argument against Judith Butler, who has criticised the feminist movement and feminist theory for seeking political representation based on an assumed existing common identity (Butler 1990/99: 3).

### A. Critical mass and change in the political workplace culture

In 1993, a Member of Parliament missed a vote in the Canadian House of Commons while she was searching for a women's washroom. Shortly afterward, the large men's washroom off the lobby of the chamber was converted into separate facilities for men and women. It has been suggested that Parliament will change as more women are elected. Research indicates that to have a significant impact on the culture of an organisation, women must occupy at least one-third of the available space – the target referred to as the 'critical mass of women'. It would be expected, then, that Parliament might become a more women-friendly environment when Canada approaches that critical mass – which brings us back to the question of electing more women to Parliament. (Julie Cool, Library of the Canadian Parliament, Publ. No 05-62Em 2010).

Today, a considerable amount of the scientific literature on gender and politics discusses how to reformulate the critical mass hypothesis in order to make it apt for empirical testing. In the following, this newer discussion of the critical mass hypothesis is scrutinised within three selected dimensions or areas: 1) Changes of the workplace culture; 2) Change of policy (substantive representation); and 3) Acceleration in women's numerical representation (descriptive representation). In this quotation above from the Canadian parliament, the critical mass hypothesis is used concerning the situation of women in the *political workplace*. The workplace perspective was the focus of Moss Kanter's classic article, although her focus was on minorities, be it women or blacks in big corporations. The arguments behind the critical mass hypothesis in this field is that as a small minority women become tokens or proxies to those holding power positions in the parties, and that the few women are turned into representatives of Woman, and if they fail, women as a category are seen as a failure in politics. Further, Kanter argues, people from the minority tend to be unable to form coalitions, since it is a looser strategy to associate yourself with others from the minority.

From a methodological point of view it is, however, difficult to distinguish the effect of the increasing number of the minority on the political workplace culture from other important factors of change, some of which might have contributed to the enhanced female representation. Nevertheless, it is too early to dismiss the relevance of the size of the minority in organisations. Comparative studies over time or between units, for instance municipalities in one country with different levels of women's representation, is a relevant research strategy.

The critical mass hypothesis, it is most important to observe, has been very instrumental in exposing a critique of the conditions women politicians meet in male dominated political institutions. In this way, the massive critique of women politicians' alleged lack of qualifications and lack of adaptation to the established norms has been exchanged with a critique of the established institutions themselves, as in the following quotation.

When a liberal politician, Jutta Zilliacus, in the 1970s was appointed as the first woman ever to the board of the public radio in Finland, the newspapers wrote about 'poor Jutta', since it was well-known that the board used to make their decisions while in the Sauna! But she threatened to join the gentlemen in the sauna, if the decision making was not returned to the meeting room, and once she actually entered the sauna, as the only one wrapped in a towel. That helped, she reported! (Dahlerup 1985: 303).

There is a long tradition in gender and politics research to investigate the barriers women politicians meet in the political workplace, using a variety of methodologies: observations, surveys, discourse analysis, analysis of institutional practices; as well as statistical analyses of gendered drop-out rates, on promotion and issue specialisation according to gender. In investigating the gendered effects of the political culture and practices, the research may adopt an *institutionalist perspective*, looking for inequality that is embedded 'in the walls', that is the formal and informal norms and practices of the political institutions. The researcher may also address the issue from an *actor oriented perspective*, looking at how politicians, individually or in groups, act to comply or protest against oppressive norms. Since Moss Kanter's classic article, new perspectives such as those of gender performativity, doing and undoing gender, have developed as important research fields, mostly in organisational research, but most recently also in political science (Butler 2004; Puwar 2004; Kelan 2010). Old dilemmas for women in politics have been given new theoretical bearing as in the discussion of the costs paid by women politicians if they – in order to adapt in a hostile surrounding – try to 'undo' their gender, which sometimes might lead to undoing themselves and their humanity, it is argued (Kelan 2010).

In practical life, the political workplace has no doubt been subject to substantial changes over time. Many political parties have deliberately altered their structure and way of working after pressure from women's groups within the parties. The very negative perceptions of women as politicians from earlier times ('women belong to the home') have slowly changed in the old democracies and in many other places on the globe, however, still dominant in some regions and in some parties (Dahlerup and Leyenaar 2013). Stereotypes and confinement to a few policy issues also limit the room of manoeuvre of politicians of national minority or immigrant background in Europe. The *numbers* combined with the *time* passed since the newcomers entered political life no doubt play a role.

The idea of a specific tipping-point attached to a specific number or share of women in an assembly must no doubt be discharged under the workplace perspective. But there may be critical episodes, a heated debate or a sudden increase in women's representation after a campaign against women's underrepresentation, which can become formative moments, e.g. leading to enduring changes of the male coded political culture. Further, the relevance of the size of the minority cannot be dismissed, but in fact seems more important concerning workplace norms, than concerning changes of policies, since the organisational perspective directly involves gendered perceptions, gendered codes and actual sex segregation of tasks and positions in political life.



### Two concepts of political effectiveness

Anne Marie Goetz has developed a conceptual framework for research on what she labels 'women's political effectiveness', defined as 'the ability to use "voice" to politicise issues of concern to women' (2003: 29). Alternatively, one could prefer to talk about the effectiveness of politicians in a different way, open to any kind of agenda that individuals or group of women politicians may want to pursue, being feminist or not. It seems relevant to make a distinction between on the one hand the problems all members of a minority meet in their ability to perform their task as politicians the way they want, because they are a minority and may be newcomers to the political scene (minority representation, newcomers) and on the other hand the resistance those politicians meet, if they are committed to pursue a feminist or gender sensitive agenda. Historically, these two perspectives are interlinked, but they are not identical.

### Gender-sensitive parliaments

Today, several international organisations work to promote what has been labelled 'gender-sensitive parliaments'. The Inter-Parliamentary Union, IPU, describes the objectives for such a programme in the following statement:

A gender-sensitive parliament is one in which there are no barriers – substantive, structural or cultural – to women's full participation and to equality between its men and women members and staff. It is not only a place where women can work, but also one where women want to work and contribute. [...] A gender-sensitive parliament is therefore a modern parliament; one that addresses and reflects the equality demands of modern society. Ultimately, it is a parliament that is more efficient, effective and legitimate (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2012a).

This discourse of gender-sensitive parliaments reflects the shift away from women's alleged shortcomings, to demand reforms of the political institutions in order to make them more inclusive. The point is that women politicians must be able to perform their task, the way they prefer, without prejudice, practical barriers or harassment and without being excluded from the most influential settings because of their sex. The first women elected to parliaments usually worked hard to adapt to the rules, which were made before women had gained access. Eventually, however, the critique of the political workplace from a gender perspective increased. This also included a new critique of traditional masculinity in politics – 'politics as a football game!' In terms of practical consequences of this critique, several parliaments have developed support systems to especially help women politicians, like kindergardens for the children of politicians, stylists and hairdressers for MPs in a rush, change of meeting hours, ban on night meetings and on sexist language.

However, research shows that politics in general is still male coded, even if substantial changes have taken place in many countries. In the Swedish

parliament with, at that time, 48 per cent women, a cross-party initiative of women parliamentarian filed a complaint to the speaker about sex discrimination in the parliamentary committees. They argued that women are still exposed to certain 'male domination techniques', as for instance not being listened properly to by their male colleagues. The speaker took the complaint very seriously and initiated several reports and surveys to investigate the problem (Jämställt? Röster från riksdagen 2010). So even if numbers count, in interaction with other factors, all barriers for women politicians are not automatically removed by a substantial increase in their numbers.

### B. Critical mass and policy change

When the number of women MPs doubled (to 18 per cent) after the 1997 election, much was expected of them. Since 1997 the key question about having more women in politics has been what difference they have made. Sometimes this has been a hostile question, asked by those observers whose distaste for women's presence in this once male bastion is palpable. The new Labour women MPs were frequently criticised in the press as nothing more than lobby-fodder and many were pilloried for adhering to party discipline in the House of Commons, criticism that reached its peak in the first session of Parliament when benefits to single mothers were cut and Labour women voted with their party (Lovenduski 2001: 755).

Policy change constitutes the core of critical mass thinking: when the share of women in political assemblies exceeds a certain threshold, then, and first then, can women politicians begin to make a difference. It is a hypothesis about a specific *turning-point*. By analogy to nuclear physics one additional assumption at play is that of a *continuous change* towards more gender equal policies with no going back to previous stages.

The prediction or the wish that a large minority of women will start making a difference may refer to different aspects of political decision making: changing the political agenda; gendered political priorities and preferences leading to new political initiatives; or changes in the horizontal sex segregation (i.e. in parliament committees); and finally, of course, in changes in legislation. Mateo-Díaz (2005:161) states that the critical mass hypothesis is made on the basis of differences in terms of attitudes between men and women, but this seems too narrow a perspective.

It is relevant to make a distinction between women politicians' *ability* to make a change (the workplace perspective, see the previous section) and their willingness or *commitment* to make change in a specific direction, here in supporting gender equality issues (the policy perspective). The critical mass discussion often diffuses these two perspectives.

Women politicians have, ever since enfranchisement, been criticised by the feminist movements for not being feminist or not sufficiently feminist (Dahlerup 1988a: 292). This critique can be illustrated by the following sharp statement from

a representative of the feminist movement from more than hundred years ago:

I believe that the greatest danger for feminism is not that no women get elected at all, or maybe only a few. The greatest danger is that only such women are elected that we cannot consider our representatives because they have absolutely no understanding of the idea of feminism. Surely this will often be the case if we leave it to the political parties to decide which women to nominate for election [...] (statement from 1915 by Gyrithe Lemche, a Danish feminist leader around the time of women's enfranchisement; in Dahlerup 1988a: 292).

The commitment and the ability or opportunities might be interlinked, as in this quotation from a female and feminist MP, representing the Norwegian Labour Party: 'If you talk feminism, the problem is not just that they do not listen to you, but if you are listened to, then I feel it gives you bad marks: Here she goes again!' (in Dahlerup 1985: 198). It is, however, part of the Nordic legacy that the very same female politician in spite of the reported resistance to her feminist initiatives, nevertheless became a cabinet minister in the 1980s at a very young age.

Defined primarily as a question of increased commitment to gender equality and an increased willingness of a larger number of women politicians to identify themselves as special representatives of women voters when they become a large minority, the critical mass hypothesis, with or without adhering to a specific turning-point, shares some of the ideas – and the same problems – of what in newer research is labelled the relation between 'descriptive' and 'substantive' representation of women, as discussed in Chapter Three in this volume.

Is it possible to define 'women's interests', e.g. interests that all women irrespective of location, class, ethnicity, age, sexual preferences etc. share? Can conservative women, socialist women and young queer feminists agree on anything? Yes, says the feminist movement, and points to the theoretical perceptions of the patriarchal system, and to specific policies such as violence against women and women's representation. Some researchers prefer to rely on subjectively defined differences between men and women on interests and attitudes (Celis 2006; Mateo-Diaz 2005) others look at legislative behaviour and contact with women's organisations (Hernes 1987; Franceschet and Piscopo 2008) while others develop theoretically founded definitions that are sensitive to diversity among women, but also state some common ground (Wängnerud 2009; Beckwith 2012).

In the public debate, and even in research, one meets many more or less vague terms like 'women friendly' legislation (Hernes 1987); 'the promotion of women's interests', 'accountable to women', 'gender sensitive politics', 'women's political effectiveness' (Goetz 2003); and 'strategic gender interests' (Waylan 1994). In the public debate and in international declarations, as argued above, such lack of clarification might be conducive to consensus-building, as when all governments of the world were to agree on the wording of the relatively radical Platform for Action, adopted at the UN Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing 1995. But for the scientific discussion about the possible effects of a critical mass, one needs relevant conceptual tools of analyses. The subject requires a comparative

approach, comparative over time and/or between comparable units with different levels of women's representation. Here are some examples:

#### *Women in US State Legislatures*

In her study of the relationship between the percentage of women in 12 US state legislatures and their policy priorities at several points in time in the 1980s, Sue Thomas, concludes that women in states with a higher share of female legislators 'introduce and pass more priority bills dealing with issues of women, children, and families than men in their states and more than their female counterparts in low representation legislatures'. She adds, however, that an organised women's caucus can have the same effect even without 15–20 per cent women in the state legislature (1991: 958).

#### *Women in Swedish municipal councils*

Studying the budgets at the local level in Sweden, Wängnerud and Sundell (2012) found some effect of the gender composition of the city council in terms of differences in budget spending among municipalities, but only as one factor among many other factors, not least left party dominance. Other studies working with one indicator or a broader spectrum of issues have found that a substantial increase in women representation at one point in time has led to changes in the political agenda and in perceptions of women's agency in politics (see for instance Childs 2001; Lovenduski 2005).

#### *Women in New Zealand's parliament*

Sandra Grey has made a textual analysis over time of parliamentary debates on three topics: child care, pay equity and parental leave. She did find some support for a critical mass hypothesis: Once female MPs moved from being a token to a 'minority group' in the New Zealand House of Representatives in 1984, the amount of debates on issues such as child care and parental leave were increasing, and female politicians claimed a greater stake in these debates. Agenda setting is, however, Grey states, not identical to policy outcome (Grey 2006:497). Similar results have been found in other studies of other countries. But are such agenda changes evident in New Zealand and in other democracies due to rising numbers of women in the national legislature alone, Sandra Grey critically asks? Her conclusion is that 'the critical mass is only useful if we discard the belief that a *single proportion* holds the key to all representation needs of women and if we discard notions that *numbers alone* bring about substantive changes in policy processes and outcomes' (2006: 492, emphasis added). Instead Grey advocates a more complex joint-effect model.

Plenty of research has found differences in female and male politicians' policy priorities, even when controlled for party affiliation. In her comprehensive analysis on the critical mass hypothesis and gender gaps in female and male MPs

specialisation, policy areas and role identifications, based on interview data, Mercedes Mateo-Díaz (2005) compares attitudes among members of parliament in several European countries in 1996, and – especially relevant for the critical mass discussion – analyses the result of a repeated surveys among Swedish MPs over a time span of several decades (see also Wängnerud 2000). Mateo-Díaz's analysis results in four categories: issues with non-significant gender differences, issues for which gender differences are constant, issues where gender differences are decreasing and finally those with increasing gender differences over time (2005: 164f.). This analysis opens up for a more dynamic conceptualisation of the critical mass perspective.

Based on survey data among voters, Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris (1999) identify three historical evolutions: the first stage is called the *orthodox or traditional* gender gap, where women are more conservative than men. In the second stage, the convergence assumption, the gender gap in attitudes seems to disappear. In the third stage, the modern gender gap or the *realignment assumption*, women tend to vote more for Left-wing parties than men, following, among other things, their position on the labour market.

Transferring this trend among the voters to the parliamentary arena, Mateo-Díaz adds a fourth stage, a *new convergence*, where the gender gap is vanishing, because men and women more and more live the same lives and gender role socialisation is weakened (Mateo-Díaz 2005: 159–60). Also Lena Wängnerud found a *narrowed gender gap over time* in the Swedish parliament (2009).

Indirectly contrasting the critical mass hypothesis, Mateo-Díaz backs the convergence assumption with an additional argument: as the number of women politicians increase, the probability of attaining a higher socio-demographic and ideological diversification in parliament increases as well (2005: 160). Others have in a similar way argued that as the number of women politicians increase, the group may grow more diverse (Childs and Krook 2008: 730). These assumptions are, however, not backed by empirical data. No doubt, the diversity among women politicians in Western democracies has increased recently in terms of ethnicity and openly expressed sexual preferences. But on the other hand, this is most probably not the case in terms of class and ideology. Ideologically, political parties move towards the middle (catch all parties). Moreover, the class differences between the few women elected in the interwar period and far into the 1950s were enormous, compared to modern Western parliaments, where a growing share of the MPs – female as well as male – come from middle class jobs in the public sector, while working class MPs have become increasingly rare.

A diminished gender gap in parliament might in fact be an effect of the very influx of women in politics, leading to a change of the agenda and the priorities of both male and female politicians, and of the political parties, which now include issues like public child care, pay inequality and violence against women in their programmes and policies. Making a difference is not the same as staying different (on this 'difference fallacy', see Dahlerup 2006b: 517–18). While the theory of increased diversity contradicts the critical mass theory, the argument that women

politicians have substantially influenced the politics of their male colleagues and the parties, gives some support to the critical mass hypothesis, yet, makes it even more complicated to demonstrate empirically.

Several conclusions can be drawn from this short discussion related to policy change: no specific *turning-point*, a critical mass of women of say 25–30 per cent can be identified. That does not imply that an increase in women's political representation is unimportant, as several comparative studies have documented. Further, no *constant change* towards more gender equality policy can be identified with a growing number of women politicians. To take the example of the Nordic countries: here the feminist commitment among women politicians was more widespread in the 1980s, and in some of the countries also in the 1990s, than in the new millennium in spite of a higher number of women in political assemblies. An alternative and more complex thesis is that a supportive *Zeitgeist*, a strong feminist mobilisation in civil society and a comprehensive public debate over feminist issues and gender equality seem to be the most important factors for feminist awareness and inclinations to act on gender equality of female as well as male politicians (*their feminist commitment*) and the percentage of women in the political assemblies is just one factor in a complex picture.

It is time to move beyond the critical mass assumptions, when public policy is concerned. In *State Feminism and Political Representation*, Joni Lovenduski appropriately states, that while increasing women's descriptive representation may lead to the inclusion of women's concerns, it is only one of the several ways of enhancing women's (substantive) representation (2005: 5). After all, as rationally stated by Lovenduski, 'feminising politics is like many other political processes' (2005: 180). Sarah Childs and Mona Lena Krook propose a shift in the central research question from 'when women make a difference' to 'how substantial representation of women occur' 2008:734). Karen Beckwith and Kimberly Cowell-Meyers rephrase the theoretical question from the critical mass debate in this way: what are the conditions that govern the ability of women legislators to make a difference? (2007: 553). To the question of opportunities or 'abilities', this article adds the 'commitment': What are the conditions that govern the commitment and interest of women politicians – and some male politicians as well – in making a difference by initiating and supporting gender equality policies? As an additional suggestion, this article recommends studies of under which historical conditions, and over which political issues, large coalitions of women's organisations and groups have been formed and with what effect.

### C. Critical mass and the acceleration in women's numerical representation

Does obtaining a critical mass of women in politics lead to further increase, maybe even an acceleration in women's numerical representation above the 30 per cent? This is the third dimension to be discussed in this article. Maybe surprisingly, this is, as Studlar and McAllister point out, a less-explored dimension of the critical mass concept (2002: 233). It is also almost impossible to find a quotation

in the public debate, which makes use of the argument that a critical mass of women, say 30 per cent, is needed for further acceleration of women's numerical representation. May be that would be too provocative!

Why should there be such a link? A structural explanation could be that with more than 30 per cent women, old prejudices against women as politicians have been removed, and a new parity-democracy norm established. An actor-oriented explanation could be that with a the growing number of women politicians, more women will obtain influential positions in the recruitment processes of the political parties (the opportunity) and that they will tend to recruit other women (the commitment) either as a matter of gender identification or as a temporary move in order to change male dominance in politics.

Analogous to the situation in nuclear physics, the critical mass assumption on the numerical increase could be translated into at least two hypotheses: firstly, a *continuous increase* after say 25–30 per cent has been obtained, which implies the idea of irreversibility. Secondly, *acceleration* in women's representation is expected. Both hypotheses can quite easily be tested.

In old democracies, which granted women the right to stand for election before and around World War 1, it took many more years and more elections to overcome the ten per cent barrier, than to go from 10 to 25 per cent (Dahlerup and Leyenaar 2013: Table 11.1). The main increase took place following the large feminist mobilisations in the 1960–80s, however with some delay, for instance in the United Kingdom (Lovenduski 2013). After this, however, we saw no acceleration, and most recently there have even been examples of *stagnation* over several subsequent elections, also in countries with high women's representation like Denmark and the Netherlands. Yet, Icelandic women's representation skyrocketed as the result of a strong feminist reaction to the financial crisis, resulting in 43 per cent women in parliament and a women prime minister (Styrkarsdóttir 2013). In Sweden, however, women's representation recently dropped after the entrance into parliament of an anti-immigration party with, by Swedish standards, very few women in their parliamentary party (3 out of 20).

Drastic falls, however, that is a decrease of more than 10 per cent units in one election, have been very rare in the old democracies, unlike the decrease in the parliaments of Central and Eastern Europe after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Matland and Montgomery 2003; Galligan *et al.* 2007). On a world scale, in one fourth of all elections to lower or upper houses in 2012, women's representation actually fell; it stagnated by 7 per cent; and actually increased in as many as two thirds (68 per cent) of the elections (IPU 2012b).

In a statistical analysis based on data from twenty industrialised democracies over a period of half a century, Studlar and McAllister found little cross-country evidence that having a critical mass of women legislators is a substantial contributing factor to either female representation *levels* or *changes* in those levels (2002: 247). Their conclusion, that gains in women's representation in old industrialised democracies have been incremental rather than a critical mass accelerating the election of women, is supported by other research. Rather than an effect of an increased number of women in politics, the remarkable increase in women's representation during the 1980s and 90s should be seen as an effect of

the strong feminist mobilisation of the 1960–80s, which reached inside the political parties, especially parties on the left, and made them nominate more women in winnable seats (Lovenduski 2005; Freidenvall *et al.* 2006; Dahlerup and Leyenaar 2013). In conclusion, neither the thesis of an acceleration nor that of a continuous increase following a passing of the critical mass threshold can be substantiated.

### Critical mass or gender parity?

Most recently, a more ambitious demand for gender balance or gender parity, i.e. 50–50 or 40–60 per cent women and men in political assemblies is replacing the demand for a critical mass of women. This happens first and foremost in countries which already have obtained a high representation of women, while the critical mass argument is still being used in countries and organisations with low women's representation. Many international declarations now entail parity as the goal.<sup>6</sup> The UN Beijing Platform for Action from 1995 is somewhat contradictory in that it demands a 'critical mass of women leaders', yet, at the same time demanding 'equal participation' and 'equitable distribution of power and decision-making at all levels'.

However, the critical mass argument has, perhaps surprisingly, been reactivated in the new debate on quotas for women in *company boards*. The under-representation of women in business is now being discussed world-wide, following the Norwegian law, which was the first to establish the rule of minimum 40 per cent and maximum 60 per cent of both sexes on the boards of the biggest companies, public as well as private. After Norway, Spain, France, Italy and probably soon also the European Union will follow the Norwegian example. The quotation below shows how the critical mass argument is being used for this new area:

### Women on company boards – a revival of the critical mass argument:

The magic number became known as the 30 per cent solution, the idea being that once women reached a Critical Mass in an organisation, people would stop seeing them as women and start evaluating their work as managers. This theory was originally developed more than 40 years ago by Harvard sociologist Rosabeth Moss Kanter in her book *Men and Women of the Corporation*.

Fifteen years after the Beijing Declaration, Norway is the only country to have progressed towards this goal via legislation – championed by someone who definitely doesn't meet the profile of a typical feminist. Norwegian politician Ansgar Gabrielsen is a Pentecostal Christian, and an archetypal alpha-male businessman. His reasons seem logical and resource driven.

6. Examples are the European Women's Lobby demands 'parity', and the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) which sets of 50 per cent target for 2015 in its 2008-declaration.

'What's the point in pouring a fortune into educating girls, and then watching them exceed boys at almost every level, if, when it comes to appointing business leaders in top companies, these are drawn from just half the population – friends who have been recruited on fishing and hunting trips or from within a small circle of acquaintances?' he says. 'It's all about tapping into valuable under-utilised resources. (Nicki Gilmour, founder and CEO of theglasshammer.com, January 21, 2010. Accessed March 10, 2013).

The critical mass hypothesis is, as the quotation illustrates, seen as a valid argument in the discussion about gender quotas for the boards of the biggest companies, an arena, where women are grossly under-represented at the same time as more and more women enter business at a high level. The quotation also illustrates the use of the *utility-argument*, discussed above. Increasing the number of women is based on the argument, here shown through a quote from the Norwegian minister, Ansgar Gabrielsen (Cons.) who proposed the law, that society and the companies should not waste the talents of women. Increasing women's representation is considered *useful*. Moving from a justice argument or a feminist argument of conflicts of interests between women and men to a utility-argument matches the present neo-liberal discourse, especially in the business world. Addressing women in business, Nicki Gilmour from *theglasshammer* goes on asking: 'How to build a Corporate Critical Mass Solution'. This supports the argument of this article that the critical mass argument is first and foremost being considered most useful in situations, where women have not yet reached a representation of 30–35 per cent.

### Conclusion

For students of gender and politics the critical mass hypothesis represents a real challenge, since it touches upon many key aspects of theories of representation and democracy. Since as many as thirty-eight countries having now passed the 30 per cent threshold, at least once, the opportunities of testing the hypothesis empirically have increased substantially. There is, however, no reason to start from scratch again.

Two aspects of the critical mass hypothesis can be eliminated from the start. The physics analogy has its limitations, since human beings are not like particles. Consequently, the effect of a critical mass cannot be understood as something that happens in a *closed room*, disconnected from what happens outside, here outside the political assembly. Further, there is no *automatic* effect of a certain gender proportion, since political change in general involves acts and actors. 'No one ever said it would be automatic. No one ever said it was inevitable', Joni Lovenduski maintains (2012: 90).

A further specification follows from the analyses of this chapter. It is time to leave the idea of a specific *turning-point*, or tipping-point, irrespective of it being set at 25, 30 or 33 per cent. It seems inappropriate to work with a dichotomy: looking for effects before and after a certain numerical level or change of level in women's representation. Studlar and McAllister ask the relevant critical question, whether there is supposed to be a single level that has universal application, or

should we look for different levels in different types of democracies (2002: 234) – and in semi-democratic countries, one could add.

This conclusion does not imply, that there are no turning points in history, no critical points or formative moments (Hughes and Paxton 2008; Dahlerup and Leyenaar 2013). On the contrary. But to take advantage of a larger number of women in political assemblies, *critical actors* (Childs and Krook 2009) performing *critical acts* are needed (Dahlerup 1988a). Numbers do count, especially in politics. Of the three dimensions scrutinised in this article, the politics-as-a workplace seems most interesting from a critical mass perspective, following Moss Kanter's more sociological research perspective.

The main problem of the critical mass hypothesis is the difficulties in distinguishing the effect of an increasing number of women in politics from all the other factors at play, including the factors which contributed to the increase in the first place. However, the recent previously unseen leaps in women's representation by the use of quota regulations – like Senegal going from 22 to 43 per cent overnight, Algeria from 8 to 32 per cent, and Timor-Leste from 28 to 38 per cent women, all in one election during 2012 opens up interesting new research on the effect of a sudden, substantial increase in women's share in the political assemblies.

In the public debate, however, the critical mass argument has no doubt made a difference. This article has shown how critical mass, since the 1980s has been, and is still, globally important for the advocacy of increasing women's representation, and thus it should be. In spite of scholarly reservations about the validity of the critical mass hypothesis it should nevertheless be studied for what it is: an important global discourse. The research agenda could encompass among other themes, the discourses, the diffusion of arguments, the effect on women politicians under different levels of representation and, not least, the persuasive capacity of the critical mass argument: who outside feminist circles really wants women in politics to make a difference?

Should feminists give up on critical mass?, Sarah Childs and Mona Lena Krook ask. Their answer is a 'Contingent Yes' (2006). In another article the same authors argue that later scholars have 'largely misread – and thus misconstrued' the classic works of Kanter and Dahlerup, which introduced critical mass thinking in organisational and political life (2008:726). That is probably true, but may also be a consequence of the exploratory character of these first contributions in the 1970s and 80s. However, as it has been argued here, many stakeholders may not have been so interested in further clarification.

For the public debate and for those who argue for a critical mass of women in politics, the strategic value of the critical mass argument, this article has argued, seems to be bigger, when the question of what difference women would make once a larger minority is left to the future. The likelihood of forming broad coalitions for changing women's historical under-representation across party cleavages, class, age, ethnic background and various types of advocacies for women and various feminist ideologies seems to increase when the key argument is the de facto exclusion of women, combined with an elusive hope of change when more women are elected.

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- [www.quotaproject.org](http://www.quotaproject.org) – global quota web site operated by International IDEA, Stockholm University and the Inter-Parliamentary Union.