Increasing Women’s Representation on Foundation Boards: Frameworks and Strategies for Minnesota

In Partial Fulfillment of the Master of Public Policy Degree Requirements
The Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs
University of Minnesota

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May 15, 2009

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**Introduction**

Women are grossly underrepresented on top grantmaking boards in Minnesota. Of the top ten grantmakers in the state in 2007, who together allocated $227,171,297 in grants last year (Minnesota Council of Foundations 2008), only one currently has 50 percent women on its board of directors. Further, four of these top grantmaking boards have only one woman board member. Arguments for the equal representation of women on governing bodies have generally focused on the political sphere, and electoral quotas are now an accepted means of achieving gender balance in many nations. Additionally, both the Democratic National Committee and the Minnesota Democrat Farmer Labor party have required proportional representation of some kind since the 1980s (Shipley 2006). Women’s groups have also turned their attention to the gender makeup of corporate boards over the past decade, with several national groups devoted to tracking and increasing the number of women corporate board directors both in the United States and abroad. As major funders of the nonprofit sector, grantmaking boards not only decide where, when, and how to allocate grant dollars, but also help to define sector-wide funding priorities, shaping both attitudes and organizations. The national philanthropic community has long recognized Minnesota as a leader and innovator in corporate and foundation grantmaking (Pratt and Spencer 2000). With a philanthropic sector commanding over $17 billion in assets in 2006 (MCF 2008), the state has developed a unique culture of giving that makes it not only a regional center for grantmaking, but also a productive area of study for those interested in foundation governance. In addition to this tradition of philanthropy, Minnesota has a history of both social and legislative support for gender equity. With the passage of the State Government Pay Equity Act in 1982, Minnesota became the first state to provide pay equity for state government employees, a requirement which the state extended to local government entities in 1984 (LCESW 1994). The Pay Equity Act sent a strong message that gender equity in the workplace
was about more than ‘equal pay for equal work.’ Rather, the legislation applied the concept of comparable worth in order to account for the ways in which gendered power disparities are both socially-constructed and highly institutionalized.

Ten percent of Minnesota’s foundations control over 86 percent of total grant dollars, meaning that these few, large organizations and, by association, their boards, possess the majority of grantmaking power in the state. Women, who constitute 50.5 percent of the state’s population, also make up 47.4 percent of the Minnesota labor force. As of the 2000 United States Census, Minnesota also has the highest rate of women’s labor force participation at 66 percent (OESW 2005). Given these figures, what is the significance of the dismal gender balance statistics of the state’s top grantmakers for the funding of women and girls and, more importantly, for larger issues of gender equity? Does gender balance on boards influence what and who gets funded? Further, do foundation boards have a responsibility, both to themselves and to those they represent, to ensure gender-balanced governance? If so, what are the most promising approaches to achieving this goal?

In this paper, I will examine the above questions using conceptual frameworks regarding the democratic impetus for gender quotas, the impact of gender on governance, and feminist arguments for gender equity. After presenting theoretical arguments for gender balance on foundation boards, as well as the cases for and against the mandating of such balance, I will highlight examples of gender quotas in action. While this section of my analysis will necessarily address the ongoing movement to establish electoral quotas, both in the United States and abroad, I use such quotas only in order to frame effective examples of more relevant quota systems at work in Iowa, Norway, and Spain. I do not advocate quotas in the context of foundation boards, but it is necessary to examine the international demand for them in order to
understand the case for gender parity fully. In the subsequent section, I will address relevant data regarding women’s participation in other types of boards, including corporate, nonprofit, and public, both nationally and in Minnesota. I will then use foundation boards in Minnesota as a case study, presenting findings on gender balance in the state and applying the theoretical frameworks addressed earlier in the paper. My final section will offer strategies for action in this area, detailing steps that can be taken in order to further the goal of gender balance on the state’s grantmaking boards.

**Methodology**

While significant data exists on women’s corporate board participation, both nationally and in Minnesota, there is a general dearth of quantitative information regarding women on public and, particularly, foundation boards. For this reason, I analyzed foundation and public board data for Minnesota in order to evaluate the gender composition of state governing bodies. For foundation boards, I assessed only the top ten grantmakers by grants paid, using annual data from the Minnesota Council of Foundations. This category includes corporate, family, and community foundations and is based on grants paid in the most recent fiscal year reported. Given the large proportion of grantmaking assets that these top foundations possess as well as their consistent presence in MCF’s top ten over the past several years, I judged them to be an appropriate measure of the state’s overall philanthropic resources. In order to evaluate the relative gender proportions of these boards, I relied on information from foundation websites, annual reports, and IRS Form 990s,¹ using first names as a gender identifier. This strategy did not produce any ambiguous results for the foundation data with regard to the gender of board members. For my assessment of public boards, I utilized data from the Minnesota Secretary of

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¹ Form 990 applies to all tax-exempt charitable organizations, non-exempt charitable trusts, and section 527 political organizations and requires in-depth reporting of financial, organizational, and program information, including the names of all current board members.
State’s 2008 Open Appointment Reports. This report contains some analysis of demographic characteristics, but, because gender is a self-reported category, does not offer a complete assessment of women’s participation. In order to obtain complete data, I performed hand-counts of women on each board, again using first names as an identifier. I chose to discard gender-ambiguous names, of which there were very few, from the data. With this in mind, I offer the disclaimer that the data described above provide only estimates for the purposes of this study.

While my analysis will necessarily address theoretical and empirical literature related to board diversity in general, I intentionally focus only on gender, and not racial or ethnic diversity, for several purposes. First, women remain grossly underrepresented on foundation boards, despite their presence as a majority in the population. In this sense, gender parity is a basic and essential first step in the larger effort to diversify boards. Further, significantly more precedent exists, both nationally and internationally, for gender-based quotas than for other types of mandates. While affirmative action policies in the United States have, at times, constituted an effective quota system (Shipley 2006), the three case studies I will present regarding board quotas suggest that mandating gender balance, in particular, may be the most politically feasible first step toward increasing board diversity. From a theoretical perspective, foundation boards, in particular, are still a relatively new area of research. The few frameworks for study that do exist have tended to focus on gender as an offshoot of similar research around corporate and nonprofit governance, with limited attention to foundation boards specifically. Given the limited scope of this analysis, my intention is not to develop new models for advancing board gender balance, but rather to assess existing frameworks and apply them within the context of the Minnesota philanthropic sector. Finally, seeking gender-balanced board governance does not necessarily
preclude other types of diversity. Rather, pushing boards to draw candidates from a larger pool of qualified women and men may actually help to increase diversity on other levels.

**Previous Research**

**Democratic Theory**

Democratic theory supports the case for gender balance. On boards, as in democratic institutions, individuals are charged with representing the interests of a much larger, and frequently more diverse, group (Lovenduski 2005). While grantmaking boards are, legally, only accountable to the state attorney general (Ostrower and Stone, forthcoming), Guo and Musso (2007) suggest that organizations such as foundations are essential to the advancement of pluralist ideals in a democracy. Specifically, they posit that voluntary and nonprofit organizations significantly contribute to democratic governance via their ability to represent citizens’ interests to government and large corporations. Guo and Musso further argue that such organizations, diverse as they are, can increase representativeness by taking “inventory” of internal mechanisms for giving voice to constituent concerns and making changes to increase representative capacity based on these specific needs. Framing foundations as vital intermediaries between citizens and institutions, both political and commercial, representation is as important a consideration for grantmaking boards as it is for public governing bodies. In this sense, applying democratic theory to foundation boards represents action towards the sort of inventory-taking Guo and Musso describe.

Although the governance and election structure of boards differs significantly from that of democratic institutions, many of the same frameworks apply. Additionally, theories of political representation are particularly helpful in answering the question of why women’s representation on philanthropic boards is important, both to the activities of the organization and
to the ongoing pursuit of gender equality. While most applications of theory in this area have focused on electoral quotas as a path to increasing women’s political power, foundation boards represent an important and largely unexamined arena for the application of principles of representation. Boards, like political institutions, not only command large pools of monetary resources, but also help to define funding priorities and trends across the philanthropic sector, effectively determining which types of programs are considered ‘legitimate’ for funding purposes, and which are not.

Hannah Pitkin’s classic work delineated two major types of representation: descriptive and substantive. In descriptive representation, representatives are assumed to possess some shared attribute, be it characteristic or experience, with the group they are representing (Mansbridge 1999). Descriptive representation, in its simplest form, means, for example, that women represent women in proportion to their presence in the population (Lovenduski 2005). Mansbridge (1999), however, finds that the application of descriptive representation is rarely so simple, noting that historical and institutional factors play an important role in determining whether or not descriptive forms of representation will be sufficient for a particular group. She further argues that descriptive representation is most effective when the groups seeking such representation possess a history of political subordination and limited political legitimacy. For such groups, descriptive representation serves as a necessary connection to a polity which previously excluded them, as well as providing symbolic and substantive models for their own political participation. Critics of descriptive representation most frequently employ arguments focused on its supposed impracticality, citing the challenges present in representing all groups sufficiently, as well as in locating representatives with the necessary leadership attributes within these groups (Lovenduski 2005). Mansbridge (2005) attaches a caveat to the argument for
descriptive representation, acknowledging the hazards of essentialism inherent in gender quotas. Gender essentialism, the idea that all women possess some sort of shared characteristic simply because they are women, is an all too frequent side effect of efforts to achieve women’s equal representation. Essentialist understandings of gender are dangerous not only because they mask diversity among women, but also because they treat gender identity as rigid and defined by a limited set of characteristics. While Mansbridge acknowledges the effectiveness of gender quotas in many contexts, she cautions against employing them as a long-term structure for women’s representation. Rather, she suggests that governments use this type of representation as a temporary response to long-term political discrimination, constructing quotas with as much flexibility as possible in order to reduce the risk that citizens will base their understanding of representation on essentialist notions of gender.

In substantive representation, representatives need not share essential attributes of the population for which they stand. Rather, they stand for particular interests of a group, which often makes this type of representation difficult to define with regard to women. Both feminists and democratic theorists have consistently debated the nature of “interests” in this context (Lovenduski 2005; Sapiro 1981). Lovenduski (1997) suggests a distinction between women’s issues and women’s perspectives as a potential way of moving beyond the debate about what exactly constitutes “women’s interests.” Lovenduski’s notion of women’s issues vs. women’s perspectives suggests a way of circumventing the essentialist assumptions that Mansbridge claims underlie all quota systems. This framework, which distinguishes between the issues that mainly affect women, and the perspectives that women bring to all political concerns, is helpful in its ability to account for socially-constructed differences not only between men and women, but among women, as well. The concept of substantive representation, then, focuses on what,
rather than who, is represented. In this sense, it is particularly vulnerable to criticism that asserts
the powerfully symbolic significance of descriptive representation. Rosenthal (1995) and Sapiro
(1981) both assert that the substantive model is not sufficiently representative. Rosenthal moves
to combine descriptive and substantive mechanisms, suggesting that descriptive characteristics,
particularly gender, can function as important symbols with substantive consequences in
representation. Sapiro rejects substantive representation entirely and argues that governing
bodies are not representative of a group unless that group is viewed as “representative” of
governance.

Others argue that the very presence of women in governing systems can create both
policy and larger institutional change. Carroll (2003) evaluates a national sample of state
legislators, both female and male, to assess the role of women as agents of policy-level change.
She finds that, in comparison to men surveyed, all women, regardless of personal characteristics
and the impact of external political factors, are more likely to have worked on “women’s rights”
bills. While Carroll does acknowledge the difficulty of identifying a unified set of “women’s
interests,” she, all the same, draws implicit conclusions about the ability of women legislators to
represent women constituents on both the descriptive and substantive level. Her findings suggest
that, regardless of how we define women’s issues, the presence of women leaders affects the
treatment of these issues at the policy level. Eisenstein (1995) argues for the potential
institutional impacts of women’s descriptive representation, considering the ways in which the
presence of “femocrats” in the Australian government facilitated a large-scale shift in national
attitudes towards women’s rights, and in government attention to feminist policy priorities.
While Eisenstein questions the permanence of the femocrats’ achievements, as well as the
salience of using bureaucratic means to achieve feminist goals, her conclusion that institutional
change did occur as a result of the “femocratic experiment” suggests, as Carroll does, the power of descriptive representation.

*Organizational Theory*

Ensuring women’s equal representation on foundation boards is also important on an organizational level. Boards play an essential role in determining both organizational identity, and the environment in which foundations operate (Ostrower and Stone, forthcoming). While there is a dearth of research dealing with women on foundation boards specifically, literature addressing corporate and nonprofit governance provides several useful frameworks for approaching this topic. Findings in both areas of study indicate that board diversity does influence organizational activities, but it remains unclear exactly how, and to what degree, we can generalize such impacts across the sectors in question (Bilimoria and Piderit; Catalyst 2008; Ostrower and Stone; Williams). Still, gender balance appears to warrant serious consideration as a tool for improving organizational outcomes, particularly as they affect women, both in the organization and in society as a whole. A 2007 report by Catalyst, an organization devoted to monitoring and increasing women’s corporate board participation, shows that Fortune 500 companies with more women on their boards of directors perform better in the areas of return on equity, return on sales, and return on invested capital than those with fewer women board members. Further, the report suggest that this trend holds across industries, meaning that it is not necessarily associated with a particular type of corporation. While no conclusive evidence exists on similar effects within the nonprofit sector, trends in women’s participation in nonprofit, corporate, and public boards show that women continue not to be represented on boards proportionate to their presence in the larger population, and to their increasing educational, professional, and financial attainment.
While research on organizations does not often examine foundation boards in isolation, analyses of nonprofit governance frequently include foundations in their assessment of nonprofit organizations (Ostrower 2007; Ostrower and Stone). In a national survey of nonprofit governance that encompasses foundation boards, Ostrower (2007) finds a positive relationship between gender diversity and board activity in fundraising, planning, and community relations and education. She also identifies several factors as positively associated with the proportion of women on boards, including percentage of clients served who are women, term limits, geographical focus, racial and ethnic diversity as a board recruitment goal, and the number of years the organization has existed. Further, while women occupy nearly 50 percent of nonprofit board seats overall, Ostrower notes that this figure decreases significantly as the size of the organization, in terms of annual expenses, increases. Among the largest nonprofits (those with over $40 million in expenses), women constitute only 29 percent of board positions. As this figure indicates, gender imbalance seems to be a more persistent problem among resource-rich nonprofit organizations than for their smaller, less powerful counterparts. Ostrower and Stone address gender in the larger context of board diversity, emphasizing the need to evaluate elements of diversity both separately and in relation to one another. Given this emphasis, they contrast the overall percentage of nonprofit board members who are women (43 percent) with the number among foundations (34.4 percent), noting that the numbers are slightly higher (43.3 percent) for family foundations, and slightly lower (25.6 percent) for private foundations.

Ostrower and Stone suggest that the research around these disparities produces two major frameworks for understanding why boards continue to be gender imbalanced. One framework holds institutionalized gender bias within the nonprofit board system to blame for women’s exclusion. This approach suggests that the very processes and norms through which
boards operate work to exclude women. The other framework Ostrower and Stone assess asserts that boards simply mirror discrimination that exists in society as a whole. From this perspective, boards may not necessarily exclude women because they are women, but rather because gender discrimination in areas such as education, employment, and attainment of wealth means fewer women have the resources to serve on boards. While the former framework places the responsibility for gender balance squarely on boards, then, the latter suggests that efforts to increase women’s participation should focus on social, rather than organizational, change. Acker (2006) offers the concept of “inequality regimes” as a way of combining elements of these two frameworks. She employs an intersectional understanding of gender, class, and race in organizations in order to suggest that we pursue both organizational and social changes as means of increasing equality within organizations. In Acker’s model, the inequality regime takes it power not only from the interaction of gender, class, and race power disparities, but also from the relationship between institutionalized practices and processes, and more general societal biases.

Literature on the role of women on corporate boards is also relevant to a discussion of foundation governance. In addition to finding an association between the number of women on boards and relative corporate returns, Catalyst finds that women board members are a significant predictor of women corporate officers among companies in the Fortune 500. According to their data, companies in the highest quartile of percentage of women board officers would have 33 percent more women corporate officers by 2006 than those in the lowest quartile (Joy 2008). Further, Catalyst finds that women board members positively affect the growth of women in line positions, a relationship they suggest helps prepare women line workers for future leadership roles, as such experience is often a de facto qualification for corporate officer and board
appointments (Joy 2008). Scholarly research on the relationship between the presence of women on corporate boards and corporate activities tends to focus on two major components: charitable giving and the status of women in the rest of the organization. Williams (2003) uses data from 185 Fortune 500 firms during the period of 1991 to 1994 to examine the impact of women’s corporate board participation on corporate charitable giving. He finds higher proportions of women on corporate boards has a positive impact on charitable giving overall, but proposes that such effects are unlikely to be significant without a critical mass of women board directors. Burke and Black (1996) provide an additional lens through which to view women’s board participation, considering corporate women’s groups as tools for increasing gender equality within organizations. While Burke and Black do find some connection between the existence of these groups and levels of gender equity, they conclude that the results of such “bottom-up” strategies are mixed, leaving open the question of whether or not top-down strategies such as board gender balance might be more effective.

Feminist Theory

Elements of feminist theory, particularly legal arguments around employment discrimination and pay equity, also significantly inform the case for board gender balance. While the structured and hierarchical nature of board governance is, by some definitions, antithetic to feminist organizational ideals, several theorists argue that participation in formalized institutions is essential to the ongoing success of the movement. Eisenstein’s account of the Australian “femocrats” suggests that the proliferation of feminists in bureaucratic roles contributed to a larger change not only in government policy priorities, but also in public attitudes towards women. Moving beyond government institutions specifically, Hartmann (1998) identifies the ways in which women’s participation in unions, foundations, and religious groups
furthered feminist goals during the 1960s and 1970s, despite their location outside of the movement “mainstream.” Indeed, Hartmann argues that these “other feminists” were successful specifically because they operated outside of the feminist mainstream, a position which allowed them access to resources that would not otherwise have been at their disposal. Hartmann’s analysis is particularly important to framing gender balance on grantmaking boards as a feminist concern, as she suggests that women’s very participation as activists within these liberal institutions emerged as feminist action even as the women themselves may not have identified it as such at the time. This inclusive definition of feminism is also in line with Mansbridge’s (1995) definition of the feminist movement as “a set of changing, contested aspirations, and understandings that provide conscious goals, cognitive backing, and emotional support for each individual’s evolving feminist identity.” Mansbridge emphasizes that feminism is a discourse, not an organizational form, thus making it possible to apply a feminist frame to organizations that may not appear feminist on their surface.

Feminist perspectives on corporate governance also provide useful frameworks for evaluating gender balance, particularly in the sense that they provide further caution against the gender essentialism that Mansbridge (2005) identifies as dangerous to the successful implementation of quotas. A substantial section of the literature on feminism and corporate governance focuses on the notion of business ethics, bringing to bear feminist ethical models in order to provide alternative conceptions of how organizations should be run (Machold, et al. 2008; Liedtka 1996; Burton and Dunne 1996; Wicks, et al. 1994). Most of these applications equate feminist ethics with care ethics, suggesting that moving outside the traditionally defined masculinist model of corporate governance can provide new lenses through which to study organizations. Burton and Dunne (1996) and Wicks, et al. employ ethics of care, which they
define as specifically feminist, in order to support and further refine the concept of stakeholder theory. Both studies characterize “feminist ethics” as collaborative, cooperative, and focused on relationships, elements which the authors hold complement stakeholder theory as a management strategy. As Machold, et al. point out, this particular ethical framework can be helpful in moving beyond conventional notions of power, authority, rights, and responsibilities frequently referenced in analyses of the relationship between stakeholder and systems of governance. Machold, et al. further suggest that this feminist ethic of care can improve governance by paving the way for more reciprocal relationships within corporate organizations, and between organizations and their stakeholders.

While these applications provide new ways of looking at organizational processes and relationships, the notion of distinct “feminist” and “masculinist” ethics also advances an essentialist understanding of gender that is problematic for assessing its affects on governance. Borgerson (2007) provides a useful critique of these attempts to synthesize feminist and business ethics, noting a persistent failure to distinguish between feminist ethics and what she terms “feminine” ethics. She further rejects the notion that feminist ethics equal care ethics, suggesting that the impulse to conflate the two frameworks has resulted in many missed opportunities to apply feminist thought to business. Arguing for a separation of feminist and care ethics, Borgerson also refuses the notion that “feminine” characteristics or values underlie the care ethics framework. Additionally, and perhaps most significantly for other efforts to apply feminist analysis to issues of governance, she identifies three major insights offered by a feminist framework: relationships, responsibility, and experience.

The feminist commitment to valuing experience also provides the underpinnings for legal critiques relevant to a discussion of gender balance on boards. Chamallas (2003) suggests that
much of the work of feminist legal scholars over the past thirty years has been rooted in the ongoing affirmation of the value of women’s experiences. Taking seriously these experiences, she says, provides an essential impetus for feminist examination and reform of the law. Chamallas applies the tenet of “thinking like a feminist” to her own approach to anti-discrimination law, noting how women’s experiences of workplace bias led to new standards for identifying and deciding cases of employment discrimination. Prior to *Price Waterhouse v. Hopkins* (1989),

Courts most often placed the burden upon the plaintiff to prove causation in cases of employment discrimination. While *Price Waterhouse* did not open the door for large-scale change, it did make it possible to shift the burden of proof for causation of discrimination onto the employer in some cases. Thus, although only an incremental victory on the legal level, *Price Waterhouse* provided feminist legal theorists with a new way of conceptualizing causation and intent in cases of employment discrimination based on the notion that gender shapes organizations and behavior. Chamallas notes how feminist legal theorists have proposed a restructuring of anti-discrimination law based on this shift, and also suggests that we discard the concept of objective causation entirely in favor of a more subjective approach. Rather than seek objective, and often unclear, causes of discrimination, Chamallas proposes an approach, based on *Price Waterhouse*, that begins with an acknowledgement of gender difference as socially constructed. Further, she cites *Price Waterhouse* in order to draw attention to the ways in which such constructions influence organizations, environments, and even perceptions. Feminist legal theory is also useful in its structuralist critique of the institutions and norms that serve to perpetuate harmful notions of difference. Chamallas, specifically, cites Rosabeth Moss Kanter’s

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2 *Price Waterhouse v. Hopkins* involved a claim of discrimination on the part of a female employee, Ann Hopkins, after she was rejected for partnership by her employee, a large accounting firm. Partners in the firm maintained that they rejected Hopkins, despite her positive professional record, due to her lack of interpersonal skills and tendency to deal harshly with employees under her supervision (Chamallas 2003).
assessment of gender tokenism within corporate organizations, highlighting Kanter’s findings that such efforts to increase women’s participation effectively reinforced and encouraged systemic gender stereotyping within the organizations.

Further, feminist theory offers productive critiques of the ways in which efforts to increase women’s representation – social, political, and legal – can fall short if they continue to construct women only as passive victims. Although Solinger (2004) does not address women’s representation specifically, she does evaluate social representations of women in the context of abortion, adoption, and welfare politics in order to argue that such representations are wholly insufficient so long as they present women only as victims or recipients of social and political consequences. Chamallas’ emphasis on the need to take seriously the experiences of those affected by a given law or policy reinforces the point Solinger makes with regard to representation. Ultimately, both suggest that, so long as women, and their experiences, are not taken seriously enough to warrant their equal and active representation – in the law, on boards, and in any position of power – gender equality will not exist.

Gender Quotas: Theoretical Perspectives

Proponents of gender balance on governing bodies have long advocated for quotas of some form as a way of achieving this balance within a relatively short timeframe, and as a means of increasing women’s participation where other efforts to do so have failed. Scholarly literature on the topic has experienced a general shift in recent years that runs parallel to the shift discussed with regard to employment discrimination law. Dahlerup (2006) notes how the discussion around electoral quotas has shifted from a focus on material barriers to women’s political participation, to a “discourse of exclusion” that focuses on institutionalized attitudes, practices, and power disparities that continue to keep women out of political decision-making. Eveline (1994, in
Bacchi (2006) is typical of this attitudinal shift in the discourse around women’s representation, arguing against what she terms a “politics of advantage” and suggesting that proponents of gender equality should focus on ending men’s implicit advantage, rather than women’s related disadvantage. Eveline’s approach is similar to the “institutionalized bias” framework described by Ostrower and Stone with regard to nonprofit boards in that she suggests gender bias, rather than women’s lack of resources, is responsible for men’s relative advantage. Assuming that women’s disadvantage is a result not of resource disparity but of gender biased social norms, she advocates for intervention in the systems that create men’s advantage, rather than for attempts to increase women’s access to resources. In general, however, most arguments for gender quotas relate to electoral politics and focus particularly on the consequences of the continued exclusion of women from politics, both for women’s interests, however they may be defined, and for the legitimacy of the institutions in questions (Dahlerup 2006). Whereas earlier proponents of quotas focused primarily on obtaining a “critical mass” of 20 or 30 percent women in elected positions, current literature stresses the importance of gender balance, an equal number of women, rather than simply “more” women (Dahlerup 2006; Bacchi 2006). Lovenduski (2005) suggests that findings around the structure and efficacy of electoral quotas are diverse, thus making it difficult to generalize their impacts. Additionally, both Lovenduski (2005) and Mansbridge (2005) identify institutional limitations on the ability of quotas to achieve gender balance, as well as issues of path dependency that impact implementation and efficacy.

Arguments for electoral quotas most often focus on their practical efficacy (Lovenduski 2005). Quotas, according to proponents, hold government institutions accountable for ensuring women’s representation in positions of power, as well as normalizing their visibility as political figures. Additionally, supporters frequently frame quotas as an essential form of compensation
for political systems that have historically excluded women. At the same time, supporters of electoral quotas do not necessarily advocate for their implementation in other sectors. Bacchi (2006) notes that it may be easier to defend political quotas than employment quotas, for example, because of the more discernible relationship of political representation to the interests of society at large. Further, diverse opposition exists to quotas at any level. Lovenduski (2005) particularly highlights male resistance to gender quotas, but Bacchi draws additional attention to ways in which feminists have expressed opposition to such mandates. On one level, critics condemn quota systems for failing to address issues of class, race, and ethnicity (Bacchi 2006). Other opposition most often takes the form of structuralist critiques of the gender biases inherent the very sorts of political structures to which quotas attempt to increase access (Bacchi 2006).

**Quotas in Action**

**Norway/Spain**

Nations throughout the world have used quotas as a way moving women into political office for over half a century. Pakistan first implemented reserved electoral seats for women in 1956 and, as of 2009, 15 countries had constitutional quotas for women in their national parliaments. An additional 45 nations have utilizes quotas in their election laws at the national level, and 33 had constitutional or legislative quotas at the sub-national level (IDEA 2009c). In most of these nations, however, quotas often seek to achieve a “critical mass” of women, rather than gender balance, per se. For instance, among the 15 countries with constitutional quotas at the national level, women still occupy only 23.4 percent of parliamentary seats on average (IDEA 2009c). Additionally, few nations apply quotas to non-electoral governing bodies such as corporate, public, and non-profit boards and, in the countries that do, it has not yet been possible to measure the relative success or failure of such policies sufficiently.
In Spain, where multi-party electoral quotas have been in place since the late 1990s, the national government recently adopted a policy requiring that all corporate boards have at least 40 percent women by 2017. An amendment to the still relatively new Equality Law, which mandates a minimum of 40 percent and maximum of 60 percent of each gender in party electoral lists at all levels, the long-term effects of this policy change remain to be seen (IDEA 2009a). Norway, as well, mandated in 2003 that all publicly traded corporations have 40 percent female board membership by 2008 or face closure (Burk 2006; Lublin 2007). This policy continued a long tradition of support for gender quotas; all five of the major Norwegian political parties have had 40 percent electoral quotas since the early 1990s, with one implementing quotas as early as 1975 (IDEA 2009b). Since the implementation of the corporate board quota policy, women’s representation on the affected boards has increased to 44.2 percent, up from 7 percent in 2002 (Lublin 2007). Realizing this goal, however, has not been easy. Not only did some affected boards openly oppose the policy, but many had to restructure their board member search strategies in order to recruit qualified women more effectively. Strategies identified by Norwegian executives, directors, and public officials as useful in approaching this challenge included giving qualified women time to attend directorship training programs, and encouraging successful women to promote themselves to executive recruiters. Other identified strategies address the responsibilities of boards in seeking out qualified women, including encouraging female board members to participate in nominating committees and recruitment, creating adjunct non-voting advisory boards to give potential board members experience, and expanding the candidate pool to included qualified women below the highest corporate ranks, as well as international women and entrepreneurs (Lublin 2007). While these strategies could be difficult to translate given Norway’s relatively unique social and political tradition of support for gender
equality, they do warrant consideration by those seeking to increase women’s participation in other types of boards. Additionally, the experiences of both Spain and Norway suggest that developing gender balance requirements in the public sector may be a prerequisite for extending such mandates to corporate and/or nonprofit boards. Both countries had longstanding traditions of electoral quotas at multiple levels of government at the time of the mandates, as well as histories of political, cultural, and social support for gender equity legislation.

Iowa

The case of Iowa demonstrates a successful application of quotas in the United States. Since 1987, Iowa has mandated gender balance on all state boards and commissions, making it the only state in the nation to implement a quota system for appointed bodies. According to the legislation, “all appointive boards, commissions, committees, and councils of the state established by the Code if not otherwise provided by law shall be gender balanced” (Iowa Code §69.16A). The Iowa law also defines gender balance more strictly than the existing international examples do, requiring that not more than one-half of board membership be of one gender, or, for boards with an odd number of members, not more than one-half of membership plus one. As in Norway, women’s participation in the affected boards has increased substantially since the enactment of the legislation, growing from 14 percent in 1974 to 49.9 percent in 2006. With a total of 707 women serving on state boards and commission as of 2006, the Iowa Commission on the Status of Women continues to include gender balance as a component of their annual policy agenda. As a result of the ongoing success of the gender balance law at the state level, the ICSW is currently pushing an amendment to extend the legislation to include local level boards and commissions. ICSW data indicates that, while women’s participation in state boards and commissions has increased, participation rates at the local level, particularly on high-power
boards like Planning and Zoning or Compensation, remain low. The proposed amendment attempts to remedy this disparity by requiring that all affected boards and commissions be gender balanced within the next four years. As of April 26, 2009, the amendment had passed both the House and Senate with few challenges and was awaiting approval by the governor.

While little secondary analysis of the Iowa law exists, Kelber (1994) suggests that the success of the legislation has been a result, in part, of the conscious use of the term “gender balance,” rather than “quota.” Kelber also attributes the 1989 passage of the law to extensive efforts on the part of activists, women elected officials, and the ICSW, who she says lobbied for the legislation after a similar law simply “recommending” gender balance proved ineffectual at increasing the number of women appointed to public boards. Further, although an impetus for expanding gender balance to non-public boards in Iowa does not seem to exist, the current legislation to include local government in the mandate does provide some evidence of the power of legislated quotas.

**Women on Governing Boards: State and National Data**

In recent years, there has been increasing interest in the number of women on governing boards, particular in the corporate and public sectors. A 2009 *New York Times* opinion piece by Nicholas Kristof even postulated that the national economic crisis of 2008-2009 might have been avoided if Wall Street’s top decision-making bodies had been more gender-balanced (Krugman 2009).³ This increase in both public and scholarly interest in the issue of gender balance is likely a result of ongoing attempts to draw attention to the paucity of women on many of the nation’s most influential corporate boards. According to the 2008 Catalyst Census of Women Board Directors of the Fortune 500, only 15.2 percent of corporate board of directors positions among

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³ Kristof’s argument relied heavily on recent social scientific literature indicating that groups with high levels of diversity make better choices overall, as well as a study of male investment bankers that showed a relationship between male hormone levels and risk-taking behavior.
Fortune 500 companies are held by women. A 2009 status report by ION, another research and advocacy group dedicated to advancing women’s corporate leadership, finds that these figures are even lower when expanded to include non-Fortune 500 companies. While ION reports a range of 11.1 percent to 17.8 percent for women board members among Fortune 500 companies, they also find that, among all companies, women occupy between 7.5 and 17.1 percent of board positions. Further, the ION report suggests that these numbers indicate little change, and in some cases even setbacks, in women’s representation on corporate boards (ION 2009). In Minnesota, 28 of the top 100 publicly held companies have no women on their boards, and an additional 43 have only one woman board member, according to the 2008 Census of Women Corporate Directors and Executive Officers. These figures take on particular significance when examined in comparison to women’s overall participation in the corporate workforce, especially in certain sectors. In the health care and social assistance sector, for instance, where women constitute 78.7 percent of the labor force, only 20.2 percent of board officers are women (Catalyst 2008).

Women occupy just less than 50 percent of nonprofit board seats nationwide, a figure that decreases inverse to the size of the organization (Ostrower 2008). This percentage is slightly less for foundation boards. In addition to the corporate sector data provided by Catalyst, 2008 figures from the Bureau of Labor Statistics indicates that women comprise 67.3 percent of the workforce for civic, social, advocacy, grantmaking, and giving organizations (BLS 2008). Women are also just over 50 percent of the labor force among business, professional, and political organizations, and just under 50 percent for arts-related professions (BLS 2008). On the public level, women constitute roughly 45.3% of appointments to public boards, commissions, task forces, councils, and agencies in Minnesota. 15 of these governing bodies have no women members, including the
Advisory Council on Wells and Borings, the Board of Electricity, and the Minnesota Combative Sports Commission (Open Appointments).

**Minnesota: A Case Study**

Given the data on women’s board participation, both nationally and in at the state level, what are the implications for women, both on boards and in the larger population, in the state of Minnesota? Minnesota has a strong history of philanthropy, with several large private foundations, such as the McKnight and Bush Foundations, based in the Twin Cities area. Nationally, the state ranks 10th in per capita foundation giving and 14th in total foundation giving. According to the Minnesota Council on Foundations (MCF), both foundation assets and total grantmaking have been increasing consistently over the past several years, with total statewide grants reaching $1 billion in 2004. This figure encompasses three major foundation types: private, corporate, and community. Private foundations, of which McKnight is an example, typically include those established by a single, private source of funds. Corporate foundations, such as the Best Buy Children’s Foundation, represent the philanthropic arm of a larger commercial corporation. Community foundations, such as the St. Paul Foundation, are not generally aligned with any private entity and tend to focus their giving on a specific geographic region. Classified as public charities, they are also subject to fewer IRS restrictions than private or corporate grantmakers (Trone, et al. 1996). The top ten grantmakers as defined by MCF include all three of these foundation types.
In 2006, 1,398 foundation and corporate grantmakers in Minnesota commanded a total of $17.07 billion in assets and made $1.16 billion in grants to organizations statewide. Nearly half (46 percent) of these grants were made by private foundations, with corporate (42 percent) and community (12 percent) grants making up the rest of the total. In 2006, as in past years, most of these grant dollars came from a small number of large, financially powerful foundations. MCF has identified this trend as significant in understanding the strength of the philanthropic sector in Minnesota, noting that 10 percent of the state’s total grantmakers accounted for 86 percent of grant dollars paid in 2006. This trend is particularly significant because it means that a small number of individuals on top foundation boards control a disproportionate amount of the state’s philanthropic resources. Table 1 summarizes the assets, grants paid, and board gender makeup of each of these top foundations. While the numbers on each individual board may not seem particularly striking, the aggregate shows that, of 108 total board members controlling assets upwards of $6 billion, only 38 are women.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Foundation</th>
<th>Most recent grants paid</th>
<th>Grants paid in MN</th>
<th>Percent Paid in MN</th>
<th>Total Assets</th>
<th>Board Members</th>
<th>Women Board Members</th>
<th>Percent Women on Board</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>McKnight Foundation</td>
<td>$93,643,806</td>
<td>$69,109,631</td>
<td>73.8%</td>
<td>$2,316,874,275</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Mills Foundation</td>
<td>$64,473,353</td>
<td>$16,890,310</td>
<td>26.2%</td>
<td>$57,937,864</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Paul Foundation</td>
<td>$59,565,623</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>$1,008,411,095</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minneapolis Foundation</td>
<td>$49,540,078</td>
<td>$39,115,034</td>
<td>79.0%</td>
<td>$689,426,201</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medtronic</td>
<td>$47,476,419</td>
<td>$12,046,554</td>
<td>25.4%</td>
<td>$40,797,000</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cargill Foundation &amp; Inc.</td>
<td>$44,021,000</td>
<td>$12,922,478</td>
<td>29.4%</td>
<td>$112,565,180</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bush Foundation</td>
<td>$38,567,884</td>
<td>$26,098,684</td>
<td>67.7%</td>
<td>$900,000,000</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fred and Katherine Andersen</td>
<td>$36,479,528</td>
<td>$23,092,728</td>
<td>63.3%</td>
<td>$817,604,041</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Otto Bremer Foundation</td>
<td>$32,111,712</td>
<td>$21,699,323</td>
<td>67.6%</td>
<td>$615,761,975</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Health Foundation</td>
<td>$30,952,513</td>
<td>$6,196,555</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
<td>$19,626,000</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals:</strong></td>
<td><strong>$496,831,916</strong></td>
<td><strong>$227,171,297</strong></td>
<td><strong>45.7%</strong></td>
<td><strong>$6,579,003,631</strong></td>
<td><strong>106</strong></td>
<td><strong>38</strong></td>
<td><strong>36%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Minnesota Council on Foundations
Trends in funding to women and girls are also important to consider when evaluating the relationship between grantmaking boards and gender balance in the state. It is difficult, however, to assess the relative impact of Minnesota grant dollars on the status of women and girls using available data. While the annual MCF survey of Minnesota foundations does include “Women and Girls” in its “Intended Beneficiary” categories, the coding system they use to evaluate grantmaking trends by beneficiary presents challenges for assessing the total grants made to organizations that directly benefit women and girls. The Grants Classification System (GCS) MCF employs utilizes six separate codes for women and girls, representing the following categories: Girls (3 codes); Adults, women; Young adults, women; and Women. For grants in which more than one beneficiary is indicated, MCF codes up to three intended beneficiaries, meaning that a grant intended to benefit low-income women and girls would be coded under Poor/Economically Disadvantaged, as well as one or more of the Women and Girls categories.

Given the difficulty of disaggregating the data MCF provides, the overall share of grant money directly affecting women and girls remains challenging to discern. On the surface, the figures appear to be significant. In 2006, grants to Women and Girls totaled $14,032,410, with the largest portion, as in the bigger picture, coming from private foundations. This figure amounts to only 1.7 percent of total grants made in the state, up from 1.3 percent in 2005. While the percentage is slightly higher for private foundations (1.8 percent), it is lower for both corporate (1.6 percent) and community (1.5 percent) grantmakers. At the same time, dedicated funding for programs categorized under the “Men and Boys” code also represents a small percentage of overall grantmaking in these years, also hovering just under 2 percent in all categories. In all likelihood, these figures are more indicative of challenges in appropriately assessing the beneficiaries of a program than they are of low funding to these groups. Early
childhood programs, for instance, are likely to impact women because they are more frequently the caregivers for children. Given the lack of disaggregated data around how grant dollars affect women and girls specifically, making judgments about the relationship between gender balance and funding presents a major challenge at this time. Further analysis of grants distribution, as well as exactly who benefits from various programs will be necessary in order to draw conclusions regarding this relationship. Such research will likely provide additional questions and answers to inform the discussion I begin in this analysis.

Given these grantmaking characteristics, as well as the relevant theoretical frames, what are the implications of the current lack of gender balance on Minnesota’s philanthropic boards? From a democratic theory perspective, gender balance provides an essential safeguard against non-representative governance. On the most basic level, it is possible to argue that women, as 50.5 percent of the state population, should have representation on boards in proportion to their presence in the state. At the same time, many legitimate arguments can be made against requiring private organizations, even those with public benefit, to be representative. Moving beyond arguments for descriptive representation, however, there are particular aspects of the work that grantmaking boards do that necessitate more concerted efforts towards reflecting the characteristics of the population as a whole. On the organizational level, women constitute a large proportion (67.3 percent) of the workforce that supports grantmaking work nationwide (BLS 2008). This percentage includes program directors and program staff, as well as administrative and technical support. The disparity between the number of women working in the philanthropic sector and the number on its grantmaking boards poses problems for the assumption that boards somehow represent the interests of their organizations. Additionally, feminist perspectives on the representation of women bring to bear another consideration: the
relationship between grantmaking boards and the individuals they serve through funded programs. Even as Minnesota data indicates a very small percentage of funding going specifically to women and girls, it is possible to suggest that women are likely affected by grant dollars in proportion to their presence in the population. Given this, failing to ensure gender balance on the boards that control these dollars risks constructing a relationship in which women are primarily passive recipients of resources, rather than active participants in the control of resources.

**Recommendations for Action**

Given the preceding analysis, I offer the following recommendations for how foundations, advocates for gender equity, and other interested groups can begin to push for board gender balance in Minnesota. Gender balance on grantmaking boards remains a relatively unexamined topic, with significant room for further study. The subsequent recommendations offer a broad range of opportunities for action intended to build support for gender balanced boards and to foster public, philanthropic, and political environments receptive to future change.

1) *Legislate gender balance on publicly appointed boards and commissions.* Increasing gender balance on public boards in Minnesota is an important and significant goal in and of itself. Both the examples of Norway and Spain, however, and Iowa also show how mandates for gender balance in the public sector can potentially make implementing other types of quotas more feasible. In Norway and Spain, gender quotas for public office have led to similar requirements for private organizations. Similarly, Iowa’s mandate for state public boards helped to create a favorable environment for gender parity in the state, facilitating the move to extend the requirement to local boards. While challenges certainly exist to establishing such legislation in Minnesota, doing so would not only make a statement about the
importance of equal representation and equal access to resources, but also open the door for a
discussion of quotas in other sectors. Additionally, given that Americans are generally wary
of government intervention in private organizations, such legislation would likely be a more
feasible first step towards implementing gender balance in other sectors, as significant
precedent exists in support of quotas on the public level (Shipley 2006).

2) Provide board training and recruitment opportunities for qualified women. This strategy, in
addition to proving effective for corporate boards in Norway, is also currently being
employed by several states as part of an effort to increase women’s public board
membership. Both California and Vermont recently established public board training
programs intended to recruit and prepare qualified women for appointment. California’s
Commission on the Status of Women and Vermont’s Governor’s Commission on Women
were the respective driving forces behind these initiatives, which both stress making women
aware of board openings, helping them assess personal strengths and relevant skills, and
supporting them in designing effective applications. The Vermont publication also
emphasizes the importance of forming and fostering connections among qualified women. In
Minnesota, the state Office on the Economic Status of Women, umbrella organizations such
as MCF, the Minnesota Council of Nonprofits (MCN), and the Minnesota Women’s
Consortium, as well as the Management Assistance Program (MAP) for Nonprofits, which
currently offers board recruitment services, could provide leadership and program support for
a similar program aimed at foundation boards. Opportunities for training and networking
would also help prepare more qualified women for board membership, as well as publicizing
board openings as necessary.
3) **Work with advocates for women on corporate boards to develop a coalition of support for gender balance.** As indicated in this paper, the majority of research and advocacy work around women on boards has thus far focused on the corporate sector. Advocates for gender balance on foundation boards should thus build upon existing arguments for corporate gender balance, as well as seek collaborations with groups that monitor women’s progress in this sector. Advocacy and research organizations such as Catalyst have been particularly effective in demonstrating to corporations exactly why gender parity is so important on the board and executive level, and such strategies could serve as a framework for establishing relationships with foundation boards around the issue of gender balance. Further, joining forces with existing corporate advocates can help to lend legitimacy to what is currently a relatively new initiative within the larger movement for gender balance on governing bodies.

4) **Shine the light on women’s underrepresentation on foundation boards.** Gender balance on grantmaking boards remains a relatively unexamined topic, and few people are aware of the current underrepresentation of women on Minnesota’s top foundation board. With this in mind, advocates should begin a media campaign in order to increase awareness of the issue, and of the current underrepresentation of women on foundation boards in Minnesota. This campaign could also include a more formal census of the gender composition of foundation boards throughout the state in the manner of the Catalyst and ION reports cited in this analysis.

5) **Assess the long-term political feasibility of a gender balance law for corporate, nonprofit, and foundation boards.** Given that no state has yet introduced a mandated gender balance for non-public boards, any effort to enact such a law in Minnesota must be preceded by a more exhaustive assessment of the current and near-future political and social landscape and its
relative openness to such a law. Action in this area should include efforts to publicize the
current gender-unbalanced state of Minnesota’s top grantmaking boards, as well as to invite
the participation of foundations in the discussion around this disparity. Assessing and
courting the support of feminist groups around gender balance will also be essential to this
effort.
References


Iowa Code §69.16A.


