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Long-Term Gains from an Unusual Gender Quota

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Are affirmative action policies inefficient? Many countries are deliberating whether to institute quotas to increase the representation of women and underrepresented minorities in business and politics, but these initiatives receive widespread pushback. Universities in the United States and elsewhere face increasing judicial challenges against admissions policies alleged to advantage underrepresented groups. However, there is limited understanding of the tradeoffs associated with these policies largely due to a lack of opportunities to observe their impact on output.

We analyzed the effects on pupil outcomes of abolishing a quota for men in the admissions process for primary school teacher studies in Finland. Our research finds that pupils who experienced a higher share of male teachers due to the quota later obtained more education and enjoyed better labor market outcomes.

Our research strategy involves comparing the outcomes of pupils who experienced a similar proportion of new teachers because of retirements but faced a different gender composition of new teachers due to the lifting of the quota. The sudden abolition of the quota instantly reduced the share of men admitted to primary school teacher studies from the required 40 percent to 20 percent. As teachers retire at age 60 in Finland, some schools happened to replace teachers right before the quota was abolished, and some happened to replace teachers right after. Schools in which teachers turned 60 when the quota still existed hired new teachers from a pool of candidates with a higher share of men compared with schools whose teachers turned 60 just after the quota was abolished.

We studied how these changes in teacher composition affected pupils using data from 1988 to 2018 on pupils' educational and employment history through age 25. In Finland, pupils have the option to apply to upper secondary education in ninth grade, which typically takes three years to complete, is free of charge, and is divided into vocational and academic tracks. Pupils apply for their desired institution, and a central algorithm allocates spots. Our research finds that pupils who experienced a higher share of male teachers because of the quota were more likely to apply to continue

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their education. Moreover, pupils' applications were more aligned with attainable options, so they were more likely to obtain one of their top two choices. Thus, the quota increased enrollment in post-compulsory education among 16-year-olds.

Next, we examined pupils' educational attainment and labor market outcomes by age 25. Pupils who experienced a higher share of male teachers admitted through the quota obtained more education on average. Pupils with vocational degrees became more likely to have additional advanced qualifications instead of a basic three-year degree. Pupils with academic degrees became more likely to eventually earn a bachelor's degree. Furthermore, our results suggest that using the quota to increase the share of male teachers by one standard deviation makes pupils 3 percentage points more likely to be a student or employed at age 25.

Our research also examines the effects of the quota on pupils by gender. We investigated whether a higher share of male teachers positively impacted boys. Male teachers could raise boys' academic aspirations and achievements by acting as a same-gender role model. However, adding more male role models for boys could cause girls to lose female examples to emulate, potentially making girls worse off. However, our results allow us to rule out the possibility that the quota negatively impacted girls. Furthermore, the results provide no evidence that male teachers set an example for boys purely because they share the same gender identity; male teachers admitted through the quota affected boys' and girls' educational outcomes similarly.

Additionally, we evaluated whether the higher share of male teachers inspired boys to study education-related fields, which are historically feminized. Our research tracked pupils' fields of study until age 25 and finds that the quota made pupils of both genders more likely to study science, technology, engineering, or mathematics. However, neither boys nor girls became more likely to pick an education- or teaching-related field when exposed to a higher share of male teachers admitted through the quota.

Finally, we explored two ways through which more equal gender representation among primary school teachers may have improved pupils' outcomes. First, if teacher gender diversity itself improves student outcomes, then one would expect the impact of an additional male teacher to be greater in places with a lower existing share of male teachers. However, our results show that the benefits of having more male teachers admitted through the quota are similar in places with few male teachers compared with places where the share of male teachers is already high. This suggests that teacher gender diversity itself is insufficient to explain improved student outcomes.

Second, as an alternative explanation, our research finds that men tend to perform lower on the primary school studies admission criteria but do not perform similarly worse once on the job. This suggests that the post-quota admission process does not select the best candidates, and we discovered three supporting pieces of evidence. First, the admission exam score places 75 percent of the weight on language fields, in which men perform relatively worse, and just 25 percent of the weight on math and science fields, in which men perform relatively better. Second, our analysis finds that teachers' performance on the admission exam, particularly the language portion, does not accurately predict performance on the job; this suggests that the weights of the admission exam inefficiently disadvantage men. Third, men who apply to become primary school teachers likely have intrinsic motivation when they enter a stereotypically female profession, and our research shows that they forgo higher earnings when doing so. Among similarly qualified applicants, men who become primary school teachers tend to earn less than those who enter other professions, whereas women tend to earn more. Overall, our results demonstrate that men's lower performance on admission criteria does not predict worse performance on the job. Thus, the primary school teacher studies quota improved both gender representation and student outcomes.

NOTE

This research brief is based on Ursina Schaede and Ville Mankki, "Quota vs Quality? Long-Term Gains from an Unusual Gender Quota," March 2023.