More than a decade ago, countries in Europe began to take measures to increase the gender diversity of their corporate boards. Norway was the first to adopt a quota for female board members (40%) in 2004. Other nations followed suit - adopting either mandatory quotas (Germany, France, Belgium, Iceland, Italy) or voluntary goals (Austria, Finland, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, the UK), with goals for female representation ranging from 25% to 40%.

The U.S. is now among the few Western developed economies with neither voluntary nor mandatory targets. Female board representation at the S&P 500 has not increased significantly over the past decade and, at 18.7%, pales in comparison to the figures in most of Europe.
In Europe, Denmark is another outlier. The largest companies are required to set a target for the number of women on their board, but there are no clear guidelines on what that number should be. The boards of the largest Danish companies (OMX20) are 21.9% female, according to the most recent figures available, while for all publicly listed companies that figure is just 7.9%.

These different approaches give researchers like us a chance to study perceptions of gender-based quotas both in countries where they have been enacted, and in countries where they have not been enacted.

To better understand perceptions of quotas, we interviewed over 60 male and female directors in both the U.S. and Europe who had served on a total of over 300 publicly traded company boards, as well as several U.S. and European executive recruiters. Our study includes interviews with directors of companies located in countries where quotas have been achieved (e.g., Iceland, Norway) as well as in countries still working toward achieving their gender diversity quotas (e.g., France, Germany, Italy, Sweden, the UK). We also include directors of companies in countries where no goals or quotas have been set (e.g., Australia, Denmark, the U.S.). This comparative investigation revealed some interesting insights into the issue.

**Hostility Toward Quotas in Countries that Don’t Have Them**

Let’s start with Denmark. Given the progress of other Nordic countries, it is particularly surprising that there continues to be strong resistance to gender diversity quotas in Denmark. Back in 2008, when Danish Prime Minister Helle Thorning-Schmidt wanted to put in place quotas like those in Norway, she met strong resistance from both men and women. For example, the minister of equality and the vice director of the Danish confederation of industries, both women, were strongly opposed to quotas - the belief was that it would lead to selection of unqualified women or selection purely on gender.

Nearly a decade later, our interviews indicate that both men and women directors express these same fears that quotas will lead to less qualified directors. For examples, as a Danish male director and former CEO said: “I know a few women sitting on boards in large Norwegian or Swedish companies, where I have really been surprised and I think it is much beyond their abilities — and I think this is a result of the quota system.”

In the U.S., the response was similar — and also overwhelmingly negative. One male director said that, with regards to quotas; “I think it is dumb and destructive — demeaning to people who are only on the board because they are in a specific category.” Female directors also expressed